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Local man's studiousness rewarded with fellowship for science teachers



Matthew McCollum

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Of the Keizertimes

Keizer's own Matthew McCollum has always had an interest in the outside world around him.

Now thanks in part to a five-year \$150,000 fellowship from the Knowles Science Teaching Foundation, he'll get a boost in passing on that curiosity to the next generation.

McCollum is a 2005 McNary alumnus who holds a physics degree from Linfield College. He will be attending the University of Alabama-Birmingham in the fall to obtain a master's degree in education, and is currently working as a research technician in the university's pathology department.

He grew up attending Keizer schools, going to Gubser Elementary and Whiteaker Middle before moving on up to McNary.

“Growing up I always excelled in science, and I really loved it,” he said.

His interest was sparked by the outside world, he said – a curiosity about nearly everything.

“At such a young age, I wouldn’t even call it science,” McCollum said. “I didn’t think of it as a subject. “... I was fascinated with water and how you could put it in a bottle and freeze it, and the water bottle would explode. I was always in my back yard just kind of discovering things.

He credited two former McNary teachers in particular for encouraging him in his interests.

“My freshman year, with (Gary) Miller, we did something called the sludge test where they gave us a whole bunch of different chemicals in a jar, and we had to determine what was in the jar,” McCollum said.

And his junior year, chemistry with Kristine Walton lit a spark, he said.

“We took pure sodium, and when you throw pure sodium in water it explodes,” He said. “I remember going outside and seeing that reaction ... lit up my world, I guess.”

Walton is now assistant principal at North Salem High School, while Miller works in the Salem-Keizer Public Schools district office as a teachers’ mentor.

“He was just a great student, curious and smart, worked hard,” Walton said.

McCollum was also a two-sport athlete in high school, playing baseball and basketball. He played baseball at Linfield for three years, pitching until his ulnar collateral ligament (UCL) gave. He faced a choice: Have Tommy John surgery in hopes of restoring his elbow, or try another sport.

Then a senior who stood 6’8”, he decided to try his luck on the basketball court. He worked his way into the starting lineup almost immediately.

“I absolutely loved my senior year of basketball season,” he said.

He would go on to be an assistant junior varsity coach at North Salem High School, alongside brother-in-law Matt Lomax.

But while he was excelling on the field of play, it took him a while to decide to go into teaching.

“I kind of had an epiphany that being a teacher is what I want to do,” he said of his junior year in college. “I was doing research and really wanted to do more kind of beyond myself and work with people.”

The fellowship will provide significant financial assistance for tuition and living expenses, and includes trips to educational conferences.

His next one is right here in Oregon, as the American Association of Physics Teachers is holding its summer conference in Portland.

“That’s what’s going to be the most beneficial to me,” he said. “Just getting to meet other science teachers and collaborating with them – it’s priceless knowledge I couldn’t get anywhere else.”

The Knowles Science Teaching Foundation aims to support and develop science and math high school teachers. According to its website, nearly half of secondary school teachers leave the field within five years.

Walton said choosing to be a science teacher often means leaving more lucrative options on the table.

“Especially in more of the physical sciences like chemistry and physics, you can, with a little more education, perhaps get into the industry and make a lot more money,” Walton said. “For someone as smart as he is to choose to teach really says a lot about him.”

The fellowship connects young teachers with resources, curriculum materials and contacts with the best in their field in order to keep them in the field and enthusiastic about sharing their knowledge with the next generation.