

Local educator wins prestigious international teaching award

Written by By Jonathan Gregg Sun Correspondent
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Prestigious. World class. Best institutions in the world.

These phrases are not generally associated with Gallup's educational system – until now.

Martin Olea of Gallup Middle College High School recently won a Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Grant.

The Fulbright is a huge deal, according to the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State.

“The Fulbright Program is the flagship international educational exchange program sponsored by the U.S. government and designed to build relations between the people of the United States and the people of other countries that are needed to solve global challenges,” a UNM-G’s press release states.

Olea will be in the Netherlands for 6 months on the Fulbright award where he said he plans on studying and learning “how the Dutch incorporate entrepreneurship into their high schools.” While there he will be based at Utrecht University, the flagship university of the Netherlands.

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Olea, who received his Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from the University of California, Berkeley and his Master's in Educational Leadership from Columbia University, has worked for the past 13 years as a teacher and instructional leader in the northwest New Mexico area.

He has been with Middle College High School for three of those years. In his capacity as a teacher at Middle College, which is a charter school operating in partnership with UNM-G and Gallup McKinley County Schools, Olea's teaching and research both center around entrepreneurship.

When Olen speaks of entrepreneurship, a fire comes to his eyes, and a passion is clearly there.

He means "entrepreneurship" in the traditional sense of starting a business. But, he also speaks often on what he calls "institutions."

"I want them learning how to organize not only businesses, but also social enterprises," he said, of his students. "Many traditional schools are not preparing students to build those institutions, rather they are just preparing them for work".

In addition to entrepreneurship and "institutions," Olea is also passionate about leadership.

"One of the main issues with rural communities is economic development, or lack thereof," he said. "Kids leave and they don't come back, and part of that is mindset. We need to work with them to develop an entrepreneurial mindset, the visionaries that can lead."

Middle College is a unique program in which sophomores and juniors can apply, and if accepted they take college courses along with their high school courses, and graduate with both a high school diploma as well as an Associates of Arts degree. The school is in high demand, and has a maximum capacity of 100 students. Olea said that "applications usually exceed that number," and when they do, spots are allocated based on a lottery.

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Olea has positively impacted many students lives during his time at Middle College, such as Max Olsen. Olsen, who graduated Middle College this year and is currently a junior at UNM, said Olea certainly deserves the Fulbright.

“Honestly, if it wasn’t for him I wouldn’t even be in college,” he said.

While Olsen said that “his classes are the best,” what really stood out to him was Olea’s “Socratic Seminars.”

According to the website readwritethink.org: “The Socratic seminar is a formal discussion, based on a text, in which the leader asks open-ended questions. Within the context of the discussion, students listen closely to the comments of others, thinking critically for themselves, and articulate their own thoughts and their responses to the thoughts of others.”

“Those classes taught me how to actually listen, process information, formulate a thought, and respond,” Olsen said. “They laid the groundwork for me to think about starting my own business, to be the master of my own fate.”

Olea’s colleagues are also impressed with his level of work and passion. Ron Schali, who teaches at Middle College and has known Olea for over 10 years, lauded his teaching skills.

“Martin is one of those rare people who have a broad range of knowledge across a broad range of disciplines,” he said. “He is one of the smartest people I know.”

The theme of Olea being multi-disciplinary comes up often with both his students and his colleagues. His alternative approaches to teaching, and multiple viewpoints help to stimulate participation from students in the classroom.

“Many of our students come from non-traditional or challenging life situations. He helps them,” Schali said. “Martin has worked with many students on the verge of dropping out, and now

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several of those kids are in college. He is a very positive person with young people.”

Olea will be leaving in January and will be back in Gallup the summer of 2018.

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