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Award-winning professor brings German language and culture to MSU

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1 of 2



Montana State University professor Kate Kithil listens in on students in her German 302 class as they talk in groups on Rachel Leathe/Chronicle

Professor Kate Kithil has a lot to shout about lately. Two different organizations have presented her with awards for her work teaching German at Montana State University.

Kithil, 47, recently won the Montana Association of Language Teachers Postsecondary Teacher of the Year award and the Pacific Northwest Council for Languages Postsecondary Language Educator of the Year award.

Kithil has been with MSU about five years. She teaches first- and second-year German and the occasional third-year class.

In high school, Kithil took German and Spanish classes but went on to study German in college. She took a year abroad before graduating, lived in Sweden for a while and was a nanny in a German household.

While living in Colorado, Kithil had just returned from being a nanny when she decided to go to graduate school. She said she fell into her career when the college told her she hadn't taken enough English classes to teach English and suggested she teach German instead.

During her year abroad, Kithil said, she began immersing herself in the language.

"The whole first semester was one of those situations where you're just always trying to practice your German and failing," she said. "People just start speaking to you in English because your German's not there yet, and it's kind of frustrating."

Kithil said she tells her students that it's the second semester when things start to click language-wise, but it was her time as a nanny that really immersed her in German culture.

"It takes a little bit to really feel like it's a part of you," Kithil said.

In her time studying German, Kithil said she learned that outreach is very important, and she has brought that to her job at MSU. She is involved in German Conversation Night, where German speakers get together at a local tea house and speak German to

each other. Conversation nights have been an important part of connecting students with German speakers outside the university, Kithil said.

She also cooperates with the World Language Initiative and attends and presents at conferences for professional development.

“I think building community is how you build strength around a program,” Kithil said.

Kithil has the philosophy that language is not static and is much more than teaching words and grammar. Students need to be exposed to German culture in a variety of ways, and she said she tries to integrate diversity, equity and inclusion into her lessons.

“You’re teaching kids how to interact with difference and that, I think, is what’s most important,” Kithil said.

Many things bring students to Kithil’s classroom. Some have degree programs that require a language. Others have German-speaking parents. Some want to learn the language to complement their majors, and some simply take the class because they like German.

Kithil returns to MSU year after year because she has wonderful colleagues and fun students. She said she enjoys the small class sizes and the creative freedom she’s allowed with her lessons.

“There’s really no part of this job that I dislike. Everything about it is so amazing,” Kithil said. “I think education in general is moving in this direction that education is not a static thing that can be trapped in a book but that needs to be lived and experienced.”

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