

## Alumni Spotlight Christine Cook '85



**Please provide your biographical information (major/minor at WCU, town you grew up in, reason why you came to WCU).**

- Christine (Brennan) Cook WCU Class of 1985
- Majored in Early Childhood Education
- Grew up in Philadelphia (in the Lawncrest section)
- Followed brother, Tom Brennan, WCU Class of 1983 and liked that WCU was just the right distance from home (about an hour)

**What made you go into degree?**

Began as a math major and calculus did me in! I grew up babysitting and loving children, and also always enjoyed school – so it was a natural fit for me. After one semester at WCU, I switched my major from Mathematics to Early Childhood Education and LOVED everything about that major!

**What is your official title and what are your responsibilities in your current position?**

I am currently in my 35th year as a kindergarten teacher at Milton Hershey School (MHS), my high school alma mater. I am retiring at the end of this school year. MHS is a private residential school for children of extreme poverty and need. It is, in my humble opinion, the greatest school in the world and the best place to work.

**What is a typical day like at work?**

Children arrive at 7:50 a.m. and leave at 2:50 p.m. I am responsible in planning their learning day. I teach language arts, math, and social studies, while weaving in technology, arts and crafts, music, science, and social skills into the class of 16 kindergartners. As a residential school, our students live with other students in their same age range and gender in student homes. These homes are led by a houseparent couple who supports and cares for the students each day like their families would in their home community. As an MHS teacher, I keep both houseparents and the student's parents/sponsors involved in their student's learning experience in as many ways as possible.

**What have been the biggest challenges at work?**

Because of the mission of MHS, children come with extremely limited backgrounds loaded with trauma. The beginning of the year is a very challenging time for kindergartners at MHS. They are adjusting to being away from home, and many are attending school for the first time. COVID-19 presented its own set of challenges but we pushed through it and managed to continue in-classroom learning for the entire 2020-21 school year. While MHS never closed as a result of the pandemic, some of our students did go back to their home communities in the early months of COVID and continued learning virtually. Trying to manage a group of kindergartners via Zoom was like playing "Whack-A-Mole." One would get his/her questions answered and settled in and then two more would need something.

**What do you enjoy most about your current position?**

The ability to make a difference every single day! The amount of growth that our children display in a year is just AMAZING and highly rewarding! Usually all they need is a little time,

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structure, and a whole lot of love, and they display tremendous growth in every way by the end of a school year.

### **What skills, talents, and other traits are useful and necessary to do your job?**

Flexibility, organization, creativity, technology skills, ability to work with others, and PATIENCE!

### **Do you have a favorite or funny story about work?**

So many and no one story sticks out in my mind. The kids give me funny stories every day! I always enjoyed dressing up as a witch every year on Halloween and trying to trick my children into believing that it wasn't actually me. It was always fun and students talk about that day and making "Witch's Brew" together for years after they were in my class. One of the many beautiful things about MHS is that I can follow my "kindergarten babies" as they go through MHS. At their graduation, I give them a card with their photos from kindergarten along with a copy of their kindergarten report card.

### **What do you enjoy doing in your free time?**

Yoga, golf, jogging, and watching Philadelphia sports teams.

### **Where do you see yourself in five years?**

Retired, traveling and visiting family and friends, and hopefully spoiling a few grandchildren.

### **What advice would you give to a current student who aspires to follow in your footsteps and pursue a similar career path?**

Be ready to WORK HARD every day. There is no "down time" in a teacher's day. The children need your best even when you're not feeling your best. Don't ever stop learning. Find a great mentor or two who will help you grow and improve. Dress professionally and always model professionalism – the children notice EVERYTHING!

### **How has your WCU education contributed to your success?**

I had great teaching classes at WCU and some really impactful professors (Dr. Zimmerman, Dr. Hasson, Dr. Gibson, Dr. Maxim) who made me feel very well prepared to be an elementary teacher. I also had a great cooperating teacher (Mrs. Brenda Ginden) when I student taught kindergarten at Hillsdale Elementary School. I learned a lot from Mrs. Ginden and still keep in touch with her to this day.

### **What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishments (both personally and professionally)?**

My late husband and I have two AMAZING daughters, Jennifer (28) and Megan (26) of whom I am very proud. Jennifer is currently in her 6th year teaching 4th grade at Milton Hershey School and is also the head coach of the MHS varsity girls volleyball team. Megan is currently pursuing her PhD in school psychology from Lehigh University and is a psychology intern two days a week at Milton Hershey School. Both girls grew up being a part of the many things my late husband Ken and I did with MHS. My greatest personal accomplishment is recently being named as Milton Hershey School's Alumna of the Year for 2021. I am humbled and overwhelmed beyond words to be awarded this incredible honor.

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### What's your favorite memory from when you were a student at WCU?

I very much enjoyed my four years at WCU from 1981-85. I have many fun memories:

- SNOW DAYS where we'd "borrow" the cafeteria trays and use them as sleds
- Late night snacks at the RAT
- Football tailgates at the stadium at South Campus
- Floor parties while a student in Goshen Hall
- Fun with my wonderful roommates Liz (Suda) Mahon and Leslie (Murray) Cook
- Going to the library to study but somehow spending more time goofing around and socializing than studying
- Using the "whisper tunnel" (not sure exactly what it was called for sure) at Phillips Hall;
- Graduation day on the football field
- No air conditioning (but several fans)
- Sharing ONE phone for the entire wing

(Not that these last two were "great" memories – but definitely character-building and a sign of the 80s!)