



Chad Zwolinski, an AP U.S. history teacher at Rochester High School, said he works hard to connect with his students in class and make learning fun.

Photo provided by Rochester Community Schools

RHS teacher earns national award with the help of his students

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After being nominated by his former students, Zwolinski recently won a National Teaching Award. Photo provided by Rochester Community Schools

ROCHESTER/ROCHESTER HILLS/OAKLAND TOWNSHIP — As a high-schooler, Chad Zwolinski said, he wasn't the most confident student.

"I was not necessarily one of the most decorated students as I started my high school career," he said. "I was struggling with my grades. ... I had a lot of C's and D's my first couple of years."

But that all changed when he met Kimberly Voss, his AP U.S. history teacher at Chippewa Valley High School.

"She really, really believed in me and took time out of her day to make me feel like I was capable and able to succeed — which was something that I hadn't received in education prior to that point," Zwolinski said. "She was willing to work with me and spend extra time. She came in after school and we had some Saturday sessions, things like that, and she just gave me the confidence and the inspiration to feel like I could do something that I had resigned myself, and other people had resigned themselves, to tell me I couldn't."

The experience set off a spark in Zwolinski.

"It opened up a whole new mindset. If someone was willing to do that for me, I wanted to do that for other people," he said.

Zwolinski, now an AP U.S. history teacher at Rochester High School, tells his students that story at the beginning of each school year.

"I let them know that I promise to be that person for them, the same way that she was that person for me, because I owe it to that teacher to reciprocate that for every student that walks through that door. My goal for the past 13 years here at RHS is to make sure that every student gets that same motivation and respect that I got," he said.

Affectionately known as "Mr. Z" by his students, Zwolinski also serves as the junior class adviser and the National Social Studies Honor Society sponsor, and has been involved in two book projects to help students pass the AP U.S. history test.

"I've taught a multitude of classes, but primarily, my focus has been AP U.S. history. In fact, when I applied, I called the principal at the time and begged him to let me teach this class, because they were thinking about letting someone else teach it, but I told them that it was my life's goal to teach that class," Zwolinski said.

Liam Clymer, now a freshman at Michigan State University, took Zwolinski's AP U.S. history class and said his former teacher has "a reputation for excellence."

"He certainly didn't let me down. Back then, I was more timid, and he made the choice to check in and always make sure I felt supported in my education. He kept that same level of support even as our year was cut short by COVID-19," Clymer said in a statement.

Zwolinski says he works hard to connect with his students.

"I just try to treat my students like individuals and teach them that each one of them matters," he said. "A really important thing to me is getting to know them and being able to speak to them in ways that show I care."

Rochester Community Schools Superintendent Robert Shaner said Zwolinski has certainly achieved that thanks to his ability to make every student know they're loved.

"When you observe his classroom, there is a lot of love, caring and kindness that allows them to see him authentically, and allows them to know they are going to be OK — even in a very challenging subject," Shaner said.

Students feel like "they can do anything" the moment they walk into Zwolinski's class, according to former student Maggie He.

"I remember the first day of class, when he stood outside of the door and immediately started learning everyone's names," she said. "Throughout the year, you could also see that he built a lot of personal connections. He would really try to get to know you and find common interests."

Marvel is what He and Zwolinski share a passion for.

"Maggie and I share a huge bond over Marvel, so she knows that my son's favorite movie is 'Shang-Chi.' We would talk all the time about different aspects of Marvel and things like that, so I think, for me, the most important thing is letting my students know that they matter first, and then the content and the subject area will come along afterwards."

And his students can feel it, according to He.

"If you were stressed out by something going on in your life, whenever you see Mr. Z, it's just a comforting feeling you have, because he is there to talk about you and help you through anything, help you feel better about whatever you are going through," she said.

After finishing her final class with Zwolinski, he gifted He with a "Shang-Chi" poster.

“It’s still sitting in my dorm room, and every time I look at it, I think of all the things we talked through,” she said. “It’s just a good reminder that there is someone in my corner to encourage me and help me out.”

Hoping to give some love back to Zwolinski, his former students nominated him for a \$5,000 National Teaching Award prize through Honored — a nonprofit organization “dedicated to keeping great teachers in the classroom and to inspiring a new generation of talent to pursue teaching.”

Zwolinski said many of his former students have since gone on to teach — including Emma Smith, who is now a history teacher at Rochester High School herself.

“I’m her mentor now, and we get to work together every day. For me, it’s that cyclical feeling of going through it, being that kid first, and now, being that teacher and seeing it. I can’t even tell you how proud I am to see her here,” Zwolinski said. “I have another former student in Houston right now teaching honors history, which, to me, is so great. I’m so proud to see these kids going into the profession.”

The Honored organization recently announced that Zwolinski won the National Teaching Award, which he has since used to take his family on a trip to Walt Disney World.

“To me, this is more than an award, because it’s coming from (my students) and shows that I made a difference for them,” Zwolinski said. “The fact that they would do this for me is humbling, and I can’t even begin to express how I feel.”