

Caitlin Rodriguez

Great Oaks Kathleen Sherry Charter School NYC

PROFILE

Seventh grade changed Caitlin Rodriguez's life. Born and raised on New York City's Lower East Side, she remembers being bullied in sixth grade. The following year became a turning point, as she started connecting more with her teachers, rather than her peers. It's also when she began finding her own voice and standing up for herself.

"Seventh graders mean a lot to me, because they're like the middle children, and they're always trying to find ways to get attention," she says. "It's important to me that they're heard and seen and valued. Middle school has my heart always."

But teaching wasn't in Caitlin's original plan. She wanted to be a social worker and was pursuing that path at SUNY Albany, when she was introduced to AmeriCorps at a career fair. Joining AmeriCorps allowed her to work at a middle school just a stone's throw from where she grew up. It also provided her first exposure to teaching.

Caitlin's AmeriCorps experience doing small-group instruction with seventh graders, combined with a nudge from the school principal, pushed her trajectory to teaching. Another principal suggested she attend Relay, from which she graduated in 2024 with a master's degree in teaching.

Caitlin chose Relay because it offered her more hands-on experience than textbook learning. "Whatever I was learning from my class that day, I was implementing immediately into my classroom at work," she says. "It made it easier for me to feel more

comfortable within the classroom. Having that hands-on experience is really important to me.”

“Relay was where I was able to really thrive and find my own teaching stance. I became my own little champion, and I’ve been doing it ever since.”

Sleep, TV, photography and Legos take up her time when she’s not at work, but teaching is front and center of everything. An English language arts teacher at Great Oaks Kathleen Sherry Charter School NYC, Caitlin is currently enrolled in a master’s and certification program, as well as the New Leaders Fellowship, with an eye on becoming a principal in the future.

Caitlin likes to share a quote with her students, which could easily be applied to herself: “If it doesn’t challenge you, it doesn’t change you.”

“I think it’s really important to challenge the status quo,” she says. “We’re in a very challenging place, and it’s OK to be the disrupter of that. Make space for yourself, take up space where you need to, and commit to that challenge.”

“I’ve always been up for challenges despite impostor syndrome and despite having those thoughts of ‘I can’t do this; I can’t do that.’ If you know you want to make an impact, go for it and ignore the thoughts. Accept the challenge, and let it change you.”

word count: 465

Q&A

Is there a teacher in your past who had a significant impact on you and what you do?

Gabrielle Johnson was my ELA teacher in, probably, 11th grade. She was the person who gave me my first C+ on an essay ever. It was because of a text I wasn't invested in. We had to do a book review, and she gave me constructive feedback in a way that wasn't steering me away from writing it again. She pushed me to excel, and then she pushed me into getting into the college summit program. She still messages me to this day just to check in. I've had a lot of relationships with my teachers. Every teacher, from preschool to my senior year in high school, I remember all their names.

Do you have a favorite experience from Relay?

It was in my last semester last year. I had recorded a final for my ELA class, where we had to put more of the work on the students, and they were the ones leading the class. Luckily, I had planned out a Socratic seminar for my students, so they were pretty comfortable with leading the class and the discussion themselves. Because of the video I sent for my final and the essay I wrote along with it, my professor personally texted me. She said, "Caitlin, I'm so sorry I'm behind on grading a little bit, but like I just wanted to let you know that was a wonderful final. You did everything you needed to, it is perfect." That was the moment for me. The individualized and personal connections you make with your professors because everybody's so tight knit — that's what stood out to me the most.

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