

Primary sources

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Willamette teacher attends weeklong institute at Library of Congress



Photo Credit: TIDINGS PHOTO: KATE HOOTS - Willow McCormick teaches a blended second- and third-grade classroom at Willamette this year. Each year, she teaches a unit on civil rights, and she incorporates the concept of social justice into her classroom each day.

Willow McCormick's summer took an unexpected — and very productive — turn when she learned in the spring that she had been selected to attend a teacher institute at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

The annual institute's focus this year on civil rights meant that the Willamette Primary teacher would have a chance to explore her passion for civil rights in the nation's capital, the site of many important civil rights milestones and monuments.

Although she did manage to squeeze in visits to a few of those, sightseeing was not at the top of McCormick's list. She spent most of her time within the library's walls, making the most of her access to the nation's library. There, she would become acquainted with the physical resources in the collection, learning how to integrate those resources into lessons back at Willamette and conducting her own research.

This year's civil rights focus meshed perfectly with McCormick's own interests. She has introduced the concept and history of civil rights to her second-graders every year during her nine-year span at Willamette. She is at the head of a blended second- and third-grade class this year, and she intends to continue teaching about civil rights.

One of the most interesting elements of her civil rights curriculum is an annual assignment for students to write a letter to their grandparents asking them to share their civil rights experience. Students ask questions such as "Were you aware of injustice?" "Were you aware of demonstrations?" and "Do you have advice for us to make the world a better place?"

McCormick posts the letters on bulletin board, atop a map, with lines drawn to the location where the grandparents live.

"You start to see that injustice wasn't isolated to the south," she said.

In fact, when McCormick first began the project, she was surprised to learn that localities such as West Linn and Oregon City had "sundown laws" that required people of color to leave town before

darkness fell each day. She did know, although her students did not, that by collecting such stories they were creating what historians and other social scientists call primary sources: firsthand accounts of actual events.

“We were creating primary sources before that was even on my radar as a concept,” she said. “It made learning more meaningful. It made the knowledge more approachable for second-graders.”



Photo Credit: SUBMITTED PHOTO - One of McCormick's prized souvenir from her week in Washington, D.C., is this identification badge from the Library of Congress.

At the Library of Congress, McCormick had the rare opportunity to handle primary sources from the height of the nation's civil rights struggle. She spent a lot of her time in the archives of Look Magazine, examining what she called “amazing” photos of school integration. Some of those photos had been published in the magazine; many others, however, had never been published.

“I’m definitely going to incorporate way more photos, every day, starting from the beginning,” she said.

During her week at the Library of Congress, McCormick became somewhat of an expert in navigating the vast collection of online resources, and that is information she is eager to share with her colleagues back in the West Linn-Wilsonville School District.

“It’s such a great resource, and how I can be a bit of a guide toward navigating the system,” she said. “Any social studies unit can be enriched with primary sources.”

The teacher institute is an annual program offered at no charge to teachers. McCormick applied for and received some funding from the district, through a professional development fund, to offset her travel expenses and the costs of staying in D.C. Assisting her fellow teachers in accessing the online collection is a way of paying back the support she received, she said.

And, of course, her own classroom will feel immediate benefits from the knowledge she gained and the sources she now can incorporate into the curriculum.

“My purpose is to empower my students to feel they can make a positive difference in the world, starting right now,” she said.

“I want for them to be looking at the world in a critical way,” she added.

By **Kate Hoots**

Education reporter

503-636-1281, ext. 112

email: khoots@westlinntidings.com

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