



Gail Chase, Sponsor  
Andrew Serna, Sponsor  
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Dear Dr. Peeper,

April 29, 2023

My name is Gail Chase and I am a proud representative of the Central Florida branch of the ESU. It was an absolute pleasure to meet you on Monday at the National Shakespeare Competition! My partner and colleague Jennifer Gautier and I were so honored to be there to support Casey Kerr, our student and branch winner, at the competition. The fact that Casey (deservedly, in my humble opinion) won second place was the icing on an already wonderful day celebrating two of my favorite things- teenagers and Shakespeare! At the reception, we had the most wonderful time talking to you and hearing about your vision for the future of the ESU and the competition itself. If you'll indulge me for a moment, I'd like to share a bit about my experience and journey with the organization that legitimately changed my life and the lives of my students forever.

In the summer of 2016, I received an invitation to attend a two day Shakespeare workshop hosted by the Central Florida ESU. It was touted as an interactive hands-on experience for teachers. On a whim, I decided to sign up. Little did I know that two day professional development would lead to a life changing experience. At the workshop, I connected with a colleague of mine from another school district. He told me about the TLAB scholarship to London's Globe Theatre and how I would be an ideal candidate for the program. At his encouragement, I applied. The following summer of 2017, I was blessed beyond measure to be selected as a scholar and I was sent to The Globe. What happened during those three weeks is almost indescribable and that is an ironic statement because I am never short on words. The program was designed for teachers and focused on how to get Shakespeare out of the textbook and on to the stage. The twenty teachers in my cohort were from around the world and a mixture of middle and high school as well as theatre and English teachers. Through hands-on exploration of the text led by our Globe Educational Practitioners, we were able to learn how to demystify Shakespeare and how to make it accessible to students of all ages and ability levels.

It is not an exaggeration to say that I came back from London a changed woman. At the time, I was at the end of my twentieth year of teaching and I was feeling very burnt out. I truly didn't know if I would make it through another year of teaching given the ever-contentious state of education in our country and especially in the state of Florida. But this program relit the fire within me, reminded me why I got into education in the first place, and redirected my energy into doing what I do best - sharing my love of theatre and language with my students and helping them to have a safe space to explore their craft as well as themselves as individuals. That school year, I produced both a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* and an original adaptation of *Macbeth* that I called *When the Hurly*

*Burly's Done*. In twenty years of being a theatre teacher, I had not produced any Shakespearean plays because I honestly didn't think I was intelligent enough to do so. What the TLAB taught me is that Shakespeare is for everyone and people everywhere *can* and *should* be exposed to his works. In truth, the strategies I learned at The Globe are used in my classroom every single day and not just when tackling Shakespeare. My students felt the shift in me and it has reinvigorated our entire theatre department. My students now love Shakespeare! During the height of the pandemic, we produced a Shakespeare-in-the-park style production of *Romeo and Juliet* (in masks and gloves!) and this school year we tackled *Hamlet*.

Since then, I have encouraged several of my colleagues to apply for the program including Jennifer Gautier who went the year after me. Upon her return, we decided that we should collaborate on a school-wide Shakespeare competition so we reached out to the Central Florida branch and got connected with the coordinator of the competition. We have participated in the competition for three years now and we very proudly have the largest school wide competition in our entire Central Florida branch! Ms. Gautier and I have had over 100 students participate in our competition each year. We bring in guest judges ranging in expertise from learned Shakespeare scholars to professional actors working in the industry. Ms. Gautier and I work together to prepare all of the students for the competition by combining our classes and having the students rehearse in front of each other. We then provide feedback and ask open ended questions of the performers to get them to really think about a character's motivation and objectives. We also highly encourage students to provide each other with feedback. This has become one of the most beloved and beneficial parts of our schoolwide program. We are very proud of this element and would love to help other schools to implement such things in their programs as well. Ms. Gautier and I truly believe that our success is thanks to our collaborative efforts and we want to have the opportunity to pay it forward to as many educators as possible.

What makes this program so special is that it is for *teachers*. There are so many programs available to students but very little quality enrichment and professional development available for the *teachers*. By investing in teachers, you truly are investing in children as well. A happy and qualified educator will move mountains for their students and the ESU is doing a fantastic job of pouring into these educators who are hungry to learn. Truly, the notion of a *thank you* feels rather trite and inconsequential in comparison to what I have received and gained from this organization. But alas, it is what I have to give. So, from the bottom of my teacher's soul I say *thank you* and I will continue to pay it forward with other educators and to pour into my students just as the ESU has poured into me!

Humbly.  
Gail Chase  
Central Florida ESU Branch