

# Creating a Haven for Growth

## Bridget Wallace surrounds her students with experiences and love

**Bridget Wallace's** Junior Kindergarten classroom is a haven on the 100-acre MICDS campus, and her charges enjoy every moment they spend there. The colorful environment can range from decidedly peaceful during naptime to full of raucous joy and laughter while learning. Wallace loves every moment.

The 14-year veteran educator comes by her vocation honestly; it's nothing but a family thing. Her mother was a high school teacher, both of her sisters are early childhood educators, and several aunts and cousins teach. "It was something I was always surrounded with," she said. "I knew when I was younger that I wanted to be a teacher." In the fourth grade, she wrote essays with her classmates about what she wanted to be when she grew up. For Wallace, it was easy: she was going to teach. Her fifth-grade English teacher, Mrs. Dultz, gave her the framework that inspires her teaching to this day. "I remember her talking to us like we were humans," she said. "She would of course correct us, but she'd never get too upset." Wallace also enjoyed the humor she brought to the classroom, using silly sayings like, "You got your mords wixed." Fifth grade is a hard age, Wallace admits, and she appreciates that Mrs. Dultz always responded with calm patience. "I saw her again when I was a teen, and she was exactly the same."







Wallace combines this calm patience with a vibrant spirit for learning each day in her lessons at Beasley, whether she's teaching in her classroom, the pollinator garden, or on the playground. She incorporates the ideas of Reggio Emilia, an educational philosophy that focuses on social collaboration and communication and understands that a child's environment is also their teacher.

Her first students were her own three children, and she enjoyed staying home with them and volunteering in the library at their preschool. "After 11 years, I decided it was time to get in the classroom," she shared. When her youngest was in kindergarten, she went back to school, first to finish her undergraduate degree at University of Missouri-St. Louis. "I was juggling a lot with kids and school," she admitted, but she persevered and went on to earn her master's in early childhood education at Webster University. As part of that program, she traveled to Italy with fellow **Junior Kindergarten Teacher Ginny Otto** to see the origins of Reggio Emilia in person. "We were able to be in classrooms and study their schools," she said.

Learning never stops for Wallace. She's a member of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and seizes every opportunity that MICDS offers. Right now, she and other early childhood educators are going through Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) and Core Knowledge Language Arts & Literacy Curriculum (CKLA) training. She's excited about both opportunities, and grateful for the guidance and support of **Head of Lower School Amy Scheer** and **Lower School Literacy Coordinator Liz Crowder**. She also takes advantage of her own community. "I'm always talking to my sisters and my teacher friends," she said. "We love sharing things when we learn about them. I also research on my own and reflect, honestly, about what I know, what's true about these kids, and what I think is the best practice."

She enjoys carefully planning each school day for her young students. "I'm thinking about all the kids and all the different needs they have, and how to get it all into our day." She strategizes to incorporate play and sensory resources into each activity. "They are talking and feeling and smelling, and I want to fully immerse them into everything we do." Her goal is for every student to glean something from each activity, and make sure she's meeting the needs of each individual child.



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She also wants her students to feel understood, and she appreciates that she has only 12 children in her classroom each year. "It's a great student-teacher ratio," she said. "They grow so much, and I want them to feel known. They are seen and this is their space to grow and to learn with confidence, even after they leave Junior Kindergarten. I talk about how I'm going to see them in the hallways. I want them to know we all recognize them as individuals."

Routine is essential to keeping the classroom organized and running smoothly, and Wallace reports it takes about three to six weeks to get students solidly in their routines. "Kids thrive on routine, so they look for it," she said. "When we know what their routine is going to be and start doing it right away each day, they feel better about it." Daily routines also contribute to effectively building a classroom community. "They grow together," she said. "They come in as little individual people and then they form this great group together and support each other and play."

Mornings at MICDS are Wallace's favorite time of the school day. After everyone arrives, she begins with a morning meeting and story time. "Have you ever been greeted by a group of four and five-year-olds?" she laughed. "They make you feel so good. They come in and they're so happy to be here. It's fun to see them become independent in the routine and in the classroom."



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Outside of MICDS, Wallace enjoys reading, cooking, shopping, and spending time with her husband, Ian, and their three children, who have all reached independence under her tutelage: Grace (24), Olivia (23), and Graham (21). She and Ian enjoyed a trip to Scotland over the summer, hiking and exploring the area where Ian's family is from. She spent the rest of the summer preparing for the arrival of her first grandchild, who will reap the benefits of being the loved one of a teacher.

Wallace's feelings about children extend beyond her family to her classroom. "I hope our parents know that when their children come here, they are so 100% loved and known by the teachers. My colleagues are my friends, and I truly know they feel as I do: we love watching these children grow up." Wallace's first class at MICDS will graduate next year, and she said it has been wonderful to get to see them all grow.

Today, though, and every day, she'll welcome the youngest learners at MICDS to her classroom with compassion and patience. "This age reminds me of what's good about humanity," she said. "They're amazing. They have their own personalities but they're so pure and innocent."

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