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Georgia Southern education senior named one of three PAGE teacher candidate scholarship recipients

September 14, 2021



NelSilva Wolf, secondary education major

Georgia Southern University senior and secondary education major NelSilva Wolf has been awarded one of three scholarships from the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE). The scholarship is awarded annually to rising juniors or seniors pursuing their initial certification as a teacher in the state.

“Ms. Wolf’s dedication to the profession is evident through her thoughtful engagement in course assignments as well as her involvement in both the university and local communities,” said Janel Smith, Ed.D., Georgia Southern senior lecturer for middle grades and secondary education. “She is willing to take on extra demands to prepare herself to be an effective educator for her future students.”

Wolf is service chair for Circle K International, an international collegiate organization that is a service leadership program of Kiwanis International, and

organizes service opportunities across the state for collegiate members. She is also the current president of the Georgia Southern Circle K International.

Wolf can also be seen on the Statesboro Campus giving tours to potential students and their families as a member and training coordinator for the Office of Admissions’ Southern Ambassadors team. She has served as a SOAR leader and FYE peer leader, and most recently joined the Educators of Color student organization in the College of Education (COE).

“The younger me shied away from being involved,” said Wolf. “Now I have the volunteer bug, and I cannot stop myself. When I see an opportunity that I think I might like, I make time for it.”

In the first semester of her senior year, Wolf started this fall in a yearlong placement at Richmond Hill High School (RHHS), a Georgia Southern Professional Development School, in a ninth grade Algebra I classroom.

“I love math,” she said. “It is my favorite subject, and I wanted to teach something I love so that my students could see my passion for it.”

As a part of the University’s placement, RHHS math educator Eileen Hough serves as Wolf’s teacher mentor for a full school year, so that Wolf can experience a closer, proactive relationship with the school and its

personnel as well as a more integrated student teaching experience for the teacher candidate in the school climate.

“I was worried that since I was not out in the field last year due to COVID that I would be at a disadvantage,” Wolf said. “But the yearlong placement puts me back on a level-playing field. Ms. Hough is awesome and brings 27 years of experience to the classroom. Before I started, I was terrified, but just a month or so into interacting with the students and receiving mentorship and advice from Mrs. Hough is lessening my worries. It has already been a very positive experience.”

Wolf received the PAGE John Robert & Barbara Moore Lindsey Scholarship this fall, which provided her with \$1,000 to assist in college expenses during her final year in the education program.

“This scholarship provided me with financial relief,” she said. “With all that I am involved in, I wanted to make sure that I could focus on balancing everything without having to worry about paying for this semester.”

For Wolf, May 2022 cannot get here soon enough, as she will get to do what she has always wanted to do since she was a child — help others.

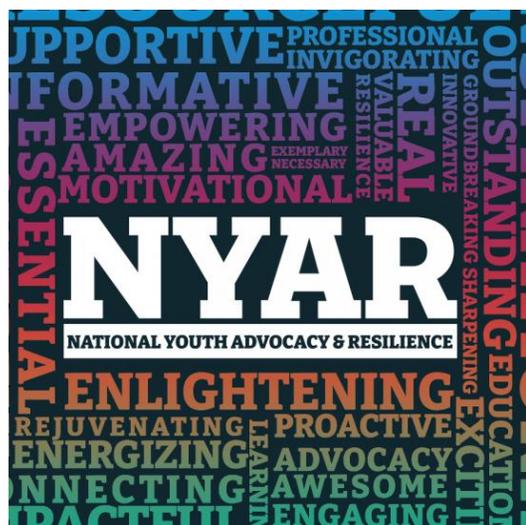
“I had plenty of career ideas when I was younger because I am the type of person who wants to help people,” she said. “Once I tried tutoring, I realized teaching was the path for me. It is rewarding. I want to teach because it makes me feel good to help the students.”

Posted in [Student Highlights](#)

Tags: [Janel Smith](#), [NelSilva Wolf](#), [Secondary Education](#)

[Georgia Southern’s College of Education creates research center dedicated to youth advocacy](#)

September 14, 2021



For more than 30 years, Georgia Southern University’s National Youth Advocacy and Resilience (NYAR) Conference (formerly the National Youth-at-Risk Conference) has served as an epicenter of information sharing and advancement for the support of youth facing challenges across the nation. The conference recently led to the creation of the NYAR Research Center, an interdisciplinary facility that is housed in the College of Education (COE) to further enhance the conference’s efforts in supporting youth across the nation.

As early as spring 2022, the NYAR Research Center will begin conducting research and developing evidence-based practices to support University professors, educators, community partners and

other adults impacting youth. NYAR Conference co-chairs Alisa Leckie, Ph.D., and Taylor Norman, Ph.D., initiated the proposal for the Center and brought together a group of faculty and administrators from multiple colleges at Georgia Southern to support cutting edge and interdisciplinary research that will have the greatest impact on youth advocacy and resilience.

“Each year at the NYAR Conference, adults who work with our nation’s youth gather to discuss how we can make a difference for our youth who are facing challenges from many different directions,” said Norman. “To make our efforts intentional and focused, we are utilizing the faculty and staff at Georgia Southern University to formally bring together our resources and centralize our efforts impacting the lives of our youth.”

The research and work of the NYAR Research Center is based on five interacting areas developed by a team including COE’s Coredlia Zinskie, Ed.D., that impacts the academic, social and emotional well-being of youth. Referred to as the Five H’s, the interacting areas include: head for intellectual achievements and school leadership; heart for social and emotional skills; hands for safety and protection; health for physical and mental health; and home for family and community support.

“Through the Center, faculty will engage in interdisciplinary research alongside community partnerships to assist young people in overcoming conditions that are threatening their safety, health, emotional needs and/or intellectual development,” said Leckie. “This research will serve to inform practice, create evidence-based professional development, and implement change in not just schools but community programs, the juvenile justice system, universities, families and beyond.”

The Center aligns with the University’s mission to be a public impact institution, including the five designated research impact areas.

“Specifically, the NYAR Research Center will advance the University’s efforts to impact the region and beyond in the areas of community enrichment as well as holistic fitness and wellness,” said COE Dean Sharon Subrenduth, Ph.D.

The NYAR Center will open under the co-directorship of two Georgia Southern faculty members. Applications for the co-directors will be collected this fall.

While the Center is housed within the COE, efforts to initiate the NYAR Research Center are strongly supported by a diverse team of faculty and administrators including: Maya Clark, Ph.D., associate professor of communication sciences and disorders in the Waters College of Health Professions; Daniel Larkin, Ph.D., assistant professor of philosophy in the College of Arts and Humanities; William Mase, DrPH, associate professor of health policy and management, and Joseph Telfair, DrPH., associate dean for practice and research in the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health; Chad Posick, Ph.D., associate professor of criminal justice and criminology, Katy Gregg, Ph.D., associate professor of child and family development, and Brenda Blackwell, Ph.D., professor and associate dean in the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences; and Tracy Linderholm, Ph.D., COE associate dean for administration and faculty affairs.

Posted in [COE Sponsored Events](#), [Community Outreach & Partnership](#)

Tags: [Alisa Leckie](#), [NYAR](#), [Taylor Norman](#)

An Eagle Educator is the 2022 Georgia Teacher of the Year

September 14, 2021



Cherie Dennis ('10)

The 2022 Georgia Teacher of the Year is a Georgia Southern University alumna Cherie Dennis ('10) who has lived and studied across the nation from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco, California, and settled in Savannah, where she began a career in teaching more than 12 years ago.

Dennis, a native of Chattanooga, Tennessee, went to Georgetown University to earn an undergraduate degree in Japanese with a concentration in language teaching. She continued her education at Stanford University and earned a master's in East Asian studies. Her goal was to teach Japanese, and everything was going to plan until just weeks before graduation when the grant fell through for a high school exchange program she was supposed to work for in Washington.

"I looked for jobs teaching Japanese in schools within California, but it was too close to the start of a new school year, and there are not as many positions available to teach Japanese as there are other languages," she said. "I had to start looking for some other type of employment."

Dennis searched for jobs that had ties to Japan and for the next several years worked for advertising agencies with clients like Toyota and Clorox, in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

"I don't regret my time in advertising," said Dennis. "It was fun and challenging."

After taking time off to be a stay-at-home mom close to family in Savannah, she saw an opportunity to return to her original dream of being a teacher. Dennis enrolled at Georgia Southern's Armstrong Campus in the [Master of Arts in Teaching \(MAT\) Early Childhood Education](#) program to earn an initial teaching certification.

She started her career as a third grade teacher at White Bluff Elementary, and a year later moved to Hesse K-8 School where she taught third grade for another six years before transitioning to teach English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

"I love teaching," she said. "This career just makes my heart feel good."

Working with an average of 60 children per year, Dennis teaches ESOL students in grades K-5, focusing on their English reading, writing, listening and speaking proficiency skills. Virtual learning during the pandemic was an additional challenge for many of these students.

"It's an extra hurdle for ESOL students," she explained. "The need to provide family support was magnified more than ever before. It has always been at the heart of what ESOL teachers do, but when families do not have access to the internet or they don't understand the technology or the assignments in English to be able to assist their children as much as they would like to, reaching and teaching our students who are already facing the difficulties of learning in a language that is not primary to them becomes increasingly complex."

Thankfully, Dennis' passion for foreign languages has assisted her in being able to communicate on a basic level with students and their families, as she knows fundamental Spanish in addition to Japanese.

"The needs of the students each year can be very different from the previous year," she said. "It's a challenge, and it involves having a pulse on who your kids are and differentiating and individualizing instruction to meet their needs."

For the next year, Dennis will continue to collaborate with her ESOL team at Hesse, but as the Georgia Teacher of the Year, she will focus on the responsibilities that come with the title such as serving as an ex officio member on the State Board of Education and traveling as an ambassador for teaching in Georgia.

"I get to be an advocate and voice for teachers, students and families in Georgia," she explained. "I will also be responsible for going around the state and speaking at various events such as conferences, workshops, new teacher orientations or professional development sessions to share my experiences."

As the state's teacher of the year, Dennis will be in the running for the 2022 National Teacher of the Year (NTOY) facilitated by the Council of Chief State School Officers. The NTOY is announced each spring.

"I am really humbled and flattered by this award," she said. "I don't do what I do alone, and what I do is only a piece of the puzzle of what educators do as a whole," said Dennis. "I can think of so many teachers who go above and beyond every single day, especially since COVID. Teachers have poured their hearts and souls into giving their students what they need to the best of their ability in the most trying of circumstances. It's wonderful to have affirmation for the work that I have done, but I feel the need to share it with everybody who has been with me along the way and who I continue to work with every day."

Posted in [Alumni Highlights](#)

Tags: [Cherie Dennis](#), [Elementary Education](#), [Master of Arts in Teaching](#)

Amidst pandemic challenges, Georgia Southern alumna awarded for national Reclaiming the Joy of Teaching Award

September 14, 2021



Margarita Pomare-McDonald ('20)

Georgia Southern University alumna and Windsor Forest Elementary School first grade teacher Margarita Pomare-McDonald ('20) is the 2021 recipient of the Literacies and Language Arts for All (LLA) Reclaiming the Joy of Teaching Award.

Presented each year by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Joy of Teaching Award is given annually to a Pre-K through 12th grade teacher who inspires authentic progressive literacy and learning.

“Ms. McDonald is always engaging students with a spirit of joy,” said Georgia Southern Professor of Reading Education Sally Brown, Ph.D. “Recently, COVID-19 spawned a series of challenges for teachers. Even through troubling times, she remained positive. Her enthusiasm brought joy to students as they learned from home, and she pushed herself to learn more about the ways digital tools can support literacy learning. Her innovative ideas and methods captured the interests of her students during the pandemic. Ms. McDonald’s commitment did not end when the school day was officially over. She continued working with families who struggled to connect with the internet in the late evening. Her joy never faltered.”

Originally from New York, McDonald’s journey brought her to Savannah where she was a stay at-home mom with her daughter.

“At first I volunteered in the school district when my daughter was in kindergarten,” she explained. “I kept saying that when my daughter got into middle school, she would be able to stay at home alone, and I would pursue a career with my business degree.”

After some time at the school, teachers and administrators alike started to encourage McDonald to join the school's staff.

The timing worked out just right, and with the retirement of a paraprofessional in kindergarten, McDonald took the school up on their offer to become a full-time employee. After a few more years, her co-workers and supporters in the school started to push her again.

"They said I had to go back to school and get certified so I could teach in my own classroom," McDonald said. "I thought I was finished with school. I didn't want to go back to school. But next thing I knew I was applying at Armstrong in 2016 to earn my Master of Arts in Teaching."

In 2019, McDonald started as a teacher with her own classroom and completed her studies and certification from Georgia Southern in 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to switch to virtual learning.

"I had enough experience under my belt from my years volunteering and as a paraprofessional to work through teaching online and get through it," she said. "I put a lot of pressure on myself because I didn't want to see my students get behind. But I am so excited to be back with them in person this school year."

McDonald is currently teaching the Dual Language Immersion class at Windsor Forest Elementary, where native English-speaking and Spanish-speaking students are integrated in the same classroom to promote bilingual and biliterate students as well as high academic achievement. To continue to grow in her career and meet the needs of her students, McDonald has pursued advanced academic opportunities at Georgia Southern, including completion of an ESOL graduate endorsement this year, and enrollment in the gifted endorsement program this semester.

McDonald is responsible for instruction in reading, English language arts and social studies in English. Her teaching philosophy is one of the very reasons she was recognized for her recent award.

"A lot of times when our students are not where they need to be, they get discouraged," she explained. "With English language learners, they are trying to learn content while trying to learn a new language. So I try to make learning exciting and focus on helping each student grow from where they are. There is no one track for everyone. I help each individual student grow to their next level."

When McDonald looks back at all of her experiences, she says she knows she is right where she is supposed to be.

"I felt like this has been my calling, and I have just been fighting it all these years," she said. "But maybe it wasn't meant for me in the past. I am where I am supposed to be at the right time. Because when I say I love what I do, I mean I love what I do."

Posted in [Alumni Highlights](#)

Tags: [Elementary Education](#), [Margarita Pomare-McDonald](#), [Master of Arts in Teaching](#)