

Application submitted by
**2025 National Teacher of the Year
FINALIST**



Janet Renee Damon
COLORADO

School: DELTA High School
Subject: History
Grade: 9-12



Janet Damon teaches history at DELTA High School and has taught in Denver Public Schools for more than 25 years as a history teacher, literacy interventionist, library specialist and trainer, and a K-12 school librarian.

Her lessons focus on inquiry, research, digital storytelling and culturally sustaining learning. Students create solutions to problems in the state and create podcasts to advocate for issues such as homelessness, gun violence, incarceration, inflation, immigration, racism, health disparities and drug addiction in Colorado.

Her organization, Afros and Books, supports equitable access to books in marginalized communities. Through family reading adventures in the Colorado outdoors, youth engage in hiking, kayaking, archery, yoga, fly-fishing and birding while receiving new books for summer reading. She is also a licensed yoga instructor who weaves mindfulness and meditation into her outreach with youth and families.

Damon has been awarded the Colorado Teacher of the Year 2025, CorePower Yoga Teacher Scholarship 2024, Extraordinary Teacher Award from Suntec Concrete in 2024, the African Americans Who Are Making a Difference Award in 2023, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Humanitarian Award in 2022, the inaugural Making our Futures Brighter Award in 2022, the Library Journal Mover and Shaker Award 2020, Facing History fellowship and Fund for Teachers fellowship. Damon earned her Bachelor of Arts in history from Metropolitan State University, master's degree in library and information science from the University of Denver and educational specialist's degree in leadership for educational organizations from the University of Colorado at Denver.

Application Questions

- 1. Describe a content lesson or unit that defines you as a teacher. How did you engage students of all backgrounds and abilities in the learning? Show how your deliberate instructional decisions create student learning and reveal your beliefs about teaching and learning.**

My school serves students who are off-track to graduate and have been unsuccessful at some of our traditional high schools. More than half of my students are immigrants coming from places such as Syria, Iraq, Rwanda, Honduras, Guatemala, Malaysia, Cuba, and Mexico. We also support students who have experienced challenges like homelessness, teen pregnancy, social anxiety, gang violence, and the loss of a parent or caregiver. As the only social studies teacher in my school, I might have students aged 14 to 19 in each class. I differentiate lessons across grade



levels, neurodiversity, and linguistic diversity. Their lived experiences are a tapestry, and they bring knowledge and wisdom that are different from some of the content of our textbooks and curricula. My goal is to create a classroom where all students are seen and heard in a safe space for them to share, explore, connect, and communicate with people from all backgrounds.

I teach Colorado history and we begin with the indigenous cultures of Colorado. I guide students in generating inquiry questions like, "What does indigenous mean? Who are they? Are they still in Colorado?" My students of indigenous ancestry asked, "Do people care about Native American struggles?" and "Why is blood quantum still used?" These questions are the engine of dynamic learning. We then put all our questions on poster paper and students began to research answers, engaging with complex readings that I chunked into smaller and more accessible passages for vocabulary development, analysis, critical thinking, and discussion.

Next, we created word walls with terms to support our multilingual learners and those with little background knowledge about U.S. history. We focused on major historical moments in Colorado's history alongside contemporary issues in our state like gun violence, car theft, drug use, incarceration, immigration, and income disparities. I created a circle space for students to gather for discussions and community building. Many of my students who speak other languages were hesitant to speak in whole groups, but as we discussed issues, they began to make connections. We were humanizing the learning and students began opening up about issues that are prevalent in their lives.

Most recently, gun violence brought us all together, as did the issue of mental health. When I asked how many of them knew someone who had died from gun violence everyone raised their hand. When I asked how many of them received mental health support all the hands went down. We learned that some cultures perceive mental health issues as being a "cursed family" and shunned anyone receiving mental health support. Others shared that they had inconsistent mental health support. As we spoke, I realized that students needed a space to talk about these issues and to share them with the broader Colorado community. I decided that podcasting could help them share research using a new district tool called Canva, students recorded interviews on their phones or using their Chromebooks.

Soon students were talking with everyone, they interviewed teachers, administration, community members, and their family members. They invited people into our classroom. One student brought his aunt, activist Donna Crisjohn, a member of the Sicangu and Diné tribe who served as co-chair of the Denver American Indian Commission to discuss Senate Bill 23-054 for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.



As students spoke up about these issues their advocacy resulted in interviews and articles on Colorado Public Radio. However, he was able to stand up for the issue and share his challenges as a Spanish speaker when only 5.5 percent of psychologists can provide services in Spanish. Afterward, Rossina called me and said, "My organization can offer free therapy to anyone at your school who needs it." I wept.

My student podcast project allowed students to uncover wisdom and knowledge in their own families. One student discovered that her family survived the Indian Residential Schools and another interviewed her family member about his history of incarceration. Both said their interviews were part of a healing process for them, just knowing their history allowed them to feel closer to their families' history and identity.

Through the power of using their voice, communicating in authentic ways, and advocating for themselves and others my students experience the healing that knowledge and advocacy can provide. One of our students nominated me for the Extraordinary Teacher Award from Suntec Concrete. When I won the award, I was given \$3,000 in podcasting equipment. I am now learning how to use soundboards and new microphones.

2. Describe a project or initiative you have been involved in that deliberately creates culture in your classroom or school. Describe how you build and use relationships to collaborate and to teach students of all backgrounds, abilities and identities. What is the status of the project today?

Since we are a small school, I can guide students through two projects that create culture in our classroom. Both projects focus on Colorado History and student leadership. In the first course, we focus on the diversity of Colorado by exploring how different groups came to Colorado and the challenges they experienced. Students research contemporary challenges and solutions to those challenges to create a podcast project. In the second course, students design the next ten years of their lives living in our state. They create a life map that includes post-secondary educational plans and research involving the cost of living (housing, transportation, insurance), creating a budget, and a presentation so they can talk about their future with confidence.

Both projects highlight students as creators of new knowledge through making connections, leading conversations, designing a learning product to share and sharing deeply personal stories with classmates generating empathy to broaden their circle of care. They also open a pathway for care to show up as advocacy, experience-sharing, and student-led lessons that build confidence and connection in the classroom.



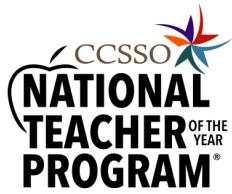
The projects have the capacity to bridge advocacy and healing because working at a pathway school where students are experiencing enormous challenges there must be opportunities to heal through telling their own stories. When one of my students found out her cousin was murdered by a caregiver, she was devastated. She was able to use this experience to design a project to raise awareness about child abuse and teach other in class how to advocate if they feel like a child is being abused. It was a powerful way for her to reclaim power and use her voice as an advocate and ally.

Another student whose family was living in a shelter used her project to challenge dehumanizing attitudes against those who are unhoused and used her podcast to speak about how increasing rents and a lack of affordable housing are impacting people in our city. She shared her own housing struggles and students related to the factors that led her family to be in a shelter as COVID impacted her caregivers ability to work and they soon lost their apartment. She told them that most Coloradoans don't have emergency savings to cover three to six months of living expenses if they lose their jobs.

These issues impact Coloradoans across identities and this can bring students together as they are all able to see the interconnected experiences across their cultures and identities. For example, as we were researching hate crimes in Colorado three students began to discuss how hate crimes are fueled by bias and racism. During our circle, my students from Rwanda, Myanmar, Palestine, and Israel discussed racial, ethnic, and religious violence.

The students spoke about peace and the importance of rejecting violence. The students led a circle discussion about the circle of human concern and ways that actions such as othering can lead to acts of violence and genocide. Having student leaders with lived experiences helped guide the students through the discussion with deep humanity and humility. My student from Rwanda said, "My parents hate to talk about it, they have scars like not just physical scars, like the scars from machetes but also emotional ones." These conversations the students engaged in gave me so much hope for a future where our identities, though different, do not override our humanity and capacity for collective care.

The second project, "My Colorado Journey", helps students to deepen their understanding and ownership of their future in Colorado. Students worked on in-depth surveys and tools to help them discover strengths and interests. Then they choose a potential career, research requirements such as degrees or licenses they will need, and then use the salary to help them create a detailed budget. These budgets helped students find an apartment, car, and estimate the costs of health insurance and taxes. Some students even used the websites and resources to



find jobs and set up real interviews during our class time. The students who are currently working as managers take the lead in the classroom to lead our lessons on how to have a successful interview and habits of great employees promoting student led learning. Some of our students have apartments and roommates and facilitate role-playing interviews for apartments and it's one of the highlights of the learning process.

These projects build a culture of self actualization, ownership, inclusion, student voice and leadership, and collective care as students embrace each other's stories, experiences, and humanity.

3. Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community. Show how these community connections dissolve classroom walls and are used to impact student learning and success.

During a time when social media technology creates a very thin and surface-level sense of connection, many students do not have the strong social connections that promote growth, resilience, and holistic well being. I began to see that my students carried many internal triggers, they were hypervigilant, and it impacted their ability to learn in the classroom. I was determined to create a healing centered classroom, which grew into a city wide program and a schoolwide opportunity for healing.

During Hispanic Heritage Month I created a project to research mental health disparities, community impacts, and we also invited Rossina Schroeer-Santiago, founder of Therapists of Color Collaborative, to discuss the lack of representation and diversity among therapists and the need for more therapists of color. As she began to listen to student experiences she paused, they spoke about street fights, robberies, car thefts, gun violence, incarceration of a parent, or experiences of their own with incarceration. All these adverse childhood experiences were impacting their mental health and many were struggling.

Over the course of the sessions we discovered that many of them had lost their mothers early in life. Others were being raised by grandparents and worried often about the health of their grandparents. Some of my students were living at shelters or in hotels and didn't know if they would still be housed when they left school. Others received phone calls that their parents or caregiver had contracted COVID and lost their job. The family needed the student to find immediate employment to bring home so they could keep their apartment.

Rossina soon saw that what began as class presentations needed to grow. We collaborated to



offer counseling sessions with therapists from backgrounds that mirrored our students' lived experiences. She provided our students with free therapy sessions to support our healing initiative. Students began learning mindfulness and breathing techniques to support them when they felt overwhelming anxiety or if there was ongoing housing insecurity at home. The impact was powerful as students became less reactive and began to emerge from their depression and grief. Students were able to do more in class because they were able to transform their trauma into resilience and strength.

As students began to experience the power of healing and resilience I began hosting nature experiences outdoors at Colorado State Parks. These were events that were open to school age students from K-12th grade. We worked to engage families in nature events and hosted yoga sessions with both English and Spanish speaking yoga teachers. Youth and their families began experiencing Colorado State Parks for the first time. They explored the forests and felt the deep sense of peace that nature can provide.

Michelle Seubert, Lead Park Ranger at Barr Lake (now Cherry Creek) gave our families memberships and families began to come often to watch our butterfly garden grow and to keep up their newfound archery skills. Teens posted pictures of themselves fishing and kayaking on the lake. The impact of these activities showed in the classroom as teens felt more connected to nature and to their own sense of well-being. Their confidence grew after experiences that challenged their fears like when we went ziplining through the mountains. Some youth swore they would never do such a thing until they watched a grandmother at sixty-five shout with joy as she soared down the treeline.

We have conducted twelve restoration projects to sustain and conserve nature. Youth have worked with Magda Garbowski, a plant ecologist and Ph.D student from Colorado State University to help us learn about plant ecology and sustainability. We joined Wildlands Restoration Volunteers for a project restoring areas and creating pollinator gardens at Barr Lake and Rocky Mountain Arsenal in our neighborhood. These projects impacted more than one hundred families that participated in our events and almost 400 youth as we shared more than 1,000 books, storytime sessions, outdoor events, and yoga with participants. I was also awarded a 200-hour yoga teacher scholarship and completed my yoga teaching certification this summer so that I can lead students through mindfulness flows in the classroom and in the outdoors.

The nature program has continued to grow and now our students have found jobs with conservation organizations after graduation. Two now work at the Highline Canal leading community engagement and another has decided to become a teacher and works at a local high school while she takes college classes.



4. Describe a time when you grew as a teacher leader and life-long learner as a result of being an advocate in your school, state or beyond. Describe your advocacy, how it helped you grow and how it impacted students.

I was sitting in the parking lot at King Soopers, a local grocery store, checking my shopping list when I received a call from a teacher. He was an African American music teacher at a local middle school and he had just moved to Denver from Maryland. He said, "Someone told me you are the one to call if you need help with sticky situations."

He was in distress, the issues at his school were eroding his mental health, his speech was rapid, breathless, and I could hear him holding back tears. I told him that I was very worried about him and that I would like to call a friend who is a therapist to talk with him immediately. I called my friend. That call was life saving. He wasn't the last call that I have received from a teacher contemplating suicide but he was the first to show me just how much our teachers are suffering.

While a classroom teacher I began the first Women of Colorado affinity group in Denver Public Schools in 2017 when teachers began reaching out to me for support. The goal was to promote the health and wellbeing of teachers while advocating for the professional development, training, and retention of women of color.

I began hosting monthly events and sending out a monthly newsletter that celebrated the lives of our teacher members. This included professional or academic achievements, as well as, life moments such as birthdays, new babies, promotions and cards for members who were ailing or suffered a recent loss. I worked to honor the humanity of our teachers and to ensure they feel seen by our collective community.

The affinity group was a safe and sacred space where teachers shared their joys and struggles but also created collective strength. I focused on the mental health and wellbeing of educators and partnered with organizations that resourced health and wellbeing. I offered free sessions in person and virtually with professional coaches, time management trainers, and mindfulness coaches. This was met with tremendous success as teachers expressed their gratitude and felt a return to balance.

The next step was networking opportunities. We gathered at social hours to enjoy mixers and soon more teachers were attending. Word spread to principals who began asking me to share positions at their schools, central administration asked me to share flyers and postings for



professional development, and colleges and universities asking to link our affinity groups. The impacts were tremendous as our groups began collaborating on programs for students.

For example, BIPOC youth were invited to attend a STEM summer camp at Metropolitan State University for 6th - 12th graders interested in ecology and technology. The camp cost \$3500 but our students received free tuition as a result of our partnership.

Another example of our impact was advocacy. When a school staff member felt that she was being excluded and targeted at work by microaggressions for more than three years and felt she had nowhere to turn. She contemplated leaving the profession and through our networking events she found colleagues that advocated for her and encouraged her to apply for a new role that would allow her gifts and talents to shine. By following their advice she was able to stay in the profession and continues to thrive to this day.

The power of the affinity group allowed teachers to be more resilient, feel more connected, and grow in their service to students and families. We welcomed members from colleges and universities, corporations such as DISH network, Denver Public Library, Jefferson County Library, and Arapahoe Libraries. Even the Aurora Public School system requested that their employees join our affinity group because they did not offer one.

The success of the group led me to receive one of my first scholarships to present at a national conference. I was invited to present a session on the power of affinity groups for employee well being at the Joint Conference for Librarians of Color (JCLC) in Phoenix, Arizona. It also led me to develop the ability to listen deeply to practitioners in the field and to create systems of support in partnership with community organizations.

Today the WoC Affinity Group continues to provide support for educators of color and while I have since passed the group to new leadership in 2022 the charter of the group remains to help and support educators throughout their journey.

5. As the National Teacher of the Year, serving as the ambassador of education for the United States, you have been asked to give a speech to a large audience of teachers. This speech is being recorded and will be shared broadly with a larger audience. What is your message? What is the talk you give? [You may indicate a specific audience. For example, a “back to school” talk.]

Don't Count Me Out: How to center and empower students as they turn challenge into transformation



Your greatest challenge is a chance for your greatest victory.

I know this because I have witnessed it time and time again, but I also know this firsthand. I was once a teen that people gave up on. People told me that I would never make it. They said, "You have made the biggest mistake of your life", and they meant it. I was a teen mom in the 1990's, deep in the most challenging time of my life and everyone from the grocery store teller to the RTD bus driver shook their head at me. They judged me, and they really wanted me to know how hard life was going to be for me and for my daughter. Those were some of the toughest days of my life, but when I looked at her little beautiful face, I knew I had to make it.

See, I hid my pregnancy for 9 months. I finished my basketball season four months pregnant and started my soccer season. My coach made me run extra laps because he wanted me to burn off my "winter weight" and I ran those laps. But I quit soon because I knew it was dangerous to my pregnancy, my coach shook his head and said, "Janet I'm so disappointed in you." I started missing assignments and teachers wanted me to get it together. But none of them knew I was carrying the heaviest burden of my life. Even teachers that I was close to had no idea. But that summer of my junior year I delivered a healthy baby girl.

Your greatest challenge is a chance for your greatest victory.

My parents told me, "You chose this wagon and now you are gonna have to pull it." Meaning they were not responsible for waking up to comfort a crying baby, I was. They were not responsible for paying for diapers, I was. So I got a job cleaning classrooms after school and a friend of the family offered to watch my daughter so that I could continue school. I was so blessed.

I was able to work off campus my senior year, and surprisingly, I was elected to serve on the Student Board of Education in Denver Public Schools by students and teachers. I was hired as a student intern in the Superintendent's office. I used the money to pay for diapers and formula. I caught buses and learned a lot of hard lessons, like how to get my first apartment, how to balance paying for gas with paying for groceries and let go of friends who wanted me to party instead of being a parent.

Your greatest challenge is a chance for your greatest victory.

I worked my way through college as a social justice organizer and met my husband of twenty-



seven years while at university. I went on to earn three degrees, have two more children, and was able to travel and live in Europe and Central America. Today my daughter is a special education teacher, married, and my first grandchild arrived this year.

I am so grateful for all the teachers, elders, and community members who never gave up on me. Who took every opportunity to encourage me during my struggles. Who didn't pity me but knew how to hold me accountable to doing the work and to reaching my own goals for myself. I am living the life I always dreamed of and the lessons I learned as a teen mom have never failed me. I learned, girl, you are gonna have to do the work because no one is going to do it for you. But always ask for help, pray often, and do your very best.

A lot of times we will encounter students who are in the midst of enormous challenges, and they might think their world is coming to an end because life is coming at them fast. They are dealing with challenges and trauma, gang violence, loss of homeland, moving to a new country, mourning the death of mom or dad, losing friends, losing identity, and some are even becoming a parent and caregivers in their teens. Working with youth is a sacred responsibility. We can help them see their greatest challenge can be a chance for their greatest victory. After all, we're working to ensure that they can be the heroes of their own stories.