BETH VANMEETEREN — DOING BIG THINGS AT UNI

The Regents’ Center for Early Developmental Education on UNI’s campus is packed with opportunities for students and Iowa teachers. Beth VanMeeteren, Director of the Center and the Center for Early Education in STEM (CEESTEM) spoke with me about her background, her path to UNI, the Early Childhood Centers, and the Ramps and Pathways program. This story will focus on Beth’s journey. Friday; a second story will focus on the programs Beth directs.

Beth has lived in Iowa her whole life, growing up on a farm in Sioux County. She earned a liberal arts degree in social sciences at Northwestern College and earned her teaching license at the age of 21. Beth began teaching 1st grade at Laurens-Marathon in Laurens Iowa. It was the social sciences background that piqued her curiosity on how people are drawn to learn.

“I have always been curious about how the physical and biological world works. I believe this began in my childhood. My upbringing on a diverse Iowa farm provided background and practical experiences in biology, agronomy, zoology, meteorology, and mechanical engineering. My mother, a 4-H leader, schooled me on the chemistry of cooking and in sewing which challenged me to work with one-dimensional materials to create three dimensional articles of clothing; a great exercise in spatial thinking as well as properties of objects. Long before STEM was an acronym, one could say I had a STEM emphasis in my childhood.”

It was these experiences that influenced Beth’s teaching style in a first grade classroom. “I was fortunate to have a principal who trusted and valued his teachers’ expertise and allowed me to engineer my classroom and curriculum to meet the unique strengths and needs of each of my students. How each child learned fascinated me, and when I was offered the opportunity to earn a masters degree through a UNI outreach program, I seized it.”

Beth earned her masters degree in literacy in 1992. In 1997, she was selected to serve on the Teacher Practitioner Council, which was created by the Regents’ Center for Early Developmental Education. In 2001, Beth was recruited to teach for UNI’s Freeburg Early Childhood Program in East Waterloo as their 1st grade teacher. “For six years, I developed and implemented STEM curricula for young children and disseminated the work. One of the activities, Ramps and Pathways, was funded by the National Science Foundation and is impacting early childhood classrooms nationally and internationally.”

In 2013, Beth earned her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis on STEM in early childhood at UNI. “I conducted research on Ramps and Pathways, identifying the engineering component and how Ramps and Pathways is truly integrated STEM. Children develop concepts in force and motion (science) as they design and test (engineering) marble runs (technology) and engage in spatial thinking and number in the process (mathematics.) I found the E in STEM is the glue of STEM. If you have engineering, you will also have science, technology, and mathematics.”

In 2014 Beth was named the director of the Regents’ Center for Early Developmental Education where she is able to continue to work with her passion, STEM in early childhood. It was Beth’s journey to UNI and beyond that I found inspiring. She has accomplished great things and she will continue to do big things here at UNI.
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