



GCSU Alumna, Georgia's Teacher of the Year, is breaking down barriers

Holly Starmer Witcher, '01, a special education teacher at Tesnatee Gap Elementary School in White County, is the 2025 Georgia Teacher of the Year.

Witcher was selected out of approximately 110,000 teachers to be the state's Teacher of the Year. She feels it's "a huge honor" to be selected and has been advocating for other Georgia teachers since her term began July 1, 2024.

"Having good administrators speaks volumes," Witcher said. "Sometimes they see something in you that you may not see in yourself. My administrators saw the way I interacted with these students and said, 'Hey, you've got this—you've already done this.'"

"It's so cool to see the changes in my students," she said. "When you're with the kids every day, sometimes you don't notice those improvements, but then you look back at the beginning of the year and you think, 'This child couldn't do this before.' It's a very rewarding career."

After Witcher was named the state's Teacher of the Year in May, she had one month to transition her classroom to ensure her students were taken care of while she's out with her new duties.

Witcher is a member of the Georgia Board of Education, where she provides input during

meetings about how certain issues affect teachers and students.

This kind of representation at the Board of Education turned the tide in the way the organization works.

"I wish every teacher could see the things I get to see—the experience is phenomenal," Witcher said.

Her platform "You Matter," serves to remind teachers, administrators and community members what they're doing is important and affects lives. She aims to spread hope to all who serve Georgia's children.

"As teachers, we know our hearts are in it, but oftentimes we don't hear it enough," Witcher said. "The work we do impacts Georgia. We may not see the difference we've made for 20 years. But as these students get older, they'll say, 'Wow, I had you as a teacher.' I know I played a part in that."

"That message also goes for administration," she said. "I speak with superintendents and how their decisions impact students and teachers."

As a child, Witcher frequently gathered the neighborhood children, positioning them in a circle to play school. Her mother always knew Witcher would make a great teacher someday.

"I loved my teachers so much when I was growing up that I just wanted to be like them," she said. "I also loved school."

"In my class," Witcher said, "we celebrate big, because the hurdles many students overcome

are huge. So, when we see them accomplish something new, we recognize them. It's so cool, because my students know one another and each other's struggles. When they see another student do something they've not done before, I'm not the only one celebrating. The other kids are cheering one another on too. I can't help but smile."

Witcher attended Georgia College & State University for her early childhood education degree. Then, she got a master's from the American College of Education and later became certified to teach students with significant developmental delays.

"Once I got my foot in the door, I realized this is what I loved doing. I could transform these children, teaching them life skills and critical skills," she said. "I never looked back."

She also learned how to become a leader at Georgia College.

"I have the best job in the world," Witcher said. "I just love making an impact on students and their families, period," she said. "There's something so contagious about being able to bring joy into the life of someone else."

In October, Witcher will travel throughout the state for speaking engagements at organizations like the Georgia Foundation for Public Education. She'll also present to the administrators at the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders Conference in January.



GCSU alumna Holly Witcher is Georgia's Teacher of the Year for 2025.



Biology major researches marsupials deep in Australia's rainforests

One of the biggest challenges at first was the lack of Wi-Fi.

Nestled deep in UNESCO's World Heritage rainforests in North Queensland, Australia, senior Natalie Skye Mears of Sugar Hill, Georgia, felt disconnected from family, friends and everything she knew.

"I was left pretty much alone on the other side of the world with people I had just met. But by the end of the trip," Mears said, "I had made friends I didn't want to let go of, and returning home was the most difficult thing in the world."

A biology major with a minor in chemistry, Mears searched for the perfect study-abroad program that mixed stunning sites with the chance for research.

She decided on a month-long summer program with the School for Field Studies. The SFS Rainforest Studies Centre is in the Atherton Tablelands, a protected area of UNESCO's Wet Tropics.

The endangered Mabi Rainforest is the only place in Australia where marsupial tree kangaroos live.



Natalie Mears skydiving in Australia.

roos live.

"We were isolated high in the mountains and deep in a rainforest and spent a lot of time studying the many marsupials of the area," Mears said. "We took many day trips to observe marsupials in their natural habitats."

Research involved setting trail cams and

comparing three rainforests to see where the most marsupials lived. These included pouched mammals like Kangaroos, wombats (looks like a groundhog), bandicoots (a large, mouse-like critter with a long nose) and opossums.

Mears learned much about the area's history—from the Gondwanan supercontinent, an ancient land mass, to the teeth of Northern quolls, a small and cute but ferocious, spotted marsupial.

She saw exotic giant clams, snakes, spiders and porcupines. In two long weekends in the nearby city of Cairns, Mears went skydiving, snorkeling and up a mountain by sky rail. She feasted on mushroom gnocchi and spent "an obscene amount of money on gelato and art."

Mears wants to get a master's in forensic science and work as a crime scene investigator.

"Studying abroad and doing research helped me get far out of my comfort zone," Mears said, "and learn how to find the answers to my questions without the structure of a classroom."

Did you know?

Dr. Joseph and Patricia Samprone of Gold Canyon, Arizona—known affectionately around the Georgia College & State University campus as Joe and Patti—were named recipients of the University System of Georgia's 2024 Regent's Hall of Fame Alumni and Distinguished Friends Award during the 20th annual Regents' Scholarship Gala on Sept. 12.

The Alumni and Distinguished Friends Award is given to an individual or couple known for championing academic excellence and access to higher education in Georgia.

Nine people, five individuals and two couples, were inducted into the Regent's Hall of Fame.

The Samprones were nominated by Georgia College for more than 40 years of campus involvement.

Dr. Joe Samprone was a crosscountry coach and taught economics from 1983 to 2003 in what was then known as the J. Whitney Bunting School of Business, while Patti Samprone earned her MBA from GCSU in 1988 and co-chaired the university's last capital campaign.

GCSU awarded silver seal for high number of voting students in '22 election

Just in time for National Voter Registration Day, Sept. 17, came news about Georgia College & State University's student voting rate. It's 5% higher than the national average, earning the university a Silver Seal distinction from the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge.

"Georgia College has a historic student voting registration and voting rate to be proud of, and I'm confident we will continue that tradition," said Dr. Janet Hoffmann, campus coordinator for the American Democracy Project, a nonpartisan group that encourages students become actively engaged in democracy and civil discourse.

The voting-rate percentage ties directly to the number of registered college students who actually cast votes on election day.

The Silver Seal is for campuses with a 30 to

39% participation rate during the 2022 midterms. That year, 36% Georgia College students voted, compared to the national average of 31%. Statistics are from the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement report released by Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts.

Georgia College is one of more than 520 campuses participating in ALL IN's nonpartisan democratic efforts to encourage students to register and vote.

The ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge began in 2016 as part of an initiative by Civic Nation to recognize student voting engagement and campuses with programs of excellence. Georgia College won its first ALL IN Bronze Seal that year for a student voting rate between 50 and 59%. The university won a Gold Seal for its 2018

midterm election rate and another Gold Seal when nearly 77% of its students voted in the 2020 presidential election. Georgia College also won "Best in the Nation" in its class of public universities for registering 94.7% of its student to vote that year.

These higher numbers dropped in 2022 across the board. Nationally, student voting rates decreased by about 40% compared to midterms in 2018, NSLVE reported.

"Typically, voter rates in midterm elections are significantly lower than presidential election years," Hoffman said, "and that was the case in 2022."

More than 8 million young adults are newly eligible to vote in 2024, according to ALL IN.



In April, senior Axel Hawkins was recognized on the nationwide ALL IN Student Voting Honor Roll for registering and educating peers to vote.

What's going on in Bobcat Territory?

Visit frontpage.gcsu.edu/events

Tuesday

24

6-8 p.m. GCSU Women's Volleyball vs. Erskine College, Centennial Center.

7-9 p.m. GCSU Jazz Jam at Amici's Cafe, downtown Milledgeville.

Wednesday

25

Noon-1 p.m. GCSU Times Talk on "What should election administrators & lawmakers do to make voters feel confident in election results?" Ina Dillard Russell Library.

5-7 p.m. Reception and artist talk by GCSU Graphic Design Professor Abraham Abebe, Leland Gallery at Ennis Hall.

7:30 p.m. Guest artist recital "Of Dreams and Nightmares" with saxophonist Paul Van Goes in Max Noah Recital Hall.

7:30-9 p.m. Opening show of GCSU Theatre's "At the Wedding," Russell Auditorium.

Thursday

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7:30-9 p.m. GCSU Theatre's "At the Wedding," Russell Auditorium.

Friday

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5:30-7:30 p.m. Women's Volleyball vs. Shorter University, Centennial Center.

7:30-9 p.m. GCSU Theatre's "At the Wedding," Russell Auditorium.

Saturday

28

7:30-9 p.m. GCSU Theatre's "At the Wedding," Russell Auditorium. Final show 2 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 29.