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Recommended Citation

College of Education, Georgia Southern University, "College of Education News" (2021). *Education, College of - News*. 274.

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Recent Georgia Southern grad changes career path after earning Master of Arts in Teaching

May 12, 2021



Recent Georgia Southern University graduate Hannah Stuart never planned to become a teacher. In fact, she said her 19-year-old self refused the idea because her mother was a teacher.

“I mean, what 19-year-old wants to do what their mom is doing,” she said.

Stuart earned a bachelor’s in social work from the University of Georgia, and she continued her studies at the University of Tennessee, earning a master’s in social work. After years of serving as a counselor and then case manager for a mental health community service organization, Stuart’s organization contracted with a school district and for the first time, she worked within school walls.

“My work previously was like a snapshot of time with these kids,” she said. “I would have an hour, maybe two at most, to spend with them. Some I would never see again.”

Stuart loved the time spent in the school, and when life took her back to her home in Pickens County, Georgia, she decided it was a good time to start a new career.

Stuart accepted a paraprofessional position in a classroom for students with disabilities. She knew right away that it was the right choice, and she began researching options for initial teacher certification in special education. Her online search led her to Georgia Southern, where she could complete her degree fully online while continuing to work at the Paulding County elementary school and raise her daughter.

She proceeded with the program based on positive experiences from friends in other programs at the University. After she enrolled in the MAT Special Education program, she was offered a full-time teaching position.

“I love working with the students,” she said. “I originally intended to work in general education, but I was given a role with special education. These were the kids I had worked with in the past, but now I get to hang out with them all day, five days a week. There is such a great opportunity for impact and to build relationships.”

Stuart said that her mental health background has also been useful in working with students in the classroom.

“As a co-teacher, all of my students are in a general education setting, and I am their additional support,” she said. “My mental health background has helped me to recognize behavior issues that are, unfortunately, typically a trauma response. Sometimes students don’t want to learn about math because they just had something traumatic happen in their lives. Building a foundation of trust is key, and I am so thankful for my mental health background because it assists with that.”

Now that Stuart has completed her MAT, she won't change a thing.

"I don't want to move out of the classroom," she said. "It's the first job that I've ever had that I truly want to wake up and go to. I am stoked to be here and do what I do."

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