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Middle School Teacher, Julia DeSerio, '18, is Miss Gastonia 2020

For as long as she can remember, music has been important to Julia DeSerio, of Shelby, N.C. A 2018 alumna of Gardner-Webb University, she is the reigning Miss Gastonia and a middle school teacher. DeSerio decided when she was a fourth-grader that she wanted to become a music teacher. "Once I knew that this was my calling, I never looked back," she reflected. "Everything that I have done since that point has been to prepare me for this career."

When she began looking at colleges, a friend from her high school in Pacolet, S.C., invited her to visit Gardner-Webb. The friend connected her with the Department of Music and Associate Professor of Music Tim Hudson. "A group of music majors greeted me and gave me a tour, introducing me to several students and professors and taking time to walk me around campus and build a relationship with me," she said. "Later that evening, I was invited to the suites to watch 'The Walking Dead,' and I think that part of the experience sold me on how much the community at Gardner-Webb cared about people. I felt so welcomed and accepted."

She majored in music with a voice concentration and minored in education. She's teaching choir and piano for 126 students at Crest Middle School and serves as the worship leader at Zoar Baptist Church, both in Shelby, N.C. During her first year of teaching, DeSerio had the



Julia DeSerio poses with her students at Crest Middle School in Shelby, N.C., before their first fall/Halloween concert. DeSerio is also the reigning Miss Gastonia and will compete in the Miss North Carolina Pageant this summer.

honor of presenting at the North Carolina Music Educators Association Conference. Dr. Morgan Soja, GWU professor of music, encouraged her to submit her proposal, “Creating Meaningful Learning: Let Students Guide Your Instruction.”

The presentation was based on DeSerio’s experiences from student teaching and as a beginning teacher. “I shared how I collected data about my students—how they learn best, what types of activities they enjoy doing, their personal interests outside of the classroom, etc.—to create engaging experiences in each class,” she detailed. “As educators, we can teach the same content to our classes, but the way we present it to every class can and should look different based on who your students are and how they learn best. Music education is often counted out as an ‘academic’ subject. One of my professional goals as a music educator is to change that stereotype by sharing my ideas and encouraging fellow educators to rise to the challenge of keeping the academic integrity of our art form.”

She is also promoting the importance of the arts in the community through her social impact initiative as Miss Gastonia 2020. The competition is a preliminary for Miss North Carolina, through the Miss America Organization. Her project, “Arts: The Highest Form of Hope,” targets at-risk students in Gaston and Cleveland counties by providing them with arts-based opportunities. “Specifically, I am working to partner with our local YMCA and Boys and Girls Club programs to help create an arts curriculum for their after school programs,” she described.

As she works with middle school students, DeSerio relies on the advice and learning opportunities provided by her music professors along with the practical experience included in the School of Education curriculum. As a GWU student, DeSerio taught in four different schools.

“I am so thankful for those experiences and how they shaped my philosophies of education, before I ever stepped into my own classroom,” DeSerio asserted. “Dr. Soja not only taught me about how to run my own music class, but how to advocate for myself, how to be a professional and how to thrive in this profession with passion and purpose. Professor (Jondra) Harmon not only taught me about how to sing and teach others to sing, but how important it is to believe in myself, show myself grace and patience through the process of learning new things, and push myself beyond what I thought I would ever be



Julia DeSerio presented her research at the North Carolina Music Educators Association Conference.

capable of achieving. Dr. (Bruce) Moser not only taught me how music works and how the history of music has shaped the world, but how to teach with a relentless passion and high expectations for my students.”