

## Interview with Melissa Leaym-Fernandez, PhD Teacher, Port Huron High School, Michigan



**What made you decide to return to work at a high school level after receiving your doctorate? It is as though you are breaking social norms, in a good way! What is your reason for doing so (high school vs. higher ed)?**

After completing my PhD, I decided to return to high school while continuing my research and this choice shocked a lot of people. But I did it for many reasons and two big ones are my quality of life at home and in my workplace and the ability to research and write with self-imposed deadlines. Additionally, in high school I can work to creatively support students who may not have opportunities to go to college or university, so my work becomes paramount.

**What do you hope to bring to your students? With all your knowledge, how do you hope to make a difference in these young lives?**

Helping students in high school to learn how to find their voice and implement that voice in real life is a goal of mine. I work in an area where poverty is extremely high. Students are not able to benefit regularly from the arts. Many of the related behaviors exist such as abuse and neglect—cousins to poverty. I can implement large projects that I break down into many steps, accommodating the variety of learners I have which include kids with trauma, learning accommodations such as 504/IEP plans and cognitive impairments all the way to those ready for college.

**What are you working on now with your students?**

The Art + Activism Watercolor Project is a project giving students opportunities to dig deeper into local or global issues that grab their attention. For my high school students, the project presented some challenges, offered some great rewards, and illustrated the critical importance of the arts in k-12 education. Some topics included harm via pollution to the Great Lakes, reproductive rights, homelessness and the lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan, USA, mental health and medical discriminations and planet pollution.

**What were some of your students takeaways from the project?**

Here are some of the things students enjoyed about the project in their own words: *"I like that I can talk about issues important to me"*, and *"I like bigger projects"*. They also enjoyed having more creative choices and learning watercolors and activism. Some of the challenges faced were learning to use large sheets of paper, *"I never worked so big!"* and working with limitations to learn processes of research and making. Finally, nearly all the students made clear that art making helps them to feel relaxed, calm, they *"feel good"* *"motivated"*, *"worry free"*, *"at peace"* and many, many said *"happy"*. This reaffirms that the arts in k-12 are critical to the health and well-being of humans.

