

Golden Apple
Success Stories
Hennessy Family



Chris and Kayley Hennessy got more out of the Golden Apple Scholars program than most participants do. They got each other. The two met at their first Summer Institute at DePaul University in 1996, and in between observing classrooms and taking classes, they found time to fall in love. The couple, now married, is proud to be carrying out the Golden Apple mission together.

Chris teaches physical education and health to fourth through eighth graders at Pershing West Middle School. Kayley teaches high school math at Lindblom Math & Science Academy, a college prep school in Englewood. And while their daily experiences are markedly different, the insight and perspective they gained from their time as Golden Apple Scholars helps them understand what the other is going through.

"It's not easy teaching in the city," Chris explained. "You work really hard and you don't often see the results right away. But we have a mutual understanding of why we got into this. It's nice to not have to justify how you're feeling when you get home."

And if the two of them ever find themselves stumped for how to solve a problem or challenge, they don't have to look far for additional support. Chris's sister Carrie is herself a Golden Apple scholar, following in her brother's footsteps two years later.

All three Hennessys agree that the support they have received from the entire Golden Apple family, both during their time as Scholars and since they began teaching, has helped them learn to relate to their students, making them better teachers as a result.

According to Carrie, "You can feel the energy any time you're around Golden Apple people. There's an enthusiasm for teaching and for life. And everyone truly believes that every child can be saved."

Coming from white, middle-class backgrounds, their childhoods were a world away from the lives most of their students lead. But that doesn't stop them from connecting with and having high expectations for their students. As Kayley explains, "Teaching at a college prep school, I know my students are going to be competing against people like me, so I go into each year with the expectation that when they leave my class it won't matter how much money they have or where they came from, they are going to be as prepared for success as someone who grew up where I did. They deserve that chance and deserve to have a teacher who believes in them."

In Chris's case, being a positive role model is a responsibility he takes very seriously. "You have to put yourself out there to show the kids that you care and that they can trust you," he described.

And while the physical tools they have access to through Golden Apple, like materials and resources, were invaluable to them as they started their teaching careers, they soon came to realize it's the intangibles – the mentoring, the networking, the opportunity to learn from those who came before them – that make the biggest difference.

"Our last year in the program, someone came to talk about navigating the CPS bureaucracy," Chris recalled. "When I started at Oscar Mayer Elementary school that first year, I knew what to expect and could rely on a whole group of other CPS teachers to help me find my way if I started to get lost."

Carrie has found that her time as a Scholar, where prospective students from all walks of life, with a wide variety of interests, spend four summers together working as a team, helped her understand how to work with other teachers when she got a classroom of her own at Roosevelt Middle School in Bellwood, teaching reading, language arts and social studies.

"It helps so much to feel comfortable and confident talking to other teachers, especially if you're having a problem with a student," she explained. "Because you can work together to help that student. And in our school, when math scores are low, I can talk to the math teachers to find out what they are teaching, so I can work it into my own classes and reinforce for the seventh graders that what they are learning in math class has application in other areas."

The Hennessys all feel compelled to give back a little of what they got from Golden Apple by remaining involved with the organization. Chris and Kayley have gone back to almost every Summer Institute since they completed the program to serve as mentors and liaisons, leading activities and teaching courses. Carrie has traveled twice to Springfield to talk to politicians who hold the purse-strings for funding for Golden Apple. They are a family that shares a passion for teaching and helping young people succeed, and a passion for Golden Apple, as well.