



SIMONE SPEARMAN: TEACHER OF THE YEAR TEACHING STUDENTS TO WIN

Simone Spearman with her 6th period AP Language class. Spearman has 51 AP students in two classes (the largest number of AP students at Piner).

By Shirah Madsen McDonald

Don't go putting on the '80s song "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" around Piner High School English teacher Simone Spearman, because she just might end up in the hospital. Dancing around the classroom to get 34 seniors fired up, she dislocated her knee and smashed her arm into eleven pieces. Yet Spearman, who was just named the California League of High Schools 2011 Educator of the Year, couldn't wait to return to work one month later—arm full of titanium and

humility in check. It's obvious her enthusiasm for teaching spills into everything she does.

Born in Detroit in 1971, Spearman moved to Bainbridge, Washington when she was twelve. The only child of parents active in the legal profession, Spearman was a focused student.

Early on she knew that she would attend either Stanford or Yale, but first she had to overcome her loathing of math. She exclaims: "Trig was a bear! I would show up at school at 6:30 in the morning

before anyone else just to get my work done...I would put in that extra time." Spearman shares this story with her students often, whenever they complain that her expectations are too high.

Everything Spearman does models these expectations; she has always been one to make things happen. For example, when she was 15 and learned of a foreign exchange program in France, her parents told her she would have to fund the trip herself. Undaunted, she walked the Bainbridge downtown in search of

a job. At the time, the only job available was at a local knitting shop. Since she did not know how to knit—and that was a prerequisite—she spent her Friday nights teaching herself how.

One year later, Spearman arrived at the summer institute in La Rochelle, France. She laughs that her husband makes fun of her because she was the only freshman at Stanford University to move into the dorms with big bags of knitting supplies.

At Piner High, Spearman teaches both AP and remedial English. This dichotomy excites her. She states: “Kids at Piner are amazing and have faith that what we have to offer is worthwhile. And that’s just huge. That just makes me want to work on the lesson plans even longer, makes me want to get it right.”

Located in Santa Rosa’s west side, Piner High School is an early college magnet. Through open enrollment, students who choose

Piner have the advantage of earning up to a year of college credit while still in high school. Spearman enthuses: “We are a geospatial technology pathway. Kids are surveying, mapping, and applying science and math to real world stuff.”

Piner also offers courses in biotechnology and health and science investigations—including internships with

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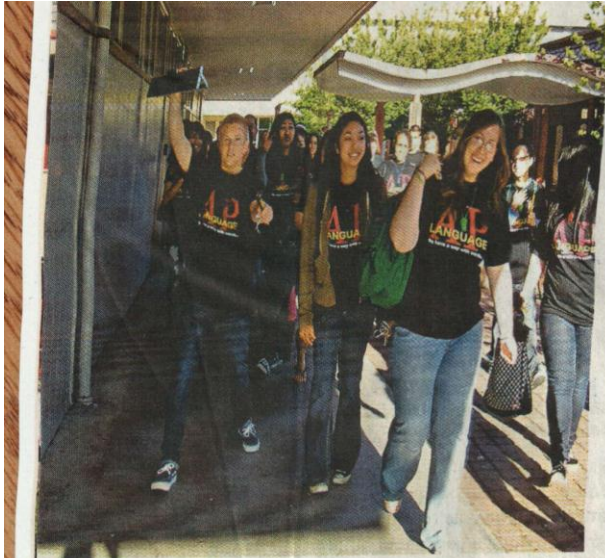
Simone Spearman, husband Jason Weaver, and daughter Saja Spearman-Weaver.

Kaiser and local businesses. The school is drawing more attention, and was recently awarded a million dollar grant to build a geospatial building on its site.

Spearman stresses that as teacher of the year, she feels merely representative. She is part of a team, asserting that all teachers at Piner have set the bar high.

Her English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are particularly close to her heart. In these classes, Spearman teaches students from Eritrea, India, Laos, Vietnam, and Latin America—kids who, according to Spearman, are “hungry” for English. It is not an easy road.





Ms. Spearman's students en route to their AP Language test. They're ready!

SIMONE SPEARMAN

These kids come here carrying their version of the 'American Dream.' According to Spearman, though they are aware of the recent rumble in Arizona with its strict immigration laws, they still try to remain positive in a climate that doesn't fully support them.

She tells the story of one freshman student who lived in a shelter. "She got up at 5:00 a.m. to shower, and then took the bus to school," explains Spearman. Despite the challenges of a transitory lifestyle, last year this student graduated and passed the California High School Exit Exam.

Spearman also assists her ESL students in applying for college. A former student from Eritrea, whom Spearman helped apply to U.C. Berkeley, has now been accepted into two graduate schools. One school has even offered a full scholarship. These are the stories that give her a "battery jolt"; at Piner she finds no shortage of inspiration.

Spearman's teaching philosophy is to treat academics as a sport. She'd love to see parents on the sidelines or in



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

bleachers, rallying cries of support and encouragement as their children take tests. Currently Spearman carries the largest number of AP kids at her school, some 50 kids.

On AP testing day, she gets her students "pumped up" by having them all wear a student-designed t-shirt. She then marches them in to music, as if they were going off to battle. They may feel silly, but this is the ultimate boost to their self-esteem.

The pride of Spearman's classroom is a driftwood podium made by her husband. She's pretty sure she's the only teacher in Sonoma County with one, and it really motivates her students when they are assigned to give speeches.

When not in the classroom, Spearman can be found rooting on her daughter's softball, basketball, and volleyball teams with her 6'8" husband, Jason Weaver. And she writes, having just finished her first fantasy novel, *The Dragons of Durga*. She is also the proud owner of Navin, a 22-pound cat. 🐱

Career Pathways

Piner High School offers an integrated course of study in the following career pathways:

- Arts and Communications
- Building Trades and Construction
- Business and Information Technology
- Culinary Arts
- Engineering
- Health Science Investigations
- Geospatial Technology

In addition, the Early College Magnet Program, in partnership with Santa Rosa Junior College, allows students to graduate from Piner High School with up to a year of college credit. 🎓