

Meet a Teacher

Meet North High's Karen Spahr-Thomas

- *Social Studies Teacher at North High since 2001*
- *Bachelor's in Journalism and Business (minor in History), Bowling Green State University*
- *Master's of Education, University of Illinois at Chicago*
- *18-year resident of Downers Grove*

North High's Karen Spahr-Thomas came to teaching in an unconventional way. An Ohio native, after college she served as general manager for a large athletic retail store in the Dayton/Cincinnati area. Overseeing 100 employees and \$15 million in annual sales, she was thriving under the pressure. "Looking back, I really had a lot of responsibility for someone so young," she recalls.

Although she enjoyed eight years in the fast-paced corporate world, she eventually followed her "impulse to serve." After moving to Chicago to get married, she started the process of becoming a teacher. She received her master's degree from UIC, and says the urban setting was helpful in broadening her knowledge of the vast differences in school environments.

While working on her master's degree, she was a substitute teacher at District 58, which gave her a feel for the community. "Working at the elementary schools provided me with knowledge of the developmental stages of students and specifically what and how they learn before they come to our high schools," says Spahr-Thomas, who also taught one period at South High her first year.

Today, Spahr-Thomas is one of two teachers who serves as an AP U.S. History instructor. She remembers the first days of the district's goal to increase college-readiness by involving more students in AP courses and knew that students would benefit from this rigorous coursework. "I'd say to people, don't judge them by their age," she says. "They have the capacity to handle



a great amount of analytical thinking if given the chance."

In her classes, Spahr-Thomas stresses literacy, test-taking and essay writing skills, all of which are critical for success in college. She also emphasizes social interactions and paying attention to detail—both of which she worries are becoming lost skills due to the influx of cell phones.

Her approach to teaching is pragmatic: she says she'd rather train students how to learn properly in high school and then be able to succeed in college—where tuition is costly. She thinks her bottom-line approach and business sense have served her students well.

"I learned from the private sector the importance of deadlines and getting things done," she says. "But most of all, I learned how to treat kids with fairness and respect, and to get to know each one as a person."