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Finding his vocation: An education graduate works with students with disabilities

July 14, 2020



Benjamin Mitchell (pictured right) with wife Amber and son.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia Southern University Double Eagle Benjamin Mitchell ('11,'20) has been teaching students with disabilities from home.

Mitchell is a special education teacher at Wacona Elementary School in Waycross, Georgia, where he has worked with fourth and fifth grade students for four years.

“The worry is of course that they don’t have the constant support they need,” said Mitchell. “But we continue to reinforce the basic concepts and reinforce fundamentals. At the end of the day, I care about their success, and I make sure they know that.”

Mitchell and his students check in at least once a week via Google or Zoom.

“With fourth and fifth grade students, they are really coming into their own personalities,” he said. “It’s important to get to know your students and show them that you will hold them accountable and celebrate their victories with them.”

Mitchell suffered a setback when he, his wife, Amber, and their 16-month-old son tested positive for COVID-19 mid-May, requiring them to be isolated from their friends and family. However, their symptoms were not severe and have since recovered.

“I am excited to return to school in the fall,” said Mitchell. “I know the students will be ready to see their teachers and peers. Wacona Elementary does a great job of providing a family atmosphere for our students.”

Special education wasn’t always in the cards for Mitchell, who completed an undergraduate degree in exercise science from the University and briefly pursued a career in that field.

“I was working in a physical therapy clinic, and I was good at it,” said Mitchell. “But my goals and outlook started changing, and I was no longer sure what direction to take.”

Amber is a special education coordinator who coaches basketball. After assisting her with practice several times, Mitchell quickly responded to her vocation and decided he wanted to coach. He began teaching special education as a pathway to coach and discovered that what he loved most was working with special needs students.

Focused, he enrolled in the fully online [Master of Arts in Teaching](#) program in special education at Georgia Southern to earn an initial teaching certificate, while teaching, raising an infant and coaching football, basketball and soccer at Ware County Middle.

“The program was flexible and the professors were very informative,” he said. “I knew if I needed anything that I could call, text or Zoom with my professors and they would be there.”

In May, Mitchell graduated with more than 4,300 students in Georgia Southern’s virtual commencement ceremony.

“I am so glad I decided to take this route,” he said. “Not everyone can work with students with disabilities, but I love it.”

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[Compelled to mentor, graduate redirects studies to coach and teach](#)

July 14, 2020



Nathan Kistler pictured with Georgia Southern’s live mascot, Freedom

Following his final wrestling match at Forsyth Central High School, Nathan Kistler left the mat with a newfound vision — to become a coach and teacher and provide the same mentorship that he received throughout school. Yet, as a new student at Georgia Southern University, Kistler chose to study business.

“I had people tell me that I wouldn’t make any money as a teacher and that it can be hard behind the scenes, and I got discouraged,” said Kistler. “I thought business would be a better path.”

However, Kistler couldn’t muster enthusiasm for business courses.

“I had to push hard to want to do the school work,” explained Kistler. “I can be creative and thought I could use those skills for sales and advertising, but I was really not listening to myself. What I wanted was to work with students.”

Kistler changed his major to middle grades education, and the impact was immediate.

“It was a lot different than I thought it would be,” he said. “When it came to my education courses, I didn’t have to push so hard to pay attention. I was excited.”

Kistler said the opportunity to consistently learn in and outside of the classroom reaffirmed his decision.

“I had student-teaching placements every semester giving me awesome experiences and really building my passion for the career,” he said. “It made me more excited as I got to build relationships with students and teachers.”

Kistler completed a [B.S.Ed. in Middle Grades Education](#) with concentrations in social studies and science in the spring during the unprecedented COVID-19 distance learning at the University. Since then he has lined up a job as an eighth grade science teacher and an assistant football coach at Otwell Middle School in his hometown of Cumming, Georgia.

“I wanted to come home to give back to the community that gave so much to me,” he said.

Kistler began meeting with teachers almost immediately after accepting the job in May and has started conditioning and training with the football team virtually.

“It’s interesting and different, but meeting virtually and working at a distance pushes me and others to be creative in how we deliver instruction and form relationships with our peers and students.”

Regardless of the challenges he may face with the ongoing threat of a pandemic, Kistler says he is ready. “It’s going to be a challenge, but it’s fun,” he said. “I know there are exciting times ahead, and I cannot wait.”

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