

Katherine Matisse ***AmeriCorps Alumni of the Year***

Katherine Matisse grew up continuously advocating in and for her community. To Kat, educational activism meant dedicating her time and knowledge to underserved communities, urging students and teachers to regularly confront systems of oppression, and encourage her students to always ask “why?” With a firm commitment to promoting educational equity, Kat decided to serve as an AmeriCorps member for two years with Teach For America (TFA) Milwaukee, at Carmen Schools of Science and Technology - Northwest Campus. She believed that through her service she could help give her students the skills and understanding to empower them to advocate for themselves and to change what they believe to be wrong or unjust in the world. Following the completion of her AmeriCorps service, Katherine has not only continued making an impact for students at Carmen Northwest, but also has founded TwoBirds Tutoring, a nonprofit designed to provide employment opportunities to Milwaukee teens while simultaneously delivering high quality academic services to local elementary students.



When she joined TFA Milwaukee in 2018, she knew she needed to be a teacher because of previous positive experience teaching in summer camp and after-school arts programs, and through exploring her desire to teach through substitute classroom positions. While teaching 6th-8th grade interdisciplinary art and 6th grade literacy as an AmeriCorps member, Kat dedicated herself to developing relationships and building a sense of community among her students. She founded the Middle School Art Club and the Drama Club during her first year, directing the school’s first play. Excitement built for the play during her second year, as even more students wanted to be involved and turnout was expected to double, but this was suddenly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though clubs and extra-curricular activities were canceled during those first months of distance learning, Kat worked with her students to innovate to allow the show to still go on. Kat purchased an animation program for one of her very ambitious students and the two of them spent countless hours animating the play, using recordings of the different students’ parts as voiceovers, with the final production meaning an incredible amount to her students who were separated by distance learning and needed the positive experience.

Kat’s service within the classroom also reached well beyond the call of duty during the pandemic. When some of her students began to fall behind and struggled to complete assignments on time, she formed an open-door policy through Facetime. Students were able to call her whenever they needed for homework help, mentoring, questions, or wellness check-ins. She soon had a small group of students regularly calling for group homework hours, who as soon as it was safe planned weekend outdoor outings with Kat to spend time with one another and enjoy time with their new mentor.

Kat’s commitment to the students of Milwaukee did not end when her AmeriCorps service concluded, nor did it stop at the schoolhouse door. While driving a former student home from an interview at a local McDonald’s, she and the student spoke about how find a job with good pay that would also get them ready for their desired future in social work. Their discussion centered around how her older former students needed career opportunities and job skills to make this possible, but her current students needed academic support. On that drive home, Kat realized she could solve these two problems with one solution; two birds, perched on one stone. Founded just last year, the TwoBirds mission is to provide well-paying and intentional job opportunities for teens in Milwaukee to serve as tutors for their younger peers at no cost to families.

Kat’s career as an educator and as the executive director of TwoBirds Tutoring are still in their early stages, but the foundation she created through her AmeriCorps service has already made a significant impact in the lives of numerous students and will only continue to make a difference for many more.