

Cultivating Curiosity: History Teacher Carla Federman Instills Agency

Carla Federman's classroom is bursting at the seams with learning, engagement, and thought-provoking decor. An upside-down world map challenges the **JK-12 History and Social Sciences Department Chair's** students to rethink how they view the Earth and its people. "You cannot know where you are going until you know where you've been," one poster asserts. From another, Rosie the Riveter proclaims, "We Can Do It!" Presidential PEZ dispensers mingle with bobbleheads from Federman's beloved Kansas City Royals. A vibrantly-colored map shows neighborhoods in the city of St. Louis, while across the room Winston Churchill declares, "Let us go forward together." When she's not teaching a class, Federman builds community with visits from her colleagues, current and former students, and alumni. Laughter floats through the open door, spilling into the hallway and inviting others to wander in and join. There's always something to learn from history, and Federman herself happily serves as an engaging and empowering conduit.

For 17 years, Federman, who earned her undergraduate degree at Yale and a master's from Washington University, has been building relationships at MICDS, consistently centering her students. Last year, as part of a series profiling MICDS educators, she was asked to sit for a formal portrait with something that defines her work as a history teacher and department chair. Other teachers brought books, musical instruments, or science lab materials. Federman showed up for the shoot with six of her students, all of whom were eager to participate. The choice was fitting: her students are not only her focus, but also a living testament to her impact.

"I've always known I wanted to be a teacher," she says. "I had remarkable teachers throughout my education, in lower, middle, and high school, and in college. They changed the way I thought about myself, and that changed the way I thought about the world." Federman has dedicated her life to making the same positive impact on other young people.



Most exciting are the “aha” moments when her students start making connections on their own. “Those moments when it’s not me anymore, and it’s the students doing the thinking, asking the questions....” She pauses for a moment, reflecting. “I love teaching high school because you’re working with young adults at a time when they are figuring out who they are, when they are building the skills they need to go on to do the amazing things they’ll do in college and beyond. We have the chance as high school teachers to inspire them in this moment when they’re trying to figure out what they’re interested in, and help them build the foundation for whatever they go out and choose to dive deeper into. Not every student who leaves my classroom will be a history major, but for those that won’t, what I want for them is to have the foundation in understanding the context of our world today and the skills the historians use so that they can apply those no matter where they go.”

This mindset underpins Federman’s teaching and mentorship — an invitation to ongoing effort and commitment rather than immediate perfection. “Part of what I

pride myself on is providing students a safe and comfortable space at school. I want them to know they are supported at MICDS and they have places here where they can process whatever it is they need to process. Teenagers are much more than students; that’s certainly a big part of who they are, but it’s not the only part. I am here first as a teacher, but I also want to be an advisor and mentor: to help and be a fan of theirs. I want them to feel like this is a place where they will be challenged to learn and grow, but also always supported. They’ll make mistakes, and I’ll have their back. I hope that what students know is that they can be their true selves around me.” She notes that MICDS students are curious and quirky, and that part of her love for this school is that it is a place where the football star can also feature in the annual musical, where a talented artist can also pursue their interest in macroeconomics.

To teach these lessons and forge these bonds, Federman credits her colleagues with constant inspiration, motivation, and collaboration. “As a teacher, MICDS has allowed me to grow in really remarkable

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ways, and it's in large part due to the people around me," she says. "The people I work with are remarkable educators. One of the best parts of my role as department chair [a position she's held for eight years] is my ability to spend more time in other people's classrooms, learning from them. I have learned remarkable things about motivation and classroom management by watching **Meg Mottl & Jessica Lloyd** teach in the Lower School. Being in **Berta Simic's** Middle School classroom has taught me so much about how to scaffold the teaching of skills. **Alex Rolnick's** 9th grade work is constantly challenging me to think about how to engage students. And that's just the beginning; so many of my colleagues have helped me in becoming a better teacher." It goes beyond her peers in the history department. "Many of my best pedagogical approaches emerged through conversations with **Lynn Mittler**, and having **Celeste Prince** across the hall means

there's an endless source of new ideas. We are a collaborative, open department, and a collaborative, open school. Teachers at MICDS are never satisfied with what they are doing. They are always pushing themselves to do more, to do better, for students, and that means constantly learning from each other. That's a huge part of the reason I'm still here 17 years later."

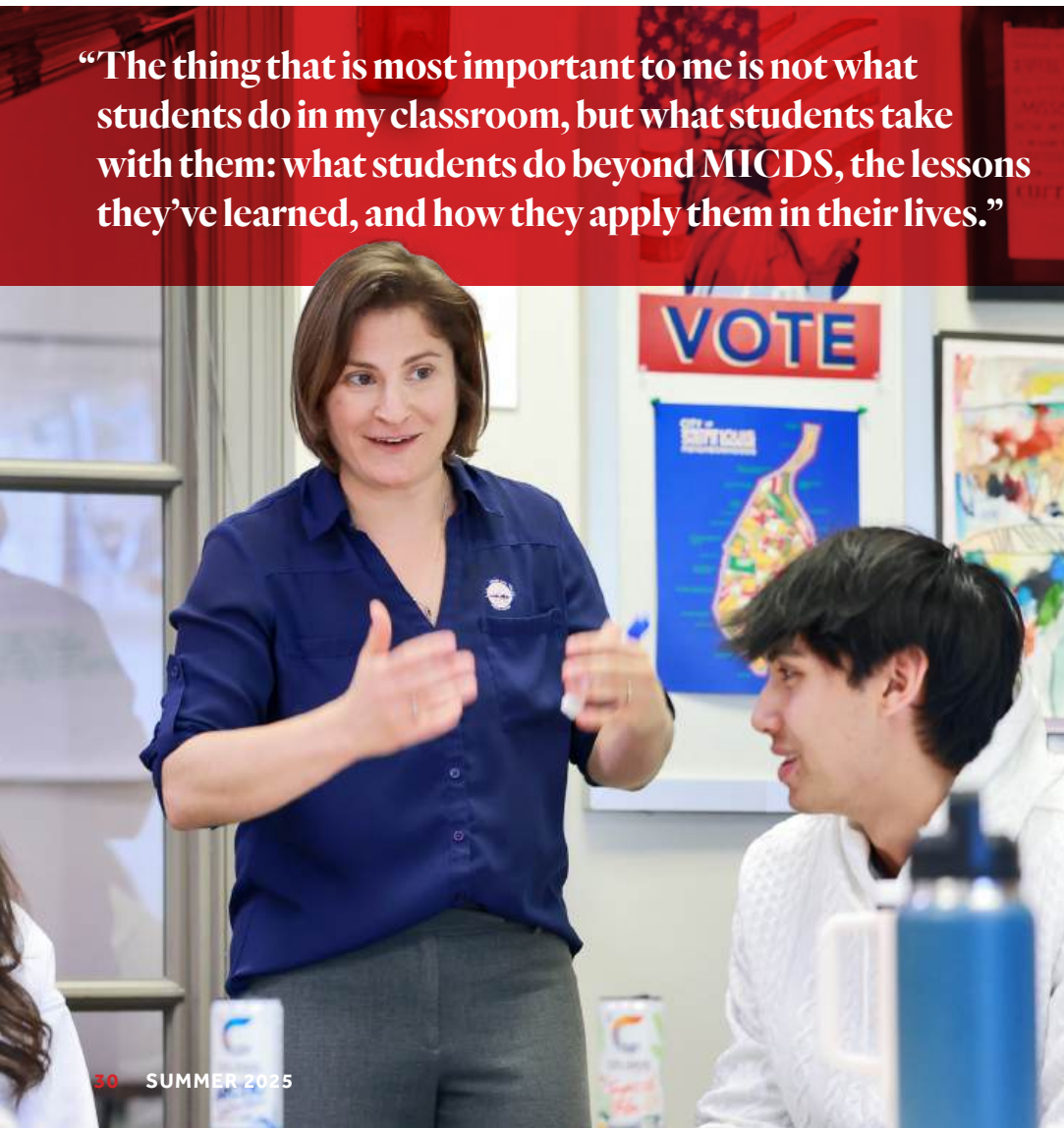
Both as a classroom teacher and as a Department Chair, Federman has continually partnered with her colleagues to develop creative ways for students to learn more about themselves and their communities, both near and far. From this collaboration emerged the award-winning History of St. Louis course, now required for all first-semester 11th-grade students. "Studying local history gives students the opportunity to connect with their community, build empathy, and enhance their sense of agency, all while they delve

into the connections between past and present," explains Federman. The team was recognized by the American Historical Association in 2022 for their innovative curriculum, which incorporates independent projects, community panels with local experts, field trips around the region, and interviews with difference makers. Federman admits that students sometimes question the requirement at the beginning of the course, but usually end up surprised at the amount they've learned. **Selina Balci '22** attested that "the History of St. Louis course ended up impacting me to the point of influencing my major choice in college. Analyzing how historical trends emerged and evolved, and how these trends impacted the communities in St. Louis inspired a passion for environmental justice, leading me to major in psychology and biology & society."

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"Understanding that the situations that exist in the world do not do so in a vacuum is important," Federman says, "that's one of the beauties of studying history." And students don't have to just look locally for connections and relevance, Federman asserts. In all of her courses, she seeks to make the content relevant to her students, and help them understand the significance of historical moments. "One of the things that makes me happiest is when a former student reaches out in regard to current events, worldwide or local," she says. "When Bashar al-Assad fled Syria in December 2024, I woke up in the morning to messages from students who had taken my Modern Middle East class over the past five years. They're not currently studying history or the Middle East, but they saw an event, understood the importance of it and its context, and wanted to talk through the possible implications. They're engaged global citizens, which is exactly what we want MICDS graduates to be."

The transformative effect of Federman's teaching is consistently echoed by her former students, who carry her lessons into diverse fields and continue to apply her foundational principles of critical thinking, empathy, and agency.





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Hopie Melton '18 emphasized a lasting appreciation for Federman's pedagogical approach. "There are many reasons why people gravitate towards Ms. Federman while at MICDS—and why lessons from not only her classes but her example still carry weight years later. Her reputation as a teacher who expects much from her students is not without foundation; she pushed us in our writing, in class participation, and on group projects. In turn, we got a teacher who treats students as whole people—people who, just like their adult counterparts, grapple with the chaos of the world and the emotions accompanying it. That level of humanity and empathy Ms. Federman demonstrates has made me a more critical thinker and compassionate leader in the years since."

Several of her students followed her into the profession of teaching, inspired by the role Federman played in her own educational experience. **Erin Holiday Swank '12** says, "The way Ms. Federman tied our curriculum to everyday social issues made our work as scholars feel relevant and important. But the way Ms. Federman impacted me the most as an educator was by showing me she believed in me, quietly and confidently. I wouldn't be a teacher if it weren't for Ms. Federman, but perhaps more importantly, I wouldn't be asking myself how I can show that same

quiet belief in my students and in my children that Ms. Federman showed me."

Another teacher, **Kate Pflager Pettit '11**, remembers a quote by Maya Angelou when she thinks of her time in Federman's class: "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." She says the quote captures the essence of Federman's teaching and the impact she has on her students. "Each of us was seen and respected as an individual, and all ideas were heard and responded to with kindness. Now, as a teacher myself, I strive to embody the same positivity, engaging nature, and welcoming attitude into my own classroom, and hope to make my students feel as seen and inspired as she made me feel."

Like so many educators, teaching runs in the Federman family. Her mother taught Spanish, and her sister math. One of the factors that drove Federman to the discipline of history, however, was the profound influence of her grandparents, Holocaust survivors who knew first-hand the power of bearing witness and who resolved to turn memory into action, co-founding the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education in Kansas City. "Their example of ensuring we learn from history, that the stories of the past are carried on and used to make better

decisions in the future, is something that has always been part of my life," she says.

This deep family legacy shapes not only Federman's passion for history but also her commitment to teaching it with purpose and empathy. It's no wonder, then, that Federman's goals in the classroom go far beyond having her students memorize dates and places of major world events. She engages learners in the hard work of critical thinking, tying current events to what has happened in the past, nudging her students to find and form their own connections, listen to alternate viewpoints, and make persuasive arguments of their own. The study of history involves understanding perspective, recognizing bias, and managing respectful disagreement. "When we think about the challenges that exist in the world today, it's easy to jump to the conclusion that the solutions lie in technology or science. And the STEM world is incredibly important, but if you don't have people who

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understand the humanities, if you don't have people who can take lessons from the past in order to make ethical decisions based on understanding of and empathy for their fellow human beings, then we are in a world of trouble," she asserts.

These pedagogical approaches are deeply rooted in Federman's belief in the power of individual action and responsibility to shape the future. One of the posters adorning Federman's wall contains a quote from the Mishnah, a collection of Jewish teachings. It reads, "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it," and to Federman, that encapsulates much of what she wants for herself, her students, and the world. "I think about that a lot," Federman muses. "It's so easy to get caught up in the magnitude of history, and so easy to think of individuals as small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things. And I think what I've learned from history is that that's not just true. Individuals are capable of remarkable things, and what we choose to do has long-lasting impact. Will we fix every problem in the world? No, but we don't have to; we have to keep working at making this world the place we want it to be, at ensuring that the work continues. So, what can I do every day to help students put themselves in a position where someday they can continue the work? Where they are inspired and motivated, where they are knowledgeable, and where they are empathetic enough to carry on this work of making the world a better place?"

For Federman, this is the reason to teach. "The thing that is most important to me is not what students do in my classroom, but what students take with them: what students do beyond MICDS, the lessons they've learned, and how they apply them in their lives." And for those who have chosen a different path than education, these lessons that they've learned in Federman's classroom continue to apply. Melton continued: "In my work with public sector employees in Chicago—who lead our city through the most pressing policy and social challenges—I try to lead as Ms. Federman models in the classroom and beyond. Hearing many sides of one issue, situating current events in historical contexts, and clarifying my thoughts to present a

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well-reasoned argument—these are all tangible skills I use today learned in my four trimesters with Ms. Federman. Even beyond these, though, I try to carry the curiosity, humility, and empathy that she embodies in and out of the classroom."

De'Ja Wood '17 provides similar testimony. "She pushed students to think deeply about how history shapes the present—not just as abstract knowledge but as something lived and real in our communities. Her classroom was a space where we were encouraged to engage critically with the past and to consider its relevance to the world around us. That approach has had a lasting influence on me." Now a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Leadership, Policy, and Organizations at Vanderbilt University, Peabody College, Wood's research focuses on educational safety and policy, and says that she "often finds [herself] returning to the analytical frameworks and sense of curiosity that Ms. Federman cultivated. Her teaching helped lay the foundation for the kind of work I do today."

Alex Curylo '17 is in law school, and agrees, saying that "the fundamentals of critical thinking and structured oral and written advocacy I rely on absolutely stem from my time in Ms. Federman's class. She pushed us to question underlying biases and the cultural forces shaping different historical periods, and to examine those

forces against our own assumptions. She encouraged our curiosity and supported us when we explored intellectual tangents. Ms. Federman laid the foundation for the critical and curious social and historical thinking that shapes my legal education today and will continue to shape work throughout my career."

Federman's influence continues to ripple out to the St. Louis community and beyond as her students and former students connect ideas across time and space, learning how and why other people might have thought differently, and learning to empathize with them all the same. "The most important thing to me is how can I leave the world better than I found it," Federman reflects. "What I hope is that my interactions with students and the things they learn in my classroom and the way they see me as a human being mean that long after I am done teaching, they will continue to do good in the world."

Her call to action is a powerful reminder that history is not only to be studied, but to be lived through purposeful action. "Now that you know the history, how we got where we are, what are you going to do about it?" Federman leans back in her chair for a moment, thinking, "What will you do to build the future we want? It's all about agency. So, what's your move? Go."