

Michele George

Fourth Grade Teacher

At age six Michele George got a chalkboard for Christmas and became a teacher. Her first students were stuffed animals, lined up in rows.

“Every job since then has been teaching,” she said.

It’s difficult to find an actual job teaching stuffed animals, so George moved on to people long ago. She is in her seventeenth year of academic teaching and her second in a fourth-grade classroom at Crossroads Academy. Along the way she has taught every grade from one to 12.

She has adult students too, as a yoga and meditation instructor with more than 20 years of experience. Over the years she has also taught dance, French, English, history, gymnastics and outdoor education.

In George’s mind, there are no walls between these many classrooms.

At Crossroads her fourth-graders practice yoga, though they may not realize it. Sometimes the class takes a stand-on-one-leg stretch break, to loosen things up. When George feels the energy rising past the point of productivity, she might ring a chime. Everyone knows what that means: Stop what you’re doing, close your eyes, and take three deep breaths.

“It’s palpable,” she said of the effect. “It feels more settled. It feels like there’s more space.”

The freedom to be creative is one thing George appreciates about teaching at Crossroads, an independent school in Lyme that immerses even grade-school students in a deep exploration of world history, literature, science and the arts. It’s called Core Knowledge.

“We have this rich curriculum,” she said, “but there’s no how-to. To me, that’s a huge invitation.”

A second point of resonance is the school’s embrace of Core Virtues: the concept of teaching character alongside knowledge. “That was a really amazing fit for me,” George said. “. . . The way I see my job is to bring forth the best part of whoever I’m working with in every given moment.”

To those characteristics of Crossroads you might add a third: an openness to change.

Last year, her first at Crossroads, George and her fourth-graders did what their predecessors had done over the preceding quarter-century: produce a fall play written by the school’s founder, Mary Beth Klee, on the meaning of the American Revolution.

But that timing led George to teach history out of order: starting with the Revolution, then hopping back to Medieval Europe, Islam and Africa as well as the dynasties of China.

So she proposed a change: Let me take up Medieval Europe first, culminating in a class performance of Robin Hood, and march on to end the year with the American Revolution and a revised production of Klee’s play.

The change was approved—leaving George with the careful-what-you-wish-for challenge of writing a Robin Hood screenplay over her summer vacation. She read as many as 20 other renditions before producing a play with 17 speaking parts, a 19-page script and four scenes. She’d wake at 5 am and write and revise until 9, when her own kids began their day.

“I tried to appeal to fourth-graders,” she said. The play should. It explores history, romance, humor, poverty, truth, injustice, and bows and arrows. That’s enough to get even an old stuffed animal excited.

