

## **Meet Ivona Todorovic, the 2023 North Dakota State Teacher of the Year**

Our NDSTOY Chapter asked Ivona Todorovic a few questions as she begins her time as the NDSTOY. She graciously took time from her very busy schedule to answer a few questions about how she came to be a teacher, how her students inspire her, how her colleagues make her a better teacher, and her hopes for the coming year. You don't want to miss a word of what she has to say.

### **How would you describe the journey that brought you to your present teaching position?**

My journey was unique, unexpected, painful, beautiful, and challenging. Teaching has been part of my DNA since I was a young child. First of all, as the oldest child, I cared for my little sister and all the other younger kids in my neighborhood. I was always amazed by reading and learning and shared it with others. So, I was one of those high schoolers who knew teaching would be her occupation and life. Through various extracurricular activities, all the way up to graduating from high school, I developed my leadership skills and became teacher savvy.

When I graduated from university in Sarajevo, Bosnia & Herzegovina, I obtained an elementary teaching position at the K-8 primary school I attended when I was a primary student. I was an energetic, optimistic, creative, and innovative young teacher whose career started when the first air sirens interrupted children's laughter and dreams. The war started, and I wanted to continue to make a difference in my students' lives, but the moment came when my husband and I had to leave. One of the hardest feelings for humans is when we feel like outsiders and lose the sense of belonging. From there, my life as a refugee started. Immigrating to the USA and reuniting with my husband's cousin was the beginning of our new life and finding a new home. Grand Forks did not only become our new home but a place where my passion for teaching even became stronger. Finally, I was back in the classroom. As a Title I paraprofessional at a local elementary school, I was encouraged to pursue my dream and to obtain my teaching certification by my school family. After graduating with an elementary degree from the University of North Dakota, I accepted a resident teacher position at Phoenix Elementary. After I received my Master's in Elementary Education, a new path opened for me, and I was invited to join the EL team in my district. The last 18 years taught me how to be a teacher-leader, active listener, effective problem solver, compassionate human being, and a lifelong learner who knows that quitting is never an option, even through the toughest times like experiencing war, moving to another country, the major flood of '97, and the world pandemic.

### **How do your students inspire you?**

One way my students inspire me is that they remind me how this diverse world is a great place to be, and we need to cherish it. My students encourage me to be brave and step out of my comfort zone because what I do matters. They remind me that we are all

imperfect human beings, pointing out that being vulnerable helps me grow--to learn and ask for help from other teachers, and connect to other human beings in order to experience humanity daily. They challenge me to learn more, to do more, and to never give up because they need me. My students teach me compassion, respect, generosity, resilience, love, fear, patience, and hope. They open my window to the world—one story at a time. They are the best investments we can make with a considerable return and promise of a great future. They are my second family, my home, and my peace.

### **What are some ways your colleagues make you a stronger teacher?**

To explain how my colleagues make me stronger, I have this analogy, "something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue." Let me illustrate it. As teachers, we borrow teaching ideas from each other and connect them to our old ideas to create new ideas, inspiring students to reach their highest potential because the sky is the limit. I would never be here, in this spot today, if I hadn't had so many teacher-colleagues encouraging me, helping me, collaborating with me, and influencing my career and life in general. They taught me how to be vulnerable and lean into my discomfort to connect and work with them intentionally to lift the quality of education in this state and beyond. I love how my colleagues challenge me with questions and ideas, which helps me grow and transform. Personally, for the last ten years, I co-taught in all content areas at my school with many content teachers. I was never more challenged, nor was I more empowered. The last three years of Covid-19 were a success because I had my fellow teachers working, collaborating, co-planning, and co-teaching together with me to help all learners succeed with rigor and high expectations. After all, more than ever, these students need to be equipped with the crucial skills to succeed.

Only together can we accomplish our goals and guide our students to success.

### **What message will you share with teachers across the state during the coming year?**

"We may not have it all together, but together we have it all."

Teachers of North Dakota, let us stand united and work together. Do uncover a story behind each student. See the wealth they bring with them. Build on it. Respect it. Expand on it. Also, open up to being vulnerable. Lean into new discomfort while sharing your expertise with other fellow teachers. Listen to each other, communicate actively, be willing to ask for help, and collaboratively serve ALL students. Only then can we say that we did everything. And only then will we have enough energy, inspiration, and passion to continue our journey as teachers and public servants of this great country and state.

### **What are your hopes for this coming year as the North Dakota State Teacher of the Year?**

I hope to elevate the North Dakota teachers' voices this coming year. I want to carry the message of hope and change. We must explore innovative ways to attract the young

people of ND and beyond to become teachers because our nation's future depends on it. I want to encourage my fellow teachers to be involved in their community and state dialogue to find many feasible solutions to our teacher shortage problem. Also, I want to emphasize that intentional collaboration and co-teaching in your buildings could be very effective solutions to serve ALL students and continue being inclusive.

I want teachers to encourage their students not to be afraid to be different—one story at a time. We need to share stories in hard times like these to connect and build relationships. Stories help us get to know our students as individuals and prove that humanity matters. With each story, the empathy gap narrows, and we build trust and relationships with our students while using their strengths to design targeted and differentiated lessons connected to real life. The storytelling approach is very effective when teaching and reaching the content objectives and essential standards. When we tell "factual stories" that are connected to real life, we create access for all students to learn and be successful no matter what subject is in question.

Finally, I will work tirelessly to encourage and cheer teachers across the state to get actively involved in important issues shaping our future as educators. I encourage all educators to start having a dialogue about the importance of having great discussions on controversial topics with our students because we must equip them with the knowledge and skills to be ready to be active citizens and future leaders of North Dakota, guiding them to grow into emotionally intelligent and conscientious world citizens working toward the purpose that matters while strengthening their voices to be heard and acknowledged.

**Will you be sharing your experiences through social media? If so, how do we follow you?**

Yes, I will share my experiences via Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

My Twitter handle is NDTOY23.

My Instagram username is 2023ndtoy.

You can follow me on Facebook at the link below:

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100086923006173>