5-27-20 issue

From a rough childhood to county teacher of the year, Swann overcame the odds

William Seidel

Smith Mountain Eagle

For teachers, winning county teacher of the year is a big milestone and one of the major highlights of their teaching career. For Franklin County Public Schools fifth grade teacher Anthony Swann, winning county teacher of the year meant everything to him.

Swann is seen winning the award in a video shared by Franklin County Public Schools. The video has more than 5,000 views and lots of comments congratulating Swann.

In the video, an emotional and surprised Swann was almost speechless, struggling to find the words that can describe all the emotions he was feeling in his big moment.

“I am just so honored to be able to serve children,” said Swann in the video. “I wanted to make a difference, I wanted to give children what I never had, and that was the love from male perspective, because I had an absent father.”

Yes, that’s right. Swann didn’t grow up in a loving home. In fact, he didn’t really have a home for most of his childhood. Swann’s mother was an alcoholic and his father did not want to care for him, he said. A memory of his childhood included seeing his mom drunk and being arrested in the middle of the night, and incidents like these were a reason Swann and his siblings ended up in foster care.

A young child witnessing moments like that can be hard on them to understand what is happening, but it all became a reality for Swann when he was in the fourth grade. One day at school, while he was in class, social services came to take him away. Swann said that in the moment it happened, he felt embarrassed, hurt, humiliated and was wanting his life to just end.

What followed next for Swann helped save him.

“My teacher, Mrs. Jerretta Wilson, grabbed and hugged me before she let them take me,” he said. “She whispered in my ear, ‘Anthony, everything is going to be alright.’”

That rare loving moment for Swann help sparked something inside of him, and that was a love for school. From there, his passion for school started at age 11, and Swann said he played school just to escape the trauma of his parents not wanting him.

“I played school every single day,” he said.

At age 14, Swann had another major surprise. That same teacher that comforted him in one of his lowest moments found him and offered to help him so he didn’t go down the same dark path his parents did.

He said she encouraged him all the time to grow up and make something of himself. She stayed by his side the entire way, including college.

Swann noted that Wilson picked him up every single day so he could get to his student teaching placement, because he didn’t have a car. It’s been many years later, and Swann still hasn’t forgotten the impact she had on his life.

“She definitely changed my life forever,” he said.

Fast forward to now, and Swann has been teaching for a total of 13 years, starting in Danville where he taught for 10 years before accepting a position at Rocky Mount Elementary School.

He has been nominated a couple of times for teacher of the year, but not once has Swann won teacher of the year at his school, let alone an entire district. He expected the same results for a third time.

“That morning I had already had a pep talk with myself. I told myself not to get my hopes up too high due to the fact that other teachers had been teaching in Franklin County way longer than I have,” said Swann. It turned out though, that third time was the charm for him.

As the candidates were waiting to hear who the winner was, Swann then saw a video of him teaching his class. It was at this moment, Swann’s heart dropped and he began to cry, as he knew he had reached that major milestone.

His struggling childhood, his determination to make something of himself, and his years of teaching and making an impact for children all led up to one of the best moments of his life.

“All I could think about was my labor has not been in vain. I thought about how my love for children and the profession did not go unnoticed. I was and still am in awe,” said Swann.

He was living the dream of being a teacher, but winning teacher of the year only adds the icing on the cake for Swann. He said it solidifies the fact that his passion and learning doesn’t go unnoticed.

Julie Nix, chairperson of Franklin County School Board, said she couldn’t be more proud and excited for Swann.

“Mr. Swann is so deserving of this award. His goal is not only to teach but to serve children,” she said.

Nix also mentioned the impact Swann has outside of the classroom, such as forming “Guys With Ties,” which is a group designed to show young men the benefits of manners, respect and kindness. She also said she was so impressed that he took his childhood experiences and turned them into something positive for the students.

Swann said it’s all been an overwhelmingly humbling experience for him, mentioning that he doesn’t like to receive praise or attention for what he does; rather he does it for his love to help children.

“I have a servant’s mentality. I don’t care what position you put me in. As long as I can serve children, my heart will leap,” he said. “I love serving children. They are my passion and purpose.”

If someone were to tell Swann when he first started teaching that he was going to have the same impact on children like his former teacher Mrs. Wilson had on him, he might have had a hard time believing it.

Now, 13 years later in his teaching career, Swann is changing lives inside and outside of the classroom.

“No one expected me to make it this far in life. It’s as almost as if I’m in a fairy tale,” he said. Never in a million years did I think that a young boy who grew up playing school in foster care would be changing and impacting students’ lives one at a time.”

His fellow peers and students love him, and Nix feels FCPS is a much better place with him, saying they are “incredibly blessed” to have him in Franklin County striving to help their children be the best they can be, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Looking back at his childhood to where he is now, it’s a remarkable feat that’s admired by many, but Swann says only you can control your own destiny.

“No matter where you come from and no matter your background, you can be somebody if you put your mind to it,” he said.

6-10-20 issue

Satterwhite reflects on his journey and experience as a ‘Jeopardy!’ contestant.

William Seidel

Smith Mountain Eagle

Will Satterwhite has had quite the journey. The Vinton resident recently was seen on national television participating in the “Jeopardy!” 2020 Teachers Tournament, which began airing May 25 and ended Friday.

Satterwhite, who is a high school band and choir teacher at Liberty High School, finished third overall, taking home $25,000.

Satterwhite said it was always a dream to participate in “Jeopardy!”

“I remember watching ‘Jeopardy!’ when I was a kid,” he said. “We would watch as a family after dinner, and it was always my favorite show to watch.”

Satterwhite recalls his first moment doing trivia was when a friend of his in the marching band convinced him to join her on the scholastic bowl team.

“It just kept going from there,” he said.

Satterwhite then met other trivia lovers in college and the hours they spent together doing trivia helped him realize that he might have a good possibility of being a contestant on “Jeopardy!” He said he actually ended up auditioning for the College Tournament when he was a student at Virginia Tech after taking an online test to be a contestant.

His most recent attempt at taking the online test is where the door to his dream of being a contestant on “Jeopardy!” opened up for Satterwhite. However, it came with a lot of waiting and patience. Taking the test back in April 2019, it was a 50-question, 50-category timed test. Satterwhite then got invited to audition in Washington, D.C., over Father’s Day weekend.

Being in a room with around 40 other people auditioning, they all took two more contestant tests and then played demo games of “Jeopardy!” so that the contestant search team for “Jeopardy!” can see how well those auditioning could use the buzzers, do a screen test, and see how they could do in a gameplay setting. Satterwhite said the search team then informed all those who auditioned that they were either going to hear from them or their time in the contestant pool will expire after 18 months and they should retake the test again.

After months of waiting, Satterwhite’s phone rang one January day. The number Satterwhite read was a California number, but he couldn’t answer right away.

“They had told us to watch out for Southern California phone numbers, so when I saw “Culver City,” where “Jeopardy!” is taped at Sony Pictures Studios, I knew it was them, but I was busy and had to let them leave a message,” he said.

Satterwhite then gave them a call back when he was free, and the excitement he felt couldn’t be put into words when he realized he was going to be a contestant on his favorite game show.

“My heart leaped up into my throat, and I actually teared up a little,” said Satterwhite.

He mentioned that there was concern if he was even going to get the chance to take the opportunity, stating that his wife at the time was pregnant with their third child and he was afraid that they were going to want him to come during her due date. Even if that was the case, Satterwhite’s wife told him that he had to go and do it, as it was his dream.

It all worked out for Satterwhite, and he was able to go live his dream. When he got there, one thing he learned quickly was how fast-paced everything was from the get go. He said all 10 episodes of the tournament were filmed in a span of two days, and it was “incredibly fast-paced.”

“Everything from the makeup, mics and promos, to the “winner's circle” interviews, from the actual gameplay, to our official pictures with Alex Trebek — all of it took place in the span of two workdays,” said Satterwhite.

As far as interacting with Trebek during his time as a contestant on “Jeopardy!”, Satterwhite said the interactions that someone sees on the show is basically the only times that the contestants get to be around him.

“During breaks, he’s working with the stage manager and judges to make sure that everything was pronounced correctly, and that gameplay is smooth. He also takes questions from the audience during breaks, and as expected, he’s very quick-witted,” he said.

Regardless, Satterwhite said Trebek was an “absolute pleasure” to interact with, and he was just as intimidating in person as he is on TV.

He also said the experience of auditioning and being on “Jeopardy!” was “everything and more,” and mentioned that there were things he learned that took him by surprise. An example Satterwhite noted was how Jimmy McGuire and Sarah Whitcomb Foss from the “Clue Crew” were actually a major part in the rehearsal process and were also the ones that did some of the contestant’s promo interviews.

One could say Satterwhite was lucky with the recording dates working around his wife’s due date, but he noted that as soon as he and the other contestants flew back home, that was when everything started to shut down from the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We’re very lucky to have gotten to do it; I believe they only taped 5-10 more episodes after our tournament before production came to a halt,” said Satterwhite.

Even after Satterwhite made it home, he still wasn’t finished yet. For the next three months, he and the other contestant had to keep the results “hush-hush.”

He said that was the trickiest part of the whole process, as no one wanted to watch a game show they already know the results to. Satterwhite said a way that helped him keep the results a secret was having weekly trivia night over Zoom with the contestants that he competed against. That’s right, despite them all going their separate ways, they all still stayed in contact during those three months of waiting.

As for who won the “Jeopardy!” 2020 Teachers Tournament, the first-place winner of $100,000 went to Ben Henri, who is a 7th-12th grade vocal music teacher from St. Clair Shores, Michigan. Second place went to Meggie Kwait, a 5th and 6th grade humanities teacher from New York, who received $50,000.

When he can look back on it, Satterwhite can remember this as one of the best life experiences he will ever have. Through the uncertainty of being there for his wife’s delivery of their third child to just beating out the pandemic, it all worked out in the end for Satterwhite.

“I am so thankful that it happened the way that it did. Getting to represent my community, my school, music educators, and the teaching profession made it even sweeter, and I’m incredibly grateful for the friendships that have come from it,” he said. “If ‘Jeopardy!’ called and asked me to come back, I would be on a plane in a heartbeat.”

7-1-20 issue

Hardy man can’t use fingers but still writes and plays music

William Seidel

Smith Mountain Eagle

“I’ve found that no matter what life throws at me, music softens the blow.” That infamous quote was said by author Bryce W. Anderson. That quote can also be found on musician Jon Weems’ website.

Weems, who is a resident of Hardy, said he has been playing music for as long as he can remember. His first instrument he learned to play was piano, and his first memory of it was climbing on the piano bench as a toddler and playing little melodies by tapping on the keyboard. His older sister played piano as well, and she taught him some songs to play with her. Weems said those moments were so much fun for him.

That’s when music started to grow even more on Weems. Some instruments he played during his time in school included trumpet in the junior high and high school band, baritone and trumpet in symphonic band, guitar and bass in stage band, and the snare drum in marching band.

“I found the guitar to be my favorite,” said Weems, who at the time was getting ready to write music.

Unfortunately, everything changed for Weems. A diving accident that resulted in a spinal cord injury left him paralyzed from the neck down. Weems is now a level C6 quadriplegic, which means he can still use most of his arms, but not his hand or fingers.

It was at that point he thought his music career was over.

“I really missed playing after my accident,” said Weems.

His creative mind, though, sprung an idea in the middle of his therapy session that brought him back to playing music. While he was being taught how to type a letter with a stick, Weems said he realized that if he could type letters on a keyboard, then he could play notes on a musical keyboard. He then went and bought a digital recording device and used it to write different sections of a song, one note at a time, and put them all together to form a song.

Weems has used this to create lots of content for his YouTube page, which has a variety of songs he created personally. One song, though, touched the lives of many around the community.

*“We Are All In This Together*,” which was posted recently, was shared numerous times on social media. During the pandemic, Weems got the idea to write his local hit.

“I wanted to write a song about everything that was going on regarding the pandemic and everyone staying home and maybe feeling disconnected,” he said. “I also wanted to give a shout out and say thank you to the people who were out there helping.”

Before it became a hit, Weems was happy with how the lyrics and music turned out for the song. He let a few people listen to it first before posting and said they loved it. What followed was one of the best moments of his musical career.

Weems shared it on social media, and it received a lot of positive responses. A humbled Weems was happy knowing the main reason he wrote the song was to leave an inspiring message.

“I was hoping it would connect with people,” he said.

Weems said he hopes all of his music can do that for people even if the message in some of his songs is lighter than his other songs.

As far as what Weems is doing now, it’s the same old song and dance. He had just finished his latest song called, “*I’m Only Human*,” which he was actually working on before he took a break to write “*We Are All In This Together.”* While the latter might have been a favorite with many in the community, Weems said this latest one is his personal favorite.

“It’s about how we treat others,” he said.

He also said he hopes to get more creative with his future songs thanks in part to his new keyboard he recently purchased, which is a new possibility that he is excited about.

Whether he writes songs for fun or to have a deep meaning, Weems will write whatever comes to him. Yes, his accident and current condition was the toughest thing life threw at him, but his ability to keep writing and playing music softened the blow for Weems. He will always be grateful and appreciative of the fact he can still do what makes him happy.

“I’ve always loved music and being able to create music I can share with others brings me a lot of joy,” said Weems.