

Josh Ziady looks like an indie rock musician, which isn't surprising because that's what he did before trading his bass and his "day job" as a cook for a classroom gig. The 33-year-old Ziady is in his second year as a science teacher at Roosevelt High, one of Portland's most diverse schools where students speak 20 different languages. Roosevelt also bears the label of a "failing" school after four years of not making adequate yearly progress. The 825-student high school—which is roughly one-quarter African American and one-quarter Hispanic—broke into small schools this year. Ziady teaches in the Spanish-English International School, where students divide their time between Spanish language arts classes and core subjects taught in English. In a conversation with *Northwest Education* Editor Rhonda Barton, he reflects on what it's like to be a beginning teacher at a school with multiple challenges.

Photo by Michael Heavener



A Teacher's Voice: From the Kitchen to the Classroom *By Josh Ziady*

You walk into a restaurant kitchen as a line cook—like I did—with a high-powered bachelor's degree from a prestigious liberal arts college, and you're next to some guy who dropped out of high school when he was 15 and some other guy who might have been a physics professor and another guy who might be an ex-con. You have to figure out how to make burritos with these people, so you have to relate to them—no matter who they are. ... That kind of prepared me for dealing with kids because there's a lot of that immediacy. You need them to do something or stop doing something. You want them to understand what you need and you have to understand what they need—and you've got to get that interaction done quickly or else you're doomed.

Nine years after graduating from Oberlin, I went to Portland State University, got my master's, and was certificated in biology and integrated science. Besides three classes of biology, I teach an interdisciplinary senior inquiry class with an English teacher. It meets twice a week for three hours and the kids also go to Port-

land State once a week for two hours (where they earn 15 college credits and take care of their freshman inquiry requirement).

The theme of the course is metamorphosis—we study change. It's the best class to teach because the sky is the limit, as long as we stay within the university study guidelines and the senior English standards. We split it into three sections: personal change, social change, and broad-spectrum change like how the earth has changed and how humanity has evolved. So, for example, we read *A Place to Stand* by Jimmy Santiago Baca. It's about a guy who had a tough time growing up, went to jail, and now he's a famous poet. At the same time, we studied crime in Oregon and recent research in teen brain development and decisionmaking processes. We blended all that together.

The one thing that drives me crazy about teaching is that there's no guaranteed output. No matter how hard you work, sometimes there are still kids who aren't succeeding. You try to do everything you can for them and you still have a certain percentage of your

kids who aren't getting there. That's tough—especially at a school like Roosevelt, which in the last few years has gone through some really hard times and where it's not uncommon for a significant proportion of kids to not meet the state standards. You work and work and work—and so do your colleagues—and you don't get results. It's also hard to see kids in difficult circumstances that are beyond your control.

Ultimately I want my kids to think like scientists: to be able to look at something in the world, ask questions, make a prediction to answer their questions, devise an experiment to test their hypothesis, and accurately interpret their results. Realistically I don't know how many will get that, but I hope they'll get the seeds of knowing there's this process of accumulating knowledge and evaluating information. So, if someone says to them some day that you have to vote on patenting genes, they'll know what a gene is and they can think about whether that's a good idea. Should Monsanto be able to patent my genes? My goal is to instill that type of scientific literacy. ■