

Rapping Kean University Professor Makes Algebra 'Contagious'

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Kean University adjunct professor Irisa Leverette of North Brunswick uses rap in the classroom to encourage her students and reduce "math anxiety."

Kean University adjunct professor Irisa Leverette with two Kean degrees to her credit (BS, 1996, management science and marketing, and MPA, 2000, public administration), helps her students learn algebra, encourages them to do homework, and reduces "math anxiety" by rapping in the classroom. One might say it is her own special version of a love song – representing a labor she loves, for students she loves, at an institution she loves.

"She'll be in the middle of a lesson, start free styling, drop the marker as if it's a mic, and then go right back to the lesson as if nothing happened," said Elijah Sherin, a freshman finance major. "She comes to every class excited to teach, so it makes us excited to come too."

Professor Leverette, a resident of North Brunswick, has been teaching to her own special beat at the university since 2005. "Teaching at Kean is personal for me. When I stepped on campus in the Spring of 1992 for a tour, the first thing I noticed was a cherry blossom tree. I had never seen one in "real life." To me it was a sign. Kean was already opening my mind to new things. No doubt, this was the school for me. Also, I loved that Kean was small, diverse and just beautiful. Everywhere I walked, flowers and trees surrounded me. It was different from other campuses she visited. But, the real cherries on top were affordability and location," she said.

"I rip classrooms like Drake RIP stages," Ms. Leverette says in one of her lyrics. *"I'mma make algebra and trig contagious."*

While Professor Leverette has done "a little rap here, a little rap there" since she was a teenager, this semester her rapping caught on in her MATH 1000 class, which is college algebra.

“Every Friday I’ll say a few sentences in rap, then I drop the mic. That lets them know I’m finished and it’s time to go. The students have gotten into it,” she said, adding that students have recorded her raps and posted them on social media.

Professor Leverette said that many students feel they can’t learn math. But she works to create a relaxed learning environment as she breaks down algebra into understandable concepts and comes up with ways to help individual students learn.

Several students said Professor Leverette’s approach helps them master the subject.

Prosper Nwankwo, a freshman architecture major from Trenton, said Professor Leverette keeps students focused. “I love coming to class because you can tell she loves her job,” he said.

College algebra is a math requirement for many students in various majors at Kean. Louis Beaugris, executive director of Kean’s School of Mathematical Sciences, said the University encourages professors to think beyond the whiteboard and slide presentation in their approach to teaching.

“At Kean, we expect our professors to innovate and engage students, to take the extra step to ensure our students learn,” he said. “Irisa Leverette does that.”

Ms. Leverette also uses technology in teaching. She posts math videos on her Facebook page, *ithinkalgebra*. The rapping prof plans to use social media further by creating a YouTube channel for *ithinkalgebra*. Her math videos have received close to 8,000 views on Facebook, and helped students in China, India, and elsewhere, as well as at Kean, she said.

“Social media is the ‘real world,’ and universities want students to have real-life experiences in the classroom,” she said. “Plus, students are so attached to their phones, it makes sense to utilize this technology in the classroom.”

And for good measure, she also uses her rap to remind students to continue learning at home.

“Don’t forget to study over the weekend,” Ms. Leverette raps. *“Let it sink in, marinate. See you on Monday. Don’t be late.”*

“When I am teaching, I see the students as part of my extended Kean family. They hold a special place in my heart because of the love I have for my alma mater. I want them to come to class to learn and have fun. I want them to know their classmates. Life is going to happen, why not add a few sprinkles of fun when you can. I know my students are the future of the University and the World. I want to make sure they have the tools to succeed as current students and after they cross this stage to the next one,” said the professor with a song – a rap song – in her heart.

ABOUT KEAN UNIVERSITY

Founded in 1855, Kean University has become one of the largest metropolitan institutions of higher education in the region, with a richly diverse student, faculty and staff population. Kean continues to play a key role in the training of teachers and is a hub of educational, technological and cultural enrichment serving more than 16,000 students. The University's five undergraduate colleges offer more than 50 undergraduate degrees over a full range of academic subjects. The Nathan Weiss Graduate College offers five doctoral degree programs and more than 60 options for graduate study leading to master's degrees, professional diplomas or certifications. With campuses in Union and Toms River, New Jersey, and Wenzhou, China, Kean University furthers its mission by providing an affordable and accessible world-class education. Visit www.kean.edu.