

Woodmont High School Teacher Named Greenville County Teacher of the Year

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Greenville County Schools Superintendent W. Burke Royster announced the selection of Will Ragland, a drama teacher at Woodmont High School, the 2012-13 Greenville County Teacher of the Year.

Sherryan Yarbrough, a kindergarten teacher at Blythe Academy of Languages, was named first runner-up; Rex Smith, a science teacher at League Academy of Communication Arts, was named second runner-up; and Abigail Cook, a chemistry teacher at Wade Hampton High, was named third runner-up.

Six other finalists were named in this year's program that exemplifies the "best of the best" in Greenville County Schools. They are: Matt Critell, kindergarten, Fork Shoals School; Jillian Grimsley, fifth grade, Stone Academy of Communication Arts; Jessica Jackson, special education, West Greenville School; Brian Morgan, art, Duncan Chapel Elementary; Sara Newell, fifth grade, Sterling School; and Jennifer Valenti, eighth grade Spanish, Northwood Middle.

Straight out of Davidson College with a degree in Studio Art, Will Ragland began performing in community theatre productions. His outstanding performance in the production of *Oliver!* caught the eye of a school district employee, who encouraged him to apply for a related arts teaching position at an elementary school. "I became a teacher, almost by accident, and the job turned out to be a perfect fit," said Will.

Since that time, this newly-named Greenville County Schools Teacher of the Year has made great contributions to his school, community, and most importantly, to the drama students he teaches every day at Woodmont High School.

Ragland says his role as a teacher takes many forms, including coach, counselor, motivational speaker, therapist, entertainer, and second father. "It is a role that is both scripted and improvised, depending on the response of the audience, and it's ever-developing," he explained. "We have our flops and our rave reviews, but the goal is always to improve and have a better performance tomorrow."

One of Will's most rewarding experiences was working with a student who had high-functioning autism, which caused him great pain growing up and made it difficult for him to connect with his peers socially. "I heard that he had some experience in plays in middle school and encouraged him to audition for one of our productions. That lit the spark for a transformation in him that was

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hard to believe," said Will.
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By his senior year, this student had been featured in every production and had become a self-confident, articulate leader who feared no theatrical challenge. He is now a college student and plans to major in theatre education and become a teacher. "He is the perfect example of the rewards I find in teaching," Will said.

Ragland describes theatre as powerful, magical, collaborative, and fun. He uses these attributes to encourage students to stay in school and graduate. "When I see a student walk across the stage at graduation and I know that I have taken a part in making that a reality, I feel a great sense of fulfillment. When I see one of my students discover a talent they never knew they had or find something that they love so much that they pursue it in college, it's one of the best feelings in the world," he explained.

As Greenville County Schools Teacher of the Year, Will's message is simple: Donate your time, talent, and money. He believes public schools need the full support of all members of the community, and schools need the physical presence of their communities. "I would encourage businesses and communities to get involved in their neighborhood schools and take a truly active part in public education," said Will.

In addition to a bachelor's degree in Studio Art, Will earned a master's degree this year in theatre production from Central Washington University. He has had many opportunities to showcase his own talent with performances at local community theatres. He has assumed such lead roles as Buddy Holly, Atticus Finch, Dr. Frank-n-Furter, Willy Wonka, Captain Hook, Sweeney Todd, and Scrooge. He was named a 2010 Greenville First's Best and Brightest 35 and Under, and is active in the South Carolina Theatre Association. His students have earned state and regional awards for their performances for the past three years.