

Willie Edward Taylor Carver, Jr.

Reflection from the 2022 Kentucky Teacher of the Year

Kentucky Board of Education Meeting - Aug. 3, 2022

Good morning Kentucky Board of Education members, my name is Willie Edward Taylor Carver Junior, and I am the 2022 Kentucky Teacher of the Year.

I want to tell you all thank you, sincerely, for supporting this program and allowing me the opportunity to speak to you today about what it has meant, and continues to mean, to me.

I am gay and Appalachian. I am sharing these parts of myself first and foremost because my students asked me to, because they sometimes feel unseen and unheard, and I want to honor their request to be more seen and more heard.

This program has been, and continues to be, just that – being seen and heard, hearing and seeing – and not just LGBTQ or Appalachian students, but all groups of students and teachers – black, brown, white, Hispanic, Asian-American, rich, poor, native: I have seen and met, have heard and attempted to amplify the voice of, countless people who have shared needs and concerns as members of groups, and people who have individual needs and concerns, since all of us are different from others, all of us want to be seen and heard as individuals, and all of us want to contribute positively to our communities, our state, our world.

This year, I have done just that. I have spoken, collaborated on projects, and worked, in person or virtually, in twenty-two states (Alabama, California, D.C., Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia, Wyoming), as well as the United Kingdom, and France.

I have spoken (or will speak soon) as a speaker or Keynote at dozens of conference (including the national conference of the American Federation of Teachers), have been interviewed by local, state, and international news outlets, including ABC, NBC, NPR Kentucky, Ed Weekly, KET, and Le Monde out of France.

I have been proud of and outspoken about the brilliance and beauty of Kentuckians, as well as the needs of people living in Kentucky. I have told the story of my students, and I am proud that people have wanted to hear it. That story has been told by national and international venues, including those listed above, as well as NPR National, Advocate (the world's most widely disseminated LGBTQ news source), The Daily Mail, out of the UK, which has an audience of 218 million visitors per month, and an upcoming professional development with KET.

I also got to speak to President and Dr. Biden. I told them about a young boy in Kentucky whose father reached out to me, in pain, because that boy was not accepted when he chose to share parts of himself to his classmates and teachers.

I advocated for Kentucky students that I don't know in the precious moments I got with an American president because I am a Kentucky teacher and this is what we do. We fight for our state's most valuable resource: our children.

And sitting on my kitchen table, right now, is a package I've not yet opened sent from the President of the United States to a young boy in Kentucky whom I've not even met yet.

I spoke before Congress, before the Subcommittee on Human Rights, before the same US Representative Raskin currently presiding over the January 6th Committee, alongside the world's leading experts on human rights and Ruby Bridges, and I told my students' stories.

I have been contacted by literally thousands of people who have sent words of encouragement and commented on the strength of Kentucky students, have received hundreds of letters, messages, and postcards from people all across the world, including an entire middle school class in Connecticut and teachers in France, England, and China.

I have spoken, too, on paper, and people have wanted to hear. This year, I've been published by the American Federation of Teachers, the Courier Journal, the Lexington Herald Leader, Education Post, the Morehead Writing Project in conjunction with the Hindman Settlement School, the Council Chronicle, Kentucky Teacher, Narrative 4, and the Washington Post.

I even got the opportunity to publish a book. My advocacy led to be getting to meet several Appalachian authors, either online or in person, people like Chris Offutt and Silas House, and to me becoming friends with several authors, including Neema Avashia, Robert Gipe, and the Kentucky Poet Laureate Crystal Wilkinson – the latter two of whom encouraged me in my creative fiction, fiction that looks at the role of education in the life of Kentucky children, and fiction for which I have a tentative offer for publication.

Also - I went to Space Camp. Did I mention Space Camp?

Space Camp rocks.

That's my segue into what this experience has really meant.

Yes there has been voice, but voice is just the medium of what matters, the access point to what is important: people.

Space Camp was and will be one of the most interesting moments of my life for a lot of reasons, and those all revolve around people, and, most importantly, students and teachers.

Space Camp is actually really hard. There are lots of numbers. There are obstacle courses. There are fourteen-hour days. It's hot in Alabama in July.

And there are issues in every system that exists, issues that we're all facing together, issues that deal with how we relate to the people in systems.

I watched these beautiful people around me literally be reduced to tears, these grown adults, more than a few times during this cool but albeit goofy kind of cool experience.

When we talked about those tears, teacher after teacher, in state after state, teachers of every imaginable background, geographical location, skin color, gender and sexual orientation, of every socio-economic status, they all talked about what this program could or would mean to their kids.

And they were brought to tears - tears because of issues their kids might face there and tears because of issues their kids might face in trying to get there, a place that is wildly innovative and fun that every kid should have access to.

Love pervades education. It's why we are here. We don't just deliver content to the kids in the room. We sit with them, we get to know their struggles, their fears, their hopes, and their ambitions, and we do everything in our power, sitting right beside of them, to get them to their wildest hope, to transform their lenses so that we might transform their lives.

This, I have learned this year, as a result of being the 2022 Kentucky Teacher of the Year... is teaching.

Teaching is sitting with our students and their families, not standing in front of them.

Teaching is being willing to sit through the tough moments that will happen on the path to improvement.

Teaching is helping make that change happen, which means speaking up to get what our kids need, taking away what harms them, and changing those systems that need changing.

This has been what I have learned.

It is why it has been my deepest, most humbling honor to speak not only with teachers across the Commonwealth and the nation, but to speak to students across Kentucky.

I am proud of Kentucky students.

I am hopeful for Kentucky students.

I am in awe of Kentucky students.

I'll share a few moments that stand out.

I attended a literacy event in Frankfort, and afterwards a student from Louisville literally came up to me to thank me for speaking up on issues that mattered to her and might not be as evident in eastern Kentucky. She then asked me what needs students in eastern Kentucky might need that she didn't know about so that she could better help advocate for them.

She taught me that caring begets caring, and showed me how much our kids care.

I spoke at the Ed Rising conference and a very shy high school student from rural central Kentucky handed me a small drawing of a smile with the words "Thank you for speaking" written on it. They told me, in almost a whisper, that me saying the word gay was the first time they'd ever heard a teacher say it. I tucked their drawing into my folder.

The day that I spoke before Congress, which was nerve-wracking, their note fell out, by chance. The words took on more weight.

They taught me that students are watching teachers and that what we say and don't say matters.

Finally, I interviewed twenty kids in rural Kentucky about their experiences with life and school. When I asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up, all of them had big dreams: doctor, nurse, teacher, truck driver. But when I asked why, nineteen of the twenty told me about potential futures they feared: they wanted to make sure not to be on drugs, they wanted not to be homeless, they wanted not to be too poor for food. 19/20 students structured their future this way.

So I began to ask them how we can change that – how we can move away from fear and towards hope.

A sixteen year old kid, a girl who had recently lost her father in an accident, offered up this answer: “Honor? Can we honor the pains that have caused us to be afraid by working towards a better life?”

Her words sunk deep into me, and they have formed the core of every speech I have ever given, every interview, every publication, every moment of my sabbatical as 2022 KY Teacher of the Year, only she was much smarter than me and put it in beautifully succinct terms.

We sit with our kids.

We hear our kids.

And, if we’re lucky enough to be in my position, we honor their stories by being brave enough to tell them, and, as that young girl said, that honor helps us hope more brightly and with less fear.

For that, I have you and the Kentucky Department of Education to thank.

This program is not simply an opportunity for a teacher to have a platform – it has been the opportunity for a teacher to be the steward of his students’ voices, to do the sometimes painful, but always beautiful, work of shifting the lens, and future, of education. I have been supported by Commissioner Glass, Chief Communications Officer Toni Konz Tatman, and the rest of the Communications team since before the sabbatical began – guided in how best to demonstrate the best of Kentucky, guided in doing the hard work for our students, and guided in consistently demonstrating hope for a better, stronger Kentucky.

They do their work, as have I, with the support of this Board, and for that, I want to tell you that I am extremely grateful as a teacher, proud as a Kentuckian, and hopeful as a teacher.