



Jonte Lee

Describe your pathway from working in the business world to an award-winning science teacher.

I took a nontraditional path to teaching. Growing up, other children played with action figures and dolls. I played with textbooks. I enjoyed flipping through a textbook and thinking of ways to deliver the content to others. I pretended to teach math and science classes.

I wanted to major in education, but fear got the best of me. I was familiar with the myths of teaching: student behavioral issues, laborious hiring processes, difficult certification exams, and low pay. Giving in to my fears resulted in me settling on biology as a major and chemistry as a minor. During my senior year of college, I was accepted into a PhD program in biology. I only lasted a year in graduate school; I enjoyed science, but it was not my first love.

I wanted to go into education, but the fears and myths were intense. So, I thought of another passion of mine: business. I earned my master's degree in marketing in 2006. My career started in the corporate sector as a distribution analyst. I was successful in my job, but not as successful as I could have been, because I was only going through the motions.

I knew that I could not continue by existing and not living. I slowly began to explore teaching again. While working

in corporate America, I volunteered as a tutor at a local elementary school over my lunch break. I loved it! Working with the next generation gave me great joy. I knew a change had to happen.

I transitioned from the private sector to a job working for a national nonprofit. I did job training for college interns. This was my opportunity to combine my love for teaching and my knowledge of the business sector. At the time, I was satisfied, not fulfilled, but satisfied.

While working for the nonprofit, I started teaching at a local college part-time. I taught in the business school. I enjoyed teaching so much that I knew I had to make a change. I was no longer able to turn away from my destiny. I threw fear and caution to the wind, and I enrolled in an alternative certification program.

While in the program, I discovered that my love for science never left me; it was a patient friend waiting for my return. The biology content came flowing back, and I was able to pass my certification exams. After completing the program, I became a full-time teacher. I never looked back. Teaching allows me to combine my passions. Every day, I have the opportunity to invest in the future through science.

Describe your school and classes. What do you teach? What kind of school do you teach in?

I love my school. The students are full of passion and futuristic ideas. I teach at an Urban Title I School. The student population is 76% Black and 23% Hispanic/Latino. Currently, I teach chemistry and physics in the Early College Program (ECA), where students have the opportunity to graduate in four years with a high school diploma and an associate college degree.

What are some of the resources you use for ideas and inspiration?

Being a teacher is not an easy job. It is rewarding but not easy. There are days

where I need extra motivation. These days, I watch the movie, *The Marva Collins Story*. This movie reminds me of the reason why I became a teacher. Teaching is hard but the rewards are bountiful. When I am discouraged, I read old notes from students. This lets me know that even though they don't always say it or show it, I make a difference.

My instructional inspiration comes from movies and television. I watch the television shows and movies my students watch. I play the video games they play and download the apps they use. I then find ways to incorporate the movies, shows, apps, and video games into science lessons. I utilize this strategy to show my students that science is all around us. I once used the movie *Avengers Endgame* to teach about carrying capacity. The students went wild.

Talk about your teaching methods. In what ways do you encourage innovative and creative thinking in your classes? How do you keep everyone engaged?

Keeping students engaged requires having a great relationship: understanding their home life, struggles, tri-



umphs, hopes, and dreams. I use that knowledge to find methods to reach them. I also allow them to tell me how they want to learn. We review upcoming topics and they decided how they would like to be taught. They decide if I will bring in a speaker, take them on a field trip, develop a lab, find a video, or whatever they would like. When I taught a lesson about space, the students wanted to take a trip to the moon. I am sure you can imagine my trepidation. I was able to use virtual reality smartphone headsets, and we explored the surface of the moon.

What's the one project that you've always wanted to do but have never been able to, due to lack of time, money, etc?

I would love to do an international pen pal science inquiry project. I want my students to be exposed to a new culture while exploring a scientific concept. The technology for real-time collaboration is available. Every year, I start it but never follow through to the finish line. It requires several steps, and the normal academic year duties get in the way. I am aware of a program that supports this, but lack of time has been the limiting factor.

What do you feel is the most important big-picture takeaway for your students? If nothing else, what one thing do you want them to learn?

Critical thinking and knowing that there is no limit to their ideas. I want my students to walk away with the ability to research any topic and think about possible solutions. Even though the solutions may be far-fetched, this is okay. We thought the technology used in *Star Trek* was far-fetched, but now are able to do video conferences, use our voice to turn on and off lights, instruct our vacuum to clean the floor, or even have our refrigerator make our grocery list. Students' minds, thoughts, and ideas are the next frontier.



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Describe a time a student impacted your life.

Ramon is a student who taught me about showing up as a teacher. I have a speech impediment, and at times, I stutter while teaching. One day Ramon heard me stumble on my words. Mind you, Ramon never spoke to me. I would say hello to him in the hallway, and he would say nothing. I figured it was because I was not his teacher and we did not have a relationship.

Another teacher told me that he had a conversation with Ramon, one that Ramon initiated. Ramon stated that he heard me stuttering and thought, "If Mr. Lee has a speech impediment and is a teacher, then I can do anything. Mr. Lee has no choice but to speak." What I didn't know was that Ramon has a speech impediment as well. The whole time he was watching me. By showing up and being myself, I gave him inspiration and hope. He thought he didn't have a future because of his stutter. I later saw Ramon at a local store, and he told me that he is in college, has many friends, and a girlfriend. He told me that

his speech impediment did not hinder him like he thought it would. Ramon is a student I will always remember.

How do you foster a socially just classroom?

I do this in several ways. I do not allow past data to serve as a predictor of students' success in my classroom. No test is an accurate predictor of students' future achievement or behavior. I do not rely on previous tests, exams, or standardized tests to paint my view of the students. I allow them to tell me their stories. They tell me, verbally and through actions, their strengths and opportunities for growth. Every student starts fresh.

I do check-ins with my students via anonymous surveys and one-on-one conversations. This temperature check gives me insights into their thinking. Through the reviews, I learned that at times, I might focus more on students with behavioral and academic challenges, and consequently, other students feel left out. When this happens, I hold lunch parties, after-school tutoring, and send personalized "good notes" home.

These strategies let students know that I care about them, and they are a vital part of the class. I also use the survey results to modify my interactions with the students to ensure everyone is receiving a gold standard education.

Ensuring a socially just classroom requires me to explore my unconscious biases. This is not a one-time reflection; I must reflect daily where my actions land on the equality/inequality scale. I ask myself: Did I focus more on the boys instead of the girls? Was race impacting my pedagogy? What are other areas beyond the standard metrics that I am not aware of could have shown bias?

I do blind grading. Students turn their assignments online without their names to ensure that I am only reviewing their work and not allowing my feeling for the person to influence grading.

I attend professional development events to receive strategies to overcome unconscious biases. As a teacher, it is my duty, to ensure that every student feels welcomed.

What strategies do you use to help struggling students?

First, I let the students know that learning is challenging, and we all have subjects that require a little extra hard work. I tell the students about the struggles I had in school and the strategies I used



to be successful. I want the students to walk away with a sense of hope and not a feeling of defeat.

Secondly, I try to determine why students are struggling. Is it a reading, mathematical, scientific skills, or content issue? Once the root problem is diagnosed, I devise a plan to support the students. If it is a reading or mathematical challenge, I work with other content specialists to develop strategies. If it is a content struggle, I stay after school or during lunch to work with the students. I learn their learning styles and devise an after school/lunch lesson and activity

that supports their learning style. I also teach the students study skills. I want them to learn how to study and become independent: teach a person to fish.

The most important strategy I use is working with students' families. Having family support is critical to the students having a successful education. I provide strategies that the family can use to support their young scholar. When students are struggling, it becomes a team effort to ensure that students are meeting the standard.

What advice would you give to a brand-new science teacher?

Be gentle with yourself. You will make mistakes; it's natural. Learn from them and move on. You are human, and that is perfectly fine. We are not superheroes. We have feelings and flaws. You will feel feelings of happiness, anger, sadness, joy. Allow yourself to feel those feelings and use those feelings to drive your instruction. You cannot do this alone. Reach out to other teachers to get ideas and feedback. As a teacher, you will never stop learning.

Protect your work-life balance. Teaching is a rewarding but high-stress job. You cannot be highly effective if you are not taking care of yourself. Take advantage of learning opportunities. Students change over time, and so should our teaching methods.



Why is dissection needed?

Because after an accident I need my vet to know what to do.



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