

Alison Donovan '03

6th grade teacher, Saint Philomena School, Portsmouth, RI



Making Learning Real

BY ELIZABETH WALKER



Alison Coakley Donovan '03 began teaching at five years old. Her first pupils were her brother and sister. What started out as sibling play soon became Donovan's life's plan. Today, the Tiverton, Rhode Island, native is in her eighth year of teaching. Yet in one respect she is back where she started.

"I'm in my fourth year at Saint Philomena School in Portsmouth, Rhode Island," she said. "It's ironic because this is the elementary school I attended from kindergarten through eighth grade. Most of the teachers I had are still here."

Donovan's former teachers easily embraced her as a colleague because her love of teaching, care for her students and competence in the classroom are so readily apparent. She teaches science, mathematics and literature to sixth-graders at Saint Philomena. Donovan, who arrives at school before 8 a.m. each day, puts in long hours. She interacts with the 26 children in her homeroom, teaches seven classes and squeezes in a 25-minute lunch break. Yet she can't imagine being anywhere else but in a classroom full of lively sixth-graders.

"Originally, I thought I wanted to work with third- and fourth-graders when I did my student teaching with children that age at a school in Worcester," she said. "My first teaching job after graduation was at Holy Trinity School in Fall River, Mass. I taught sixth, seventh and eighth-graders. For some reason, they just drew me in. I really like to work with students that age because they're still really excited about school."

She also delights in their willingness to take chances and be wrong. "Sixth grade is an interesting mix of personalities, especially at this time of the year," she said. "They're all over the place emotionally. Some are still fifth-graders; some are sixth-graders. Some are trying to find themselves. I like them because they're willing to share their ideas. They're willing to be wrong and to accept constructive criticism. They're still kids, still fun and still excited about learning."

During her student-teaching experience, Donovan learned valuable strategies for classroom management and discipline that she still employs today. She says that her Assumption education prepared her well to handle the many challenges new teachers face. She credits Kimberly Schandel, an associate professor of biology and chemistry in the department of natural sciences, for encouraging her so strongly to pursue both science and education.

"One of the best things Assumption does is to require students in education to major in something else," Donovan said. "I majored in biology with a concentration in elementary education. As a new teacher, I came to the classroom with a science background that was well beyond that of most new K-8 teachers. When I started teaching, I didn't have to learn the content area. I could focus on classroom management and planning daily lessons. I already had learned how to deal with a classroom full of students as a student teacher. In fact, that was my only exposure to being in public school."

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From kindergarten through college, Donovan attended Catholic schools. That includes graduate school. In 2008, she earned a master's degree in educational administration from Providence College. Halfway through the program, her daughter, Ella, was born. Alison and her husband, Brendan '03, a certified public accountant, are expecting their second child in May.

"I've always been in Catholic schools," she said. "The sense of community is important to me and prayer is a big part of our day. I teach science and religion which means we explore the tension between science and religion in ways that we couldn't in public school. We have great discussions about Creation."

In addition to the self-confidence, content-area knowledge and classroom management skills Donovan brings to teaching, she also offers her students some personal qualities that she hopes enhance the learning environment.

"I would say that I have high expectations, but I'm also fair," she said. "My students seem to find it easy to talk to me because they know what I expect, but they also know I can be accommodating if they're having a problem."

Keeping things new and interesting is an ongoing challenge for Donovan as she completes her eighth year of teaching.

"I don't want to do the same thing every year," she said. "It's important to make learning real and I want my students to feel engaged, not simply reading out of a book. I think this will be an ongoing challenge throughout my career, but I'm in education for the long haul." ❖