

The Gadsden County Times

More than equal to the task

Gadsden's Rookie Teacher of the Year teaches math at Havana Magnet School

By Kendrick Brown

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His classroom walls are covered with drawings of algebraic expressions on handmade posters he calls anchor charts, giving one the sense that student eyes seeking some distraction will find none.



Kendrick Brown

Havana Magnet School eighth grade algebra teacher Abria Harris assists one of his students during a quiz. Harris is the county's reigning Rookie Teacher of the Year.

In Abria Harris' class, there is no escape from his math, and his grasp is over his students in a way both sweet and stern that leaves them describing him as engaging.

It's clear he has quickly taken to his role in the classroom. And the accolades prove it. Earlier this month, Harris was named the county's Rookie Teacher of the Year.

Harris began teaching in January 2014 at Shanks Middle in his hometown, Quincy, but was quickly recruited by his former teacher and current principal of Havana Magnet School, Delshauna Jackson, to join her at the new school. Jackson taught Harris when the latter was a sixth-grader at what was then Havana Middle School.

Harris went on to win the HMS' rookie teacher of the year distinction in his first year at the school. He was eligible to win the county's competition this year because teachers qualify for the award their first three years in the classroom.

While a student at Florida State University, Harris began feeling the urge to somehow give back to his native community, Gadsden County, and figured mathematics, a subject he had developed a passion for through a strict but guiding St. John Elementary instructor in fifth grade, could allow him that opportunity.

"He made sure you knew mathematics. He really pushed us to understand the skills we were covering," Harris said of that math instructor. "It helped me to see math is a language within itself."

Today, Harris' students speak of him just as dearly, with Lavondar Chandler, 14, describing him as fun, amazing and energetic, and Cheleshia Johnson, 13, appreciating his outside mentorship of her through advising the school's Student Government Association and FSU's College Reach-Out Program.

"He makes us smile and he relates to us so we can talk to him," Chandler said.

Neither student could deny Harris' high expectations.

Principal Jackson said Harris' effectiveness is clear, with all of his algebra students passing the course last year. She even went as far as to call him the ideal teacher after coming short of words and calling him indescribable.

"He's a great teacher who goes over and beyond," Jackson said.

"I'm very happy he's the Rookie Teacher of the Year and am more than sure that he will soon be the Teacher of the Year."

While a student at FSU, Harris enrolled in a teaching program that allowed him to double major, eventually graduating in Dec. 2013 with degrees in mathematics, and mathematics and science teaching.

He also twice received a grant through the Noyce Scholarship, which according to its website aims to "recruit highly qualified math science teachers in the nation's high needs schools," and requires recipients to "either commit to a period of teaching in a high-needs school, or to repay the full dollar amount of the loan within six years in lieu of the teaching commitment."

Receiving the scholarship made coming home an easier choice for Harris, but an added incentive has been getting his feet wet at his old stomping grounds, HMS.

"I wouldn't have had it any other way because there's a need and that's why I was so focused on coming back home," Harris said.

Adding, "Now I'm working alongside some of my former teachers and it brings back so many memories of my time here as a student."

Jackson said Harris has begun to show leadership qualities and he said he was designated by the county lead secondary math teacher for the school district.

"All students can learn but with that in mind it takes the true heart of an individual to teach to do it," Harris said when asked of his teaching philosophy. "It's important we don't count out any child. We should set high expectations for them all and the moment we set high expectations, they will rise to the occasion."

Harris is still continuing his education, having earned a masters in education through online courses from private, Christian college Grand Canyon University, and plans to pursue a doctorate in math education.

Harris was raised in Quincy's Scott-town community by his late father Johnny C. Harris, Jr. and his mother Marilyn, matriculating through St. John Elementary School, Havana Middle School and Shanks Middle School before graduating from East Gadsden High School in 2009.