

Marian Greenblatt Fund Winner and Teacher of the Year Finalist

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Philip K. D'Agnese

After twenty years as the Chief of the Radionavigation Office in the United States Coast Guard, you'd think a man would be ready to kick back and relax. Not Phil D'Agnese! Instead, "Mr. D" deftly switched gears, earned his Master of Arts in Teaching from Johns Hopkins University (JHU) and with his characteristic, high-voltage energy, was off to help open the state's largest elementary school, Sparks Matsunaga.

Under Mr. D's leadership, after-school basketball is more than simply an opportunity to stay fit. He partners with the Montgomery County Police Department to emphasize cooperative learning, teamwork, and good sportsmanship. To enhance students' interest in science, Mr. D builds butterfly gardens, develops inquiry-based science projects, and assembles weather stations. To train his pint-sized forecasters, he wrote and received a Howard Hughes Science Foundation grant which got a state-of-the-art weather station up and running; NBC News 4 later supplied a second station.

Mr. D truly understands children. He appreciates that they learn almost effortlessly when they have a personal link to the information. Thus, for eight years running, his second-grade students have earnestly helped him compute how much fencing he needs (perimeter) and how much grass seed to buy (area). A fractions lesson focused on pizza—a favorite among this crowd—got an enthusiastic response. Excited students waved their hands frantically to supply correct answers. "Can we explore more tomorrow?" one asked as he reluctantly packed away his plastic fraction manipulatives. Mr. D mesmerizes his students with his vivid lessons. Learning about solids and liquids? Mr. D shared a photo of himself on an iceberg from his Coast Guard days and then passed around cups with ice cubes floating in water to explain their physical properties. Photos of him in any number of the 106 countries he has visited locks in a geography lesson for good.

Understanding that a connection to home is the key to student success, Mr. D supplies students with a tidbit to share to stimulate discussion with the family. He frequently counsels parents, who rave about his insights and ability to coax high performance from their children. He generously mentors teaching interns, who find themselves awed by his classroom skills. But Mr. D is first and foremost a beloved, respected, and effective teacher. So how has he adjusted to the land-locked life of teaching? "This is what I want to do for the rest of my life," is Mr. D's firm answer.



"It's not exaggerating to say that my son's second-grade teacher at Matsunaga Elementary School last year, Phil D'Agnese, has changed the lives of my son, our entire family, and scores of others he has touched in nine years of practicing his creative, inspirational, and compassionate approach to teaching."

**MICHAEL W. COGAN, PARENT, SPARKS
MATSUNAGA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

"I have had the pleasure and honor to have been Phil D'Agnese's student intern for the Johns Hopkins University.... This experience left me yearning for my own classroom so that I could implement the strategies that I actively saw demonstrated by Phil throughout my internship."

**KARA KEARNY, TEACHER, SPARKS
MATSUNAGA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**