

Classroom and Community Come Together in Innovative Saint Louis University Program

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Teach Me: Classroom and Community Come Together in Innovative Saint Louis University Program

By Emily Clemenson

February 24, 2017 — Thirteen strangers are chosen and instructed to live together, eat together and depend upon each other.

This isn't the next season of prime-time reality television. This is the Billiken Teacher Corps, a two-year, service-driven master's program at Saint Louis University. Participants are not just roommates or classmates; they're treated as a community — somewhere between a cohort and a family. They have shared experiences and make programmatic decisions as a group. They're young, energetic teachers who rely upon each other for prayer, support, fellowship and camaraderie.



Fr. Ronny O'Dwyer, SJ, leads Billiken Teacher Corps members in a classroom blessing at St. Louis the King School. (Jay Fram)

“The Billiken Teacher Corps is a program with three interlocking pillars,” said Dr. John James, a School of Education faculty member who helped make the program a reality. “One, teaching in a high-need, urban, Catholic school. Two, earning a tuition-remission master’s degree at Saint Louis University. And three, living in an intentional faith community, which involves prayer and personal spiritual development.”

The program launched in June 2015. Participants are recent college graduates, some with undergraduate degrees in education and some without, who have a drive to serve and a desire to teach. The inaugural six Billiken Teachers

have started their second year in the program and welcomed a new cohort of seven in June 2016.

The Billiken Teacher Corps is based on the Alliance for Catholic Education at Notre Dame, but anyone familiar with service-driven programs will notice similar elements. It's like the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, but with a teaching component. It's like Teach for America, but all participants live together.

"It's like my personality was shifted into a program," said Michelle Ehrhard, who is in her second year in the program. "I was somewhere between being Catholic and wanting to teach, but wanting it to be more than just a career — wanting to show God through it."

The Teaching

Each student in the program is placed in an under-resourced school in the St. Louis region to teach for two years. Elise Earley teaches middle school science at St. Cecilia School and Academy in St. Louis. She has always wanted to effect change in the world. But because she did not decide to become a teacher until after she graduated from college, she was without the student-teaching experience that undergraduate education majors have.



Sarah Staten teaches math and religion to sixth, seventh and eighth graders.

"The first day of school was kind of shocking," Earley said. "Nothing can prepare you for that first day. Until you get into the classroom, you have no idea what it'll be like."

She was lucky to have very sweet students in her class, she said, willing to help out as she learned the ins and outs of managing a classroom.



Kelsey Kerr works on lesson planning.

Sarah Staten teaches math and religion to sixth, seventh and eighth graders at St. Louis the King School at the Cathedral in St. Louis' Central West End.

"It was initially intimidating to have six classes to plan for," Staten said. "I've had to develop my own curriculum based on what the students need and what they aren't understanding."

The Learning

Once a week during the school year, the tables are turned and the Billiken Teachers become students. Earning a Master of Arts in teaching through the two-year program, the cohort takes one evening class during the academic year and three concurrent classes during the summer.



Billiken Teacher Corps participants take classes together at Saint Louis University.

“The classes are mostly discussion-based,” Staten said. “For a lot of it, you incorporate what you’ve done teaching into the class.”

“The Billiken Teachers’ success will be grounded in the ability to use the research-based approaches they learn at SLU to achieve real-world results,” said Jesuit Father Ronny O’Dwyer, director of the program. “This will require our members to integrate spiritual passion and intellectual depth with their service as leaders in Catholic education.”

The Community

All Billiken Teachers live together in a renovated convent at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in south St. Louis. The old convent has three floors: the top floor has 14 individual rooms and community bathrooms; a main floor includes study spaces, tables, couches and a chapel; and the bottom floor has the kitchen, dining room, laundry room and television room.



Mandatory weekly events fulfill the community and faith-formation aspect of the program. One night a week Fr. O'Dwyer joins the community for Mass and dinner and leads them through various aspects of St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. On other evenings, one person cooks dinner for the group.

"We're like a family," Ehrhard said. "It's like somewhere in between really close roommates and family because they're peers — peers that you might not have chosen, but you end up loving. It's a messy, beautiful thing."

Billiken Teachers live together, eat together, pray together, learn together, laugh together. They stay up late and share classroom techniques and ideas with each other.

"I didn't expect to be super close to anybody, but I have come to love everybody in the program," Staten said.



Billiken Teachers did a run together to support organizations helping at-risk children.

And Staten said it's been a huge blessing during the challenges brought up by the program. When someone has to miss a community event, it becomes obvious how important that time together is.

"I didn't know I'd need it," Staten said, "but God knew I would, so he gave me good people."

The Calling

Billiken Teachers have adopted the phrase "Teach me" as their motto. "Anyone familiar with Jesuit education likely knows by heart St. Ignatius' prayer for generosity," Fr. O'Dwyer explained. "The prayer consists of seven stanzas, each beginning with the words 'teach me' — teach me to be generous, teach me to serve, teach me to give, to fight, to labor.



Fr. O'Dwyer serves as director of the Billiken Teacher Corps.

“It’s a prayer to God, of course, but it’s also a call we hear coming from our students: teach me,” he continued. “But there’s more. Anyone who has ever taught knows that teachers learn from their students. So to the students, too, we say teach me — teach me how to be Christ for you.”

Even with this powerful motivation, joining the Billiken Teacher Corps might not be the right fit for everybody. Teaching is a job full of delayed gratification, the Billiken Teachers say, and you have to be able to rely on your community for support on the days the job is taxing. You have to put your community’s needs and wants ahead of your own needs and wants. You have to share a bathroom.



(Jay Fram)

But all of the Billiken Teachers agree: It's worth it.

"It has really worked out for the best," Ehrhard said. "Not just for the better, but for the best."

This [article](#) originally appeared in the fall 2016 issue of Saint Louis University's [Universitas](#) magazine.

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