

PE teacher brings 'adapted physical education' to Durham

"I just agree with what Dean Smith said, 'You should never be proud of doing what's right. You should just do what's right.' And that's all I try to do."

- Lara Brickhouse

By Jarely Parada and Brian Shurney
Staff, Durham VOICE

The Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) named Lara Brickhouse, a local Durham teacher, National Adapted PE Teacher of the Year last month for her contribution to the special needs community.

According to its website, SHAPE America is an organization founded in 1885 that aims to "advance professional practice and promote research related to health and physical education, physical activity, dance, and sport."

Brickhouse says she did not expect recognition from SHAPE America, the nation's largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals.

"I'm not keen on having the attention on me, but if it's an opportunity to advocate for individuals with special needs and adapted PE: I'm in!" she says. "I feel like that's been possible with this award."

She explains adapted PE as teaching physical education to children of all needs and giving them all a platform for life. She says PE can help children learn lessons they can carry throughout their lives.

"It means being equal and being included," Brickhouse added. "The things they learn, they can take through life, and they can be mini-victories."

She began to see the separation between traditional students and students with disabilities in 2007 as a general PE teacher. In 2011, Brickhouse passed the Adapted Physical Education National Standards and became a certified adapted PE specialist. Today, Brickhouse has earned a master's in Adapted Physical Education and has received her special education license.

Brickhouse says she owes thanks to the many others who helped start the program. She thanks, Rhys Myrick, a board-certified behavioral analyst, for seeing the need for adapted PE in Pitt County. Myrick suggested the idea to Cathy Keeter, Pitt County children's director, and that started the process that ended with



Lara Brickhouse keeps a lot of her supplies for her adapted physical education in the trunk of her car. (Staff photo by Jarely Parada)

E.B. Aycock Middle School hiring Brickhouse as the adapted PE instructor. The program then started from scratch, serving approximately 300 children.

Myrick says their goal is to create a model special education program. She felt that educationally they were making progress, but she knew adapted physical education was vital.

"Not to mention it's supposed to be part of their education by federal law, and if students have disabilities, they might need specially designed PE," Myrick says. "So we set out to find a PE teacher to serve our kids adapted physical education."

Myrick, who started out as a physical education teacher, says that over the last seven years, Brickhouse has become a pioneer in true adapted physical education.

"She is passionate, educated and a role model for North Carolina, and now in the United States, on how to educate those with disabilities," Myrick says. "I can go on about her for hours."

Brickhouse now lives in Durham and is bringing the program here. She oversees about 110 students of all grade levels in the county. She says the most difficult part is making connections here since she has left the people she knew in Pitt County.

"It's about them," Brickhouse says. "The attention I received from articles being shared really shows people what adapted PE is and that it's about the students involved."

She says the three things she has learned are: patience, that there's so much more to the human population and how resilient these students are. She says it's important to remember to "keep it personal first" and to be careful when labeling children and individuals with special needs.

"The students with disabilities are

thought-provoking, meaning you can't just be a normal teacher. They push you to be better. They make you feel like it's Christmas. They remind you to check your problems at the door," Brickhouse says. "I think, as a society, we aren't able to do that."

Brickhouse says her work is cut-out for her in Durham.

"A lot of work is left to be done after building the program here just two years ago in August," she says.

Brickhouse is thankful the conversation for students with disabilities has opened. April is National Autism Awareness Month.

"I wish Sesame Street would've added the new cast, Julia [an autistic puppet], about 25 years ago," Brickhouse says, "but I'm happy to see them aiming to teach children at a young age the importance of acceptance. I hope this paves the way to the idea that they may be different, but they are not less."

Through the award, Brickhouse will have the opportunity to travel the country and give presentations about adapted PE.

"I'm having a hard time with being away from the students here," Brickhouse says. "To me, Greenville is similar to Durham in the sense that the kids, administrators and town all share the same values, and both places have the need to raise awareness about adapted PE."

Brickhouse says that unfortunately there is still a disconnect, nationwide and statewide, and that people overall should collaborate for this program since not everyone seems to agree all the time.

"I don't have a personal reason for what I'm doing. I never had a family member who had special needs," Brickhouse says. "I just agree with what Dean Smith said, 'You should never be proud of doing what's right. You should just do what's right.' And that's all I try to do."