

Meet Featured Alumna

Amy E. Johnson, M.Ed., M.S.
Stetson Class of 1996



Biography:

- While at Stetson University, participated in 2 undergraduate research opportunities:
 - o Argonne National Laboratory, Summer 1994
 - o Cornell University, Astronomy Dept., Summer 1995
- Graduated Stetson University, May 1996, B.S. in Physics (in the Honors program)
- Attended graduate school and worked as a graduate assistant at Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia
 - o Master of Education in Science Education, August 1998
 - o Master of Science in Physics/Astronomy, December 1998
- taught at Wesleyan School in Norcross, Georgia, 1998-2000
 - o taught Physics (General, Honors, and AP-B), Chemistry, and Astronomy
 - o coached Varsity cheerleading for football and basketball
- teaching at Wheeling High School in Wheeling, Illinois, 2000-present

- teaching General Physics, Physical Science, and Astronomy
- coaching Varsity cheerleading for basketball (previously coached JV cheerleading for football and basketball)
- participate on the organizing committee for the Relay for Life of Wheeling/Prospect Heights (for the American Cancer Society)
- tutor part-time at Huntington Learning Centers in Georgia and Illinois, 1998-present
 - tutor math, reading, ACT

Open Letter to Physics Majors:

As the first woman and high school teacher selected, I am honored to be chosen as the Stetson Physics Distinguished Alum for 2004. You may be asking, as I often ask myself, how in the world did I end up teaching physics (and coaching cheerleading!) at a suburban high school outside of Chicago?!? Well, it's an interesting story...

In high school, I was equally successful in all my subjects, although I much preferred Math and Science over English and History. My senior year, after taking a class at Fernbank Science Center in Atlanta, I decided that I wanted to be a college astronomy professor. However, I had also decided to attend Stetson, a small university that did not have an astronomy major. So, having never taken a high school physics class, I became a physics major in order to reach my goal! Fortunately, I enjoyed it very much and after graduation, I decided to head back to Atlanta to attend Georgia State University as a graduate student in the Astronomy Ph.D. program.

Much to my surprise, after about 6 months, I realized that my interest in Astronomy had waned, to the point where I couldn't see committing the rest of my life to it. Luckily, I was enjoying the teaching aspect of being a graduate assistant, therefore I applied to and was accepted into a program at Georgia State that allowed undergraduate science majors to get their Masters of Education in 1 1/2 years. My advisor in Astronomy let me continue teaching and taking classes to also receive my Master of Science in Physics.

So, in August of 1998, armed with two Masters degrees and a couple months of student teaching, I became the first physics teacher at Wesleyan School, a relatively new

private Christian school north of Atlanta. While my two years teaching and coaching there were a great experience, I discovered that in order to be a better teacher, I needed two important things: one, a larger, more-established school that would not require so much of a time commitment outside of class, and two, an experienced physics teacher to mentor me. I decided that I needed to leave Wesleyan for greener pastures, but I had no idea where to find those pastures. At a conference for the American Association of Physics Teachers in January of 2000, I met another physics teacher by the pool who taught in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. I fondly remembered my times in Chicago when working at Argonne Lab in college, and had long ago decided that was the one city besides Atlanta I could see myself living in. Within three months of that meeting, I had sent off my resume to Illinois, flown up for an interview, and accepted a job teaching at Wheeling High School, about 30 miles northwest of downtown Chicago.

I am now in my fourth year of teaching and coaching at Wheeling, hoping to receive tenure at the end of this school year. Wheeling is an ethnically diverse community with dedicated teachers. The physics teacher I work with has been teaching here for 30 years! Working with him, and the other physics teachers in the area, I have been able to bring new ideas, demos, and teaching methods to my classroom to make it a more interesting, educational, and fun place to be, for both the teacher and the student. Every year we take a huge group of students to Six Flags Great America, where they successfully apply the physics concepts they've learned throughout the year. In addition, this will be the second year for our program, Physics is Phun Phor Parents- a 3-night class where the parents of current students can learn basic and fun physics concepts. I don't know if I will teach for the rest of my life, but for now it gives me great joy to (hopefully) positively influence the lives of high school students, whether inside or outside of the classroom.

So what's the point of this whole long-winded story? I guess my big piece of advice is to stay open-minded and amenable to change. Growing up, I never would have pictured myself as a high school teacher, but now I can't imagine doing anything else. We are a strange and rare breed, those of us who are intrigued by math, physics, problem-solving, and delving into why things do what they do. I think that it is a real gift to be able to share a love of all things physics with other people, whether they are a student, parent, or another teacher. No matter if you go into research, industry, or education, remember that it's up to us the spread the knowledge of how things work and why. Good luck in all of your future endeavors, and remember...*Physics is Phun!!*

–Amy Johnson

Web sites:

Wheeling High School - site for the school where I teach, along with a link to our district web site. <http://whs.dist214.k12.il.us/>

Physics Northwest- site for a group of physics teachers in the suburbs who meet once a month to socialize and exchange ideas, demos, etc.

<http://home.comcast.net/~physicsnw/index.html>

Wheeling High School Physics- site for the physics classes and other physics events

<http://whs.dist214.k12.il.us/www/academics/ms/physics/index.html>

Pictures:

Amy sent us some pictures from Wheeling High School's first "Physics is Phun Phor Parents" night, held in January, 2004. The first is of her teaching, the second of is her colleague, Pete Ogilvie, teaching, and the third is of some parents checking out infinite images from mirrors.





Amy recently wrote to tell us that:

This summer (2005), I left Chicago and moved back to Atlanta to be closer to family and old friends (most of whom are Stetson grads!). I am still teaching Physics (Honors and General) and coaching cheerleading (9th grade football and basketball), but now at Norcross High School in Norcross, GA.

*She still welcomes contact, and her new contact info is below...
If you have any questions for her, please feel free to connect with her directly.*

Contact Info:

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