

Getting *in his* Groove

Choir student teacher takes away
new perspective from time at East

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Standing in front of a group of over 150 choir students, Nick Lee, who is most well-known by his teaching name, Mr. Lee, tells the group a story. The previous night was Halloween, and he had tickets to the Chiefs game. Not exactly sure what he was getting himself into, he wanted to make use of the tickets, so he and a friend went to the hectic game. Full of awkward, dangerous and hilarious encounters, Lee shares his story with the class.

As the story comes to a close, the Choraliers madly erupt into applause and cheers.

This is Nick Lee, who student-taught in the choral program at East for eight weeks. Lee, who is studying at Concordia University in Seward, Nebraska, is planning on getting his degree of Bachelor of Science in Education, endorsed in Vocal Music and Drama and then graduating in the Spring.

Mr. Lee found out about Ken Foley, the choir director at East, when a student at Concordia, who previously had Mr. Foley as a teacher at Pembroke, told Lee that it would be a great opportunity to learn under him as he student taught.

"After the fact, I said 'Hey, I had a student from Pembroke who went up to Concordia, do you happen to know Whitney Cain?'" Foley said. "He said, 'Yeah, that's the reason I found you, because she said you should go work with Mr. Foley in Kansas City.' It's sort of a small world type of deal."

In order to find out more about the choir that Lee was about to direct, he decided to make the four hour drive to East on a Wednesday night for the fall choral concert. Lee wanted to get the chance to hear the choirs before choosing songs for them to sing at their next concert.

"I was really nervous the first time I walked in the school because I just had no idea what I was getting into," Lee said. "It's weird sitting there in that seat and watching these students, all of whom I was

about to get to know really well and listening to this beautiful concert that they had put on and spent all these weeks preparing."

Lee was finally able to meet Mr. Foley after the concert. The man who up until this point he'd only heard about, read about and seen in pictures online. Lee calls meeting Foley a "surreal experience."

Even with all the driving that evening, Lee was still energized and ready to start being a part of East.

"I got in the car and we started driving home," Lee said. "You think I'd be tired from all the driving, but I was so ecstatic, just so excited to get down here. It was a good kick off, even though I did get home at 1:30 in the morning."

Despite his current dedication to choir, Lee wasn't always planning on going into music. Originally he started out at the University of Nebraska Kearney, where Lee, a percussionist by trade, was a part of the drumline. At the time he was looking to go into Medicine, but a single experience changed his mind.

"We were singing Handel's Messiah and right in the middle of that piece, something just hit me," Lee said. "I just was so taken by the musicality of that and I just decided that I wanted to devote my life to music, so I decided right then that I was going to become a music teacher."

In order to pursue his new career path, he transferred to the University of Concordia back in Seward, his hometown, because he was looking for a more challenging choir program than the one offered at his previous university.

In the middle of October, when Lee showed up at East on his first day teaching, he didn't know what to expect. Between the sheer number of kids and fear of the unknown Lee was "terrified."

Lee quickly became integrated into the choir program as he got to know people and as students had the opportunity to discover

his personality.

It was a Friday, and just like other Fridays, the piano was in the center of the choir room, with all of the students circled around Lee as he led them through warm-ups.

"I'll never forget the first time I was telling the Choraliers this dream I had about this crocodile encounter," Lee said. "For whatever reason, [at] the last second I decided it was a good idea to tell 155 strangers about the weirdest dream I've had in a very long time."

Although the story seemed random for Lee at the time, it marked a turning point for him and the group.

"I just got in the zone where I was telling this story and people were laughing," Lee said. "That was the first moment that I really, really felt comfortable being in front of these people, and shortly after that I started sharing other stories with the choirs."

After sharing the crocodile story with the group, Lee started "Mad Props" Fridays, a time when he congratulates the choirs and tells them what they've done well that week. It's also a time when goals are set for the upcoming week. Usually a story or other funny happening is involved as a reward.

Junior Dani Mader, like many other choir students, enjoys the "Mad Props" Friday that Lee started. They've become something that is looked forward to each week.

"The 'Mad Props' of the Week really make us feel good and get us excited to work on a Friday," Mader said. "Plus you never know what to expect from him and he's one of the kindest student teachers I've ever met."

Mader, who plans on studying the arts in college, thinks that Mr. Lee has been a valuable example for students who are thinking about teaching in the future.

I want to be a fine arts teacher and he's a really good example. He's going places in life."

Lee is thankful that his time at East went smoothly. He says that student teaching can often make or break a prospective teacher. Since it is the last chance to make up your mind, some people end up dropping out at the last moment.

"[Student teaching at East] really has secured me with this idea that I do want to become a teacher," Lee said. "I look back and just think, if this wouldn't have been a good experience, I could be changing the course of my life. But because it has, I'm ready for years in the future that maybe aren't as good."

Throughout his time at East, Lee has seen classroom ideology truly come to life.

"[In our educational classes] they said the number one thing you can do is just really get to know your students," Lee said. "Whether or not you actually teach them anything should come secondary to you being involved in their lives."

From Foley's perspective, who has been teaching for years, student teachers can either help or hurt the classroom.

"[In] the immortal words of Forrest Gump, 'Student teachers are sort of like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get,'" Foley said. "And it's true, because if you get a bad student teacher it makes your life tougher, but if you get a good one it really helps. [Mr. Lee's] really fun to work with, he's been great."

Reflecting on his time at East, Lee feels that he's been impacted more than the students have been.

"I came here to teach all this stuff and I'm not sure I've taught anybody here anything, but I have learned so much about myself and about what it means to be a leader in the classroom," Lee said. "I'm very, very excited to start teaching in my own classroom and just start changing lives, but we'll see, because I came here to change lives and my life has been changed."