THE MERITAS EXCELLENCE in Teaching Award program is designed to celebrate the outstanding teachers in the ten Meritas Schools. For school year 2013-14, two teachers, one lower school and one upper school, were chosen as recipients of this prestigious award from among hundreds of excellent Meritas educators. Through self or peer nomination, the nominees rated themselves against the eight Meritas Teacher Professional Standards and submitted documentation to support their ratings. After a lengthy review process, the final recipients were determined. In 2014, the winners were Christina Liu of Lake Mary Prep for lower grades, and Léman’s very own Emily Khan for upper grades. The Bullhorn was able to catch Mrs. Khan in between classes to find out more about the English Department Chair, and how she felt upon discovering she had won the prestigious award.
BH: Hi Emily, congratulations on your win, we’re all so very proud! We’d love to learn more about you. Where did you grow up?
EK: I am from Kersey, Pennsylvania, a little town in Appalachia. My parents built our house in the middle of the woods. I’m the youngest of four, and my siblings and I spent lots of time playing music and reading aloud and talking about literature. I think I always knew that I wanted to be an English teacher.
BH: Tell us about your educational and professional background.
EK: I received my BA in English from Fordham University with a concentration in Medieval Studies. I then went on to earn my MA from NYU in Teaching English 7-12. Prior to coming to Léman, I taught at George Washington Public High School in San Francisco and Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. I’ve been teaching at Léman for almost 5 years.
BH: Who are some of your favorite authors?
EK: There are too many to mention! Toni Morrison, Jhumpa Lahiri, Art Spiegelman, Junot Diaz, John Keats and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, to name a few.
BH: How did you find out you had won the award, and how did you feel?
EK: Well, at first I felt shocked, because Drew surprised me with this news in front of the entire faculty! And then, staring out into an audience of my dear colleagues and administrators, I felt overwhelmed with gratitude for everything that I have learned from them over the years. Léman has been a tremendous place to learn and to teach, and to try my hand at building something new. And I felt very lucky. Teaching is my passion, and it feels tremendously satisfying to be recognized for something that I love to do.
BH: What aspects of teaching inspire you on a daily basis?
EK: At Léman, internationalism is real. Every single day, I interact with students from different nations, who pepper our hallways with other languages and bring unique world views into my classroom. They bring such perspective to the study of literature, and I can see students really learning from one another—meaningful lessons about real diversity. When I receive papers written by students of so many nationalities, or listen to them discuss a work of literature together, I sometimes disengage for a moment to just marvel at the breadth of human experience. It feels transcendent. My mother also serves as an inspiration to me. She is a former English teacher herself, and has been very instrumental in shaping my classroom approach. Teaching can be hard work, and my mom has always been there with a supportive hug, anecdote, and effective advice.
BH: Is there anyone you would like to dedicate the award to?
EK: My late father, Herman Pontzer, who left this world when I was nine, who read to me often, and who was, by all accounts, a rock star high school English teacher.
The sound of eager students approaching indicates the end of our time with Mrs. Khan, but with awards season in full swing, it only seems appropriate that we ask if there is anyone she would like to thank.
EK: I’m very grateful to my husband and to my parents, for always supporting me no matter what. And I’ve been blessed with many talented teachers, colleagues and administrators: Drew Alexander, Sarah Polland, Colleen Brown, Jerry Maraita, Patrick Kane, Michael Johnson, Eric Grossman, Holly Schechter, John Kezel, William Gould, Martin Chase, Jeanne McLaughlin, the Léman Manhattan English Department… these are just a few of the many educators who come to mind when I think of great teaching and powerful leadership, and perhaps it is best not to list names since I could go on forever!

Unfortunately for Khan on this occasion, her trophy resides on a bookshelf at home, nestled among her aforementioned favorite authors, leaving her unable to hold it as she gives thanks- in true awards season style.

[Photo of Emily Khan with her award.]

