

Haddonfield teacher is named New Jersey Teacher of the Year — and got married at school last weekend

by [Ellie Rushing](#), Updated: October 3, 2019



DAVID MAIALETTI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Two significant milestones for Kimberly Dickstein Hughes decorate Haddonfield Memorial High School. Spanning the front of the brick school is a banner congratulating the 33-year-old English teacher on her recent honor as New Jersey’s Teacher of the Year. And just beyond the front pillars are the remains of the chuppah under which she was married on Saturday.

The Camden County native says she was born to teach, inspired by education at a young age because of mantras her grandmother instilled in her: *The more you know, the more you grow. Listen to learn, learn to listen.*

And then in high school, her best friend, Alicia DiNatale, died of cancer.

“When I lost my friend in high school, I leaned on my teachers,” said Dickstein Hughes, who has taught English at Haddonfield for the last 11 years. “And I didn’t realize this until later in life, but that is probably what brought me back to the classroom. My teachers taught me what it was to be a whole educator.”

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For her passion for education, Dickstein Hughes was honored as Teacher of the Year by the New Jersey Board of Education on Wednesday. She is the first Camden County teacher to receive the honor since it was established in 1969.

“If you want to help people, become a teacher,” she said at the board’s meeting in Trenton. “And if you want to give back to your community, become a teacher in your community.”

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Kimberly Dickstein married Phil Hughes at Haddonfield Memorial High School on Saturday, Sept. 28, where Dickstein has taught English for the last 11 years.

“She dedicates 100% in the classroom,” said Tammy McHale, principal of Haddonfield Memorial. “She’s an original thinker of how she can express and meet the standards beyond the classroom.”

Julie Smart, one of Dickstein Hughes' English colleagues, echoed that sentiment. "Her passion for teaching is contagious. She's going 100 miles per hour, and she takes everyone with her. You can't not want to be involved with something she's involved with."

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Dickstein Hughes was Smart's student teacher in 2008, and Smart said she was awed by her from the beginning, with her passion and ability to connect with students.

"What she does on the 10th grade level is amazing — her students really have an understanding of the world. A global perspective that is beyond mature for 16-year-olds," said Smart, who has taught at Haddonfield since 1989.

Dickstein Hughes has made community service and global citizenship key components in her classes. Last year, her 10th grade world literature class connected with Garang Buk Buk, [a former child soldier from South Sudan](#), and helped raised more than \$81,000 for him to earn a master's degree from Emory University. She said this is one of her favorite memories as a teacher.

"This was the definition of, 'Don't talk about it, be about it,'" she said. "It was amazing to see students become activists, and see their sense of possibility come to life, which is something that adults lose."

Mehki Rippey, a 16-year-old junior at Haddonfield, said taking Dickstein Hughes' world literature class last year ignited his passion for public service and community activism. His class alone raised about \$10,000 for Buk Buk.

"I realized, 'Whoa, I can actually do something,'" said Rippey. After this class, he became more involved on campus and is now the president of Peer Bias Leaders, a student club that promotes diversity and inclusion on campus.



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Kimberly Dickstein Hughes, the 2019-20 New Jersey Teacher of the Year, smiles as she is praised at the State Board of Education in Trenton on Oct. 2.

The educator's relationship with her school, students, and community goes beyond the classroom. On Saturday, she walked through her high school campus in much different fashion — a wedding dress.

Around 300 people, including 60 students, crowded into the high school's courtyard to see their teacher marry Phil Hughes. Students handed out programs and organized chairs, and a school a cappella group performed.

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“If Kimberly is the best teacher in the state, and New Jersey's education system is ranked No. 1 in the country, then is it fair to say we have the best teacher in the country sitting here right now?” joked one of the Board of Education members at the recognition ceremony.

Public service is embedded within Dickstein Hughes' life beyond the classroom, too. Inspired by the loss of her friend, she volunteers with the Alicia Rose Victorious Foundation, a Camden County nonprofit working to improve the quality of life for hospitalized teens fighting cancer and other life-threatening illnesses. Her new husband, after serving in the Peace Corps, founded [Mavuno Harvest](#), an organic snack food brand that looks to increase African farmer incomes by purchasing and drying fruit that had previously gone to waste.

Katelynn Brotz, Dickstein Hughes' younger sister, said she was inspired to follow in her sister's footsteps as an educator. She currently teaches social studies in Moorestown.

“Her heart is at the school,” said Brotz. “She is so committed to teaching and to being a global citizen.”

Dickstein Hughes earned her bachelor's in English and political science from Rutgers University in 2008 and her master's in English secondary education from Rutgers in 2009.

With the award, she will receive a car for the year and a \$500 clothing allowance, and will travel to Washington to meet the president, among other accolades. She will also receive a sabbatical from January through June to go through professional development training and attend speaking engagements.

This article has been updated to reflect the year the statewide Teacher of the Year was established. It was 1969.

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