

## Jacksonville.com: A jittery day for teachers, too 8/20/97

A jittery day for teachers, too By Thomas B. Pfankuch Times-Union staff writer Published Wednesday, August 20, 1997

Ellen Hightower of Orange Park was so nervous yesterday morning she could hardly eat breakfast.

Hightower, 23, had reason to be jittery. After all, she was about to embark on the first day of a career that could directly affect the future of the nation.

"I didn't feel too well with my Cheerios," Hightower said.

At 9:12 a.m., when an administrator at Highlands Middle School called Hightower's name, 22 sixthgrade students stood and followed their new teacher to her classroom on the first day of the 1997-98 school year.

After walking to a portable classroom outside the school on Jacksonville's northwest side, the students sat down in their desks. Hightower closed the door and turned to face her new homeroom class.

"Hi you guys, my name is Mrs. Hightower," she said.

But then the seemingly calm and cool first-year teacher made an acknowledgement that seemed to put the class at ease.

"Are you guys nervous? I am," she said. "You are, I can tell, but it's OK. You can breathe."

The skittish sixth-graders, formerly the oldest students at their elementary schools and now the youngest at Highlands Middle, stared blankly at Hightower.

"I'm not weird," Hightower said to them. "You're looking at me like I'm weird, but I'm not weird."

Then, as if to convince herself, Hightower turned to a file cabinet away from the students and whispered, "I'm sane."

On Thursday, six days before the start of school, Hightower had exuded confidence that her first day as a teacher would go smoothly.

"I'm concerned, anybody would be," she said then. "I'm a very organized person, so I know I can do it."

Highlands Principal Shelton Hobbs said he hired Hightower this summer for two key reasons: He needed a health teacher, and he was impressed by Hightower's personality and professionalism.

"I saw a spark plug-type person," Hobbs said last week. "I found Ellen to be exuberant and invigorating, and I have complete confidence in her."

Hightower was graduated from Florida State University in 1995 with a degree in health education. A native of West Palm Beach, she married her college sweetheart, Lester Hightower, in March and moved to Jacksonville.

Since graduating, Hightower interned at a West Palm Beach high school and occasionally worked as a substitute in Tallahassee and Jacksonville.

But the challenges facing a middle school health teacher will surpass those faced by a substitute in even the most unruly class, Hobbs said.

Unlike other teachers, Hightower's classes will include sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders, and each grade has a different curriculum. Health classes also tend to be larger, with up to 40 students.

Health topics also tend to be touchier than "2 plus 2," or "See Jane Run."

AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, drugs, puberty, sex, rape, divorce - Hightower must present these issues to middle school students, many of whom are going through hormonal changes themselves.

"We're going to be able to sit here and chat about smoking and drugs and things that can really affect their lives," Hightower said. "Because I'm young, I feel like I can help them."

Hightower's first day, however, started slowly - handing out schedules, a few worksheets and laying down the basic school and class rules.

Hightower said last week she planned to handle her classes with a firm hand.

"I know I'm going to have to start out strict and that concerns me," she said. "I have to be mean."

But in her first few classes yesterday, Hightower seemed more straightforward than strict.

"I'm a pretty cool teacher," she told her class. "But when I tell you, 'Sir, please sit down,' you do it."

When interrupted during roll call, Hightower politely reminded some of her more savvy eighth-grade students to keep quiet.

She also plans to hold her own detention for misbehaving students and promised to call parents to report both good and bad student behavior.

"I've got to be tough and consistent," she said. "Students like discipline because it makes them feel safe and comfortable."

After his first day in Hightower's class yesterday, at least one student said he liked her approach.

"She's all right," said Thomas Hardy, 13. "She's better than our other teacher. Our other health teacher was mean."

After lunchtime yesterday, Hightower said she was more certain than ever that teaching was the job for her. And her belief in herself, and the profession, had grown even stronger.

"I'm a real caring and feeling person, and I have a lot to offer," she said. "I feel like I can help them do something great with their lives."