Veteran has passion for second career as a teacher

Teacher Jim Tweet
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Adrian Sanchez-Gonzalez | Posted: Saturday, November 10, 2012 10:48 pm

Jim Tweet, a former Air Force pilot and now a teacher, helps his eighth grade students during a brainstorming session in his Jobs for Montana Graduates class at Belgrade Middle School on Wednesday, Nov. 7.

GAIL SCHONTZLER, Chronicle Staff Writer
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BELGRADE — Combat may be the perfect preparation for teaching middle school.

Jim Tweet served 20 years in the Air Force and flew during wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, operating radar-jamming and laser-guided bombing systems.

Yet what he enjoyed most was serving 16 years as an instructor at the Army Command and General Staff College.

"I loved it," Tweet said of teaching. "I think it's my gift."
“Getting animated, conveying information to another person, watching the light bulbs come on – there’s a lot of gratification.”

Today, thanks in part to the federal Troops to Teachers program, Tweet is teaching math at Belgrade Middle School, applying lessons he learned in the military to instruct and inspire seventh- and eighth-graders.

Sitting in his classroom, where a student has handwritten “Mr. Tweet is awesome” on the whiteboard, he said that the transition from teaching adults to teaching kids was pretty straightforward.

“Motivation is motivation,” said Tweet, 47, a Montana State University grad and son of a Butte coal miner. He mentioned the bag of candies he keeps handy and grinned. “It’s amazing what a seventh-grade kid will do for a Jolly Rancher.”

At a time when thousands of military veterans are returning home, Troops to Teachers offers one path to a new career.

Finding a job has been tough for many post 9/11 military veterans. Their unemployment rate in October was 9.7 percent, or nearly 2 percentage points higher than for the nation as a whole, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

LeRoy “Le” Gaub, a retired Army colonel, manages Troops to Teachers for Montana and six other states from an office housed at MSU’s College of Education, Health and Human Development.

Since the program started more than a decade ago, about 80 veterans have been placed in teaching jobs in Montana, Gaub said. Nationally 14,000 military personnel have been placed.

Troops to Teachers offers financial help, advice on how to become a teacher, help finding jobs and bonuses to teach in high-need schools.

“We have mature, experienced, trained teachers,” Gaub said. When a veteran is hired, he said, “the veteran wins, the school wins, the kids win.”

Belgrade School Superintendent Candy Lubansky said veterans are well trained, have strong teamwork and technical skills and a strong sense of self.

“They have been through challenging situations,” she said. “Jim is a wonderful example of an extraordinarily good teacher.”

Tweet got help in gaining his teacher certification from both the Northern Plains Transition to Teaching program at MSU and Troops to Teachers. When finding a job as a math teacher in the Gallatin Valley proved harder than expected, Troops to Teachers connected him to a job opening in Belgrade. He has taught there since 2008.
In addition to math, Tweet teaches an elective class on “jobs for Montana graduates” and an enrichment class on aeronautics.

“He actually cares about us,” said Skielar Mager, 14, an eighth-grader. “He’s most of our favorite teacher. He likes to have fun but he also makes us learn a lot.”

“I’m glad this is what I do for a living,” Tweet said. “Hopefully I’m having some kind of influence on the next generation. A positive influence.”

Gail Schontzler can be reached at gails@dailychronicle.com or 582-2633.

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