

A call to teaching

Patterson dedicates life to helping others through Grace Learning Center

By JESSICA O'BRIEN Staff Writer | Updated 5 days ago

MICHIGAN CITY — Since the fall of 2012, Kristen Patterson has served as director of Grace Learning Center in Michigan City, a non-profit center operating under the umbrella of Citizens Concerned for the Homeless.

Through this center, Patterson works with needy and disenfranchised people in the community to help them develop job skills — learning the basics to become employable citizens in an effort to end homelessness in the city.

As director, Patterson said she is responsible for creating, developing and implementing programs which will tutor people, help them learn to read, obtain a GED or any other assistance her clients need to help prepare them land and keep a job.

Patterson earned a degree in secondary education from the University of Nebraska with an emphasis in English. She pursued a career in education because she understands the need for specialized attention when it comes to reading and learning.

Through much of her elementary, middle and high school years, she struggled to read. As an adult, she hopes to provide the support as a teacher she felt she always needed as a child - hoping to inspire her clients to not only learn, but enjoy learning.

Although a native to Michigan City, she spent seven years in Las Vegas teaching seventh and eighth grade English while also serving as the middle school English department chair.

When she is not helping others through the Grace Learning Center, Patterson spends much of her free time volunteering. She is a mentor through Hours for Ours and serves as youth group leader at Christ Church. She also gives time to community organizations such as Michigan City NOW and the Commission on the Social Status of African-American Males.

N-D: Why did you chose teaching as a career?

Patterson: I really struggled as a kid. I did well in school, but I didn't know how to read. I didn't learn how to properly read until I was in college and I faked my way through a lot of things and thought, 'I wish there was somebody that would have taught me these tricks.'

I had a pretty bad year my eighth grade year, in life, and I wish I would have had teachers that had stepped in and noticed. I wanted people to have inspirational teachers that make them want to learn how to read, make them want to explore, and who support them in what they want to do.

N-D: Who inspires you and why?

Patterson: My parents, for sure. They encouraged me to go for my dreams. They know what sacrificial love looks like. They're extremely hard workers, would do anything for anybody and truly, genuinely love people and love cultures — so that's where I get my love for everyone from. It's just seeing how they love everybody and accept everybody.

Anybody who wants to do more inspires me. Everybody inspires me.

N-D: What advice would you give someone who looks up to you?

Patterson: My best friend, Joan Paye, used to say 'You gotta show up, pay attention, ask questions and keep going,' and I think that's what it is. The other piece of advice is from my friend, Toni Ellis, 'clarity, focus, execution.' Clarify what it is you actually want, focus on those goals and start to execute them.

Know that I make mistakes all day, everyday. If you're genuine and you're vulnerable and you're honest with people, then there's a lot for grace.

N-D: What are the most stressful and most rewarding parts of working in nonprofit?

Patterson: The most stressful is never feeling like you're doing enough. There's just such a need — from helping people to get to new heights, helping them accomplish their goals, staying with them and really feeling like you're helping them change their lives and not wasting people's money, not wasting people's time, but really doing something quality that's making a difference.

The most rewarding is seeing the community. I love our community. Whether it's a client, or a donor, or someone who just wants to volunteer - our community is absolutely, hands down the best community I've ever lived in. Everybody wants to help out and the rewarding part is my clients are not just consumers, they're contributors. Everybody wants to help out, everybody is there for each other. It's humbling to see how much our community gives in every single way. It's amazing.

N-D: If you could meet one person in history, who would it be and why?

Patterson: I think I would chose Alice Walker who wrote "The Color Purple," and I would chose her because she is a knitter of words the way that she is able to take a moment and clarify or expand upon a moment using such carefully chosen words. I think that being intentional is so important with me and she was just an intentional writer and I just admire that. With that intentional writing I know that she is intentional in the rest of her life and I love people that are intentional and I think she could teach me a lot.

N-D: What is something about yourself that might surprise people?

Patterson: I like to paint. My grandmother instilled a love of the arts in me and I like abstract painting. I like to do crafts. I love the arts.

N-D: In your words, why is celebrating Black History Month important?

Patterson: I think celebrating all people is important. I am so excited that the newspaper is (celebrating Black History Month). I think it's important to encourage what's already been done, to promote what's going to be happening in the future and to help connect people. That's one of my favorite things in the entire world to do is to connect people and I feel like this connects our community. Celebrating the people who are in our

community and who are African-Americans making a difference in the community is crucial to mending and building bridges.



Photo provided

Kristen Patterson serves as director of the Grace Learning Center, a non-profit organization which creates and implements programs designed to help people learn and obtain jobs, combating homelessness in the community.