

2020 ACTFL National Language Teacher of the Year

Rebecca Blouwolff:

BY MARTHA GORMAN

At the Intersection of Learning and Teaching



ABOVE: Rebecca Blouwolff's parents, Tom and Peggy Wolff, in Paris, circa 1970.

RIGHT: Rebecca Wolff in Paris in 1997, while serving as a Fulbright Teaching Assistant in northern France.



"I started out as a very traditional, textbook teacher and nothing looked broken to me. I got great reviews and great feedback," recalls Rebecca Blouwolff, who has taught French at Wellesley Middle School in Massachusetts since 1998. "It was hard for me to see the value of learning how to do what I thought I was already doing effectively."

Then, in 2014, a friend convinced Blouwolff to attend a workshop by Laura Terrill. "Frankly," says Blouwolff, "I was afraid that Laura would make me change how I taught." And she did.

Rebecca Blouwolff was named the 2020 ACTFL National Language Teacher of the Year at the 2019 ACTFL Annual Convention. She attributes this honor not only to what she learned about language teaching from Terrill, but also to what she learned about language learning from her own children.

Born Rebecca Wolff, the daughter of a Jewish, German-American Francophile father herself became a Francophile at a very young age. French music at home in a small town in western



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Teaching French 8 at Wellesley Middle School.

Photo by Tom Kates Photography

Massachusetts, a once-a-week after school French lesson starting in fourth grade, and an adventure in Québec in fifth grade, when she discovered the value of being able to speak the language of the place that you are visiting. A trip to New York City to see *Les Misérables* with the memorable French teacher Monsieur Luippold led to home-stays in Nantes, France in 1989 and 1990, and in Montpellier in 1991 and 1992.

“I just assumed that I would be a French major in college,” recalls Blouwolff. But when she got to Brown University she found she couldn’t read the literature. When as a TA she was asked to put verb conjugations on the board, she realized that she really didn’t know them. She switched her major to American Civilization.

“As I approached graduation, it was suggested that I apply for a Fulbright. I took one education class when I found out that I would be teaching English at a middle school in France the following year.” The school was in mining and textile country near the Belgian border.

“I loved their energy, their curiosity,” she says of her students. “I did a unit on maple syrup and pancakes—it was fun to teach about culture.”

“I thought I would be a social studies teacher,” she recalls. Although she applied for positions and was invited to interviews, she received no job offers. On a whim, she applied for a French teaching position and was hired immediately as an intern at Falmouth Academy on Cape Cod. “I just sort of slipped into a Massachusetts teaching credential,” she marvels, piecing together the eight courses needed for a major in French and applying just before the state began requiring a language and culture test.

The following year, while signing the contract for a French teaching position at Wellesley Middle School, she was asked to present her teaching license. “I took two more education courses that summer at UMass Amherst and did in-school mentorships. I seem to have always been slipping in under the proverbial window.”



Blouwolff is passionate about both learning and teaching. While still a student at Brown, she converted to Judaism and studied Hebrew “just for the pleasure of learning it.” In 2000, she received a Dorot Fellowship in Israel. This program seeks to educate future Jewish lay leaders from North America about Israel, Jewish history, and the Hebrew language. She spent a year in Jerusalem and attended an *ulpan*, a uniquely Israeli way of teaching immigrants Hebrew. “Having been a French student, I had a very different concept of fluency,” recalls Blouwolff. “I became obsessed with my pronunciation of the Hebrew letter *raysh*—I felt it gave me away as an American. But I was soon told: ‘We are a nation of immigrants. No one cares about your *raysh*!’”

She did a summer *ulpan* and spent the school year at a traditional (albeit coed) yeshiva, and tutored a young Jewish girl from an Iraqi family. “It was a very valuable cultural and linguistic experience.”

When she returned from Israel, Wolff resumed teaching at Wellesley Middle School and began a Master’s in Education at Harvard, taking classes after the end of the school day and during the summer months.

She also started a Hebrew language book club. That was where she met her future husband. Joshua Bloustine had also spent a year in Israel and studied Hebrew. “He was a very strong Hebrew speaker,” recalls Blouwolff. However, his post doc in physics in 2005 took the couple to Strasbourg, France, providing the newly minted Blouwolffs (Get it? Bloustine + Wolff = Blouwolff, pronounced “blue-wolf”) with yet another opportunity to live abroad.

“I did a second round as an English assistant at area high schools and taught English through the Strasbourg Chamber of Commerce.” She also sneaked into the University and started taking classes. The easiest way to enter officially was through the small Judaic Studies department. She found herself translating newspaper articles from Hebrew into French. “I took many literature classes,” she recalls.

Back in the U.S., while the couple was expecting their first child, something very interesting happened. “Even though his French was not that strong, my husband suggested that we speak to our children in another language. He even brought home books about it.” The French teacher remembers pushing back initially, thinking: “But I’m not the same person when I speak in French,” drawing a line between work and home, between her French and English personas. “I found I was concerned about feeling authentic in my parenting if done in another language.”

Although they met through Hebrew, the Blouwolffs speak “non-native French” at home with their children, Jonah and Liora. “I have learned a lot of words by speaking French with the children,” she admits, remembering a call to a friend in France to ask how to say “onesies.” Then there were all of the words for different types of trucks, the term for leotards ... “I mostly needed nouns,” she recalls with a chuckle.

The Blouwolff family does “French language vacations” to Québec and France. “Last summer we rented a house with French friends and their children. Just listening to how our friends scolded the children was very interesting.” Her

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:

Fifth grade French class road trip via VW bus to Québec City in 1985. Rebecca and her father are on the far right.

Rebecca and her French host sister Stéphanie enjoying ice cream cones in western Massachusetts in 1990.

Rebecca and her French penpal Elise in Brittany in 1992.

Rebecca’s collège (middle school) students in Saint-Omer, France in 1997.

Rebecca with her students in Saint-Omer in 1997.

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children also attend camps while abroad. "It's always interesting to see how well the kids are understood. At camp in Québec and in France, we've found they seem to get in trouble, perhaps because they don't fully comprehend."

When Blouwolff attended the transformative Terrill workshop in 2014, her children were 4 and 6 years old. "Suddenly I saw the similarities between what Laura was saying and what was happening at home," she says. "That gave me a true appreciation for learning L2."

Her son Jonah is now in sixth grade, the grade that she is currently teaching. "It's been very interesting to have someone at home who is the same age as my students."

"I really love teaching and I really love French, but for a long time I just taught like I had been taught," she says. "These past six years have been a totally different professional career for me, learning how to do everything differently. It has taken this long to beat all those ineffective practices out of myself. If I had been taught to teach properly in research-based ways in the first place, it would have saved me a lot of time and heartache. It is hard to leave behind all of those practices," she admits. "I got great reviews, but I was totally out of whack with where the profession was going. The move to proficiency and having faith in the language learning process is really wonderful."

Rebecca Blouwolff teaches in a small, New England school district. She is acutely aware of her own privilege as well as of the responsibility which she feels it confers.

"Kids in monolingual families do not have enough exposure to people who are multilingual," she says. "So how do we show them the value of all multilingual people? There are people who look at people like me—White, upper class, professional—and think it's great that they're multilingual. But these same people have a hard time being patient with people with accents. We are told that we are in America and we all ought to speak English. Those of us with privilege have such a huge responsibility."

This is the core of what Blouwolff intends to bring to her year representing the profession. She spoke to this quite eloquently during her National Language Teacher of the Year acceptance remarks at the Opening General Session of the 2019 ACTFL Annual Convention:

We are living at a time when it is not safe for all people to speak languages other than English ... Language-learning should not be a luxury, nor should it be a liability In America, every person should be free to express themselves in the language of their choice, where they choose It is not the job of multilingual people to make monolinguals feel comfortable in their ignorance.

"I also have a small, selfish goal," she adds. "I want to learn as much as I can at all of the conferences that I get to attend!" Great teachers love to learn.

Martha Gorman is Editor of The Language Educator. Multilingual, she is also an accredited translator, a certified interpreter, and is passionate about languages.



ABOVE: Rebecca with a French 8 student at Wellesley Middle School.

BELOW: One-on-one work with a French 6 student at Wellesley Middle School.

Photos by Tom Kates Photography

