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A TEAM Effort: Mississippi Teacher Corps Students, Alums Use Nontraditional Methods

 JULY 26, 2012 BY [ANDREW MARK ABERNATHY](#)

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Mississippi Teacher Corps TEAM teacher Golda Sharpe works with summer school students in Holly Springs during the programs summer training.

OXFORD – At North Panola High School in Sardis, algebra students in Golda Sharpe's classroom learn about parallel and perpendicular lines in a nontraditional way – to the rhythm of rapper T-Pain's song "Low."

Fifty miles away at Byhalia High School in Byhalia, English instructor Catherine Gray teaches linking verbs to her sixth-grade students by changing the lyrics to "Paper Planes" by rapper M.I.A.

Gray's students shift eagerly in their desks before these lessons waiting for their cue. After a brief musical intro, one student says, "All right, you go!" and the class breaks into harmony, singing: "Am, is, are, was, were, have been ... they are linking verbs, they are linking verbs – it's so easy that it's absurd!"

"This is a Teacher Corps method," explained Sharpe, a 2011 graduate of the University of Mississippi's Mississippi Teacher Corps and a TEAM teacher in the program. "I wish I could take credit for it, but another teacher, Danielle Hall, taught it to me in my first year of teaching."

At its heart, the MTC is a nontraditional program with nontraditional methods. It attracts high-ability students from universities such as Harvard, Tulane and Emory with degrees in business, the humanities, the sciences – even law – and places them in some of Mississippi's most challenging classrooms, teaching spots that more experienced teachers often don't want to fill.

For Sharpe, the key to growing and surviving as a young teacher in a high-needs school was combining creativity with a support network of other young teachers also trying to teach children in high-needs schools. Rewriting popular songs to teach grammar and mathematics, and even using contemporary song lyrics as a teaching tool are among multiple, resourceful techniques teachers in the MTC have developed over 23 years and continue to share during the MTC's formal summer training.

"It's always a team effort at North Panola," she said. "There're about 10 Teacher Corps teachers there. Being able to go to teachers who are experiencing the same things you are and share ideas keeps you going."

According to MTC data, five years after graduation, 50 percent of the program's alumni are still teaching. Ten years after graduation 75 percent are still involved in education in some capacity. Nearly a quarter leave education completely.

"One of the biggest misconceptions is that we're a program for the Mississippi Delta," said Aaron Johnson, an MTC alumnus and acting program manager of the corps. "What people don't realize is, we are sending out students to Okolona, Jackson and Meridian. We never claim to be a solution to improving education in Mississippi – just a Band-Aid."

This summer, like many past summers, Johnson and fellow MTC alums are training 27 college graduates at Holly Springs High School, getting them ready to enter their classrooms this fall. The school serves as a catch-all for children in four surrounding counties who need credits or academic enrichment.

For many of these aspiring teachers, the training is a trial by fire. Every day, first- and second-year teachers design and lead lessons while TEAM teachers give critiques. Second-year teachers also critique first-years. Many students work 12-hour days.

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Civil Engineering Professor Receives Most-Cited Paper Award

OXFORD, Miss. – Peer recognition is a rewarding experience for anyone, but University of Mississippi researcher Amir Mehrara Molan was elated when an article he co-authored recently received the Most Cited Paper Award at the 102nd Transportation Research Board meeting in the nation's capital. The International Journal of Transportation Science and Technology presented the civil engineering

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Young Alumna Gives Back to School of Accountancy

OXFORD, Miss. – Stephanie Jennings Teague, of Chicago, sees her commitment of \$100,000 to the Patterson School of Accountancy's new building at the University of Mississippi as a means of saying "thank you." "It is a way to show a small token of my appreciation to Ole Miss, the faculty and staff, and the accounting

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Ole Miss In the News

Reuters: Keep an Eye on the Money Supply

U.S. inflation roller coaster prompts fresh look at long-ignored money supply By Michael S. Derby NEW YORK – The amount of money sloshing around the U.S. economy shrank last year for the first time on record, a development that some economists believe bolsters the case for U.S. inflation pressures continuing to

abate. The Federal Reserve's

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"I really feel the program is one of the best ways to learn how to manage a classroom in such a short time," said Hannah Jordt, a second-year MTC member and science teacher at Simmons Junior/Senior High School in Hollandale. "I came from such an affluent environment that there are everyday things that I would have never expected. Being a year in now, and working with first years, I can see how far I've come. Somehow, I became a teacher this way."

At the helm of the training school are MTC alums, many of whom are only a few years out of the program. Ryan Bolland, a former MTC member, serves as principal of the school and 16 other alumni, including Sharpe, serve as TEAM teachers who offer advice and hands-on training to the aspiring educators. The average age of this year's MTC class is 24. They are teaching 161 students this summer; however, what may seem like a well-organized process came from very humble beginnings.

"When we founded the program, it was only a one-year program, and we weren't teaching them how to lead a classroom," said Andy Mullins, founder and co-director of the program. "It's was a huge change in environment for a lot of them, so we were mostly teaching them about the South. Those first few classes of teachers were not prepared at all."

Founded in 1990 with three years of seed money from the state Legislature, the program changed to a two-year, master's degree-granting program in 1993 with a focus on classroom training taught by working teachers. In 2002, the MTC took over summer school in Holly Springs. Each year, alumni like Bolland, who drove from Southern California at his own expense, travel back to Ole Miss to teach a new class.

"We have a strong tradition of letting alumni run this program and keep it moving forward," Johnson said. "People don't realize the passion it takes to do this job and the bonds that form. It's a hard job and you can't do it forever, but even when you leave the program, you still want to give back. I don't know if there are a lot of other programs out there like this."

First-time TEAM teacher Jamila Alexander, a Jackson native, joined the MTC after receiving her law degree from Harvard in 2006 and working as an attorney for more than a year. She spent two years teaching in Jackson public schools before she left to teach law at Florida A&M University College of Law and later at University of Miami School of Law. Today she is spending her summer teaching first-year MTCers in Holly Springs.

On Friday (July 27), the MTC will finish its summer school in Holly Springs. All participants who complete the program will begin their first year as teachers in August.

"I was born and raised in Mississippi, and I'm a product of public schools," said Sara Jacobs, a first-year MTC member and UM alumna. "A lot of kids feel like a good education is out of reach. I hope I can help change their minds."

For more information on the Mississippi Teacher Corps, go to <http://mtc.olemiss.edu/>.

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