

Meet Michelle Colte, SLJ's 2014 School Librarian of the Year

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At the library at Hale Kula Elementary School in Wahiawa, Hawaii, third graders play Minecraft to learn about economics, fourth graders chat with a volcanologist through Google Hangouts, first graders learn how to code, and the sight of camouflage-clad soldiers perched on kid-size chairs reading picture books is not at all rare.

These are just a few examples of how librarian Michelle Colte's library reflects her own love of learning. "She believes that libraries as learning organizations have to involve community members who define the needs and shape the direction of the library," writes University of Hawaii at Manoa professor emerita Violet Harada about Colte. "She strives tirelessly to infuse learning that demands asking the why, how, and what if questions."

Hale Kula is located on the Schofield Barracks Army Installation in this suburb of Honolulu on the island of Oahu. Colte, the library media specialist, and her colleagues must meet the unique requirements of a school where 99 percent of students are military dependents. Her dedication to creating a feeling of *ohana* ("family" in Hawaiian), her creative programming, innovative use of technology, talent for collaboration, and passion for learning are why she is the winner of the inaugural *School Library Journal (SLJ)* School Librarian of the Year Award.

The School Librarian of the Year Award, which is sponsored by Scholastic Library Publishing (SLP), recognizes an accomplished K–12 library professional who is using 21st-century tools to engage students and promote multiple literacies. The two finalists, Andy Plemmons, a librarian at David C. Barrow Elementary School in Athens, Georgia, and Colleen Graves, a librarian at Lamar Middle School, in Flower Mound, Texas (see profiles on p. 34 and 36), each won \$500 in materials from SLP. Colte, whose application essay listed "The Top Ten Reasons I LOVE Being a Librarian," won \$2,500 worth of print and digital materials from SLP and a cash award of \$2,500.



Even though she has lived in Hawaii for 20 years, Colte still has a whisper of Wisconsin, her home state, in her voice. Her Twitter avatar shows a woman with a wide smile and a Dr. Seuss red-and-white striped Cat in the Hat topper pulled over dark blond hair. Judging by her tweets, it's safe to bet that her favorite punctuation mark is the exclamation point. Colte remembers her elementary school librarian fondly and speaks about her most cherished childhood book, E. L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (Atheneum, 1967), with the particular reverence of a bibliophile.

After graduating from St. Olaf College in Minnesota with a degree in English and a concentration in teaching, Colte took a job as a high school English teacher in Hawaii. Then came marriage, the birth of her son, enrollment in library school at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, the adoption of her two daughters, and, in December 2004, her MLIS degree. She began working in the 796-square-foot Hale Kula Library in September 2005.

A DARING EDUCATOR

The School Librarian of the Year Award is not the first recognition Colte has garnered. In May 2013, she was one of 50 educators worldwide chosen to attend a Google Teacher Academy in Sydney, Australia. That year, Colte was also selected to take part in the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Summer Teacher Institute. Colte says she was "shocked and surprised" when she found out about her latest honor, and made a point to mention several times that without the support of Hale Kula teachers, librarian assistant Janet Huszar, library clerk Amanda Pemberton, and principal Jan Iwase, she would not be able to accomplish anything.

Colte had to teach herself about the technology she now shares with students and colleagues. "I'm not tech-savvy at all," she says. "That was actually one of my biggest fears about going into the library." Approaching educators she doesn't know via Twitter or Google Plus to ask for guidance, tips, and insight still feels uncomfortable for Colte, a self-described introvert. However, she knows that in order to continue developing her professional knowledge, she must also continue to overcome reticence. "Most recently, I've been more daring, and I've asked folks, 'How did you do this? Can you help us?'" she says. "That's not my nature. I'm really shy."

Though initially resistant to changes Colte implemented, Hale Kula teachers and administrators embrace the technology she introduced. "Frankly, she pushes me out of my comfort zone and keeps me on my toes!" Iwase writes in a recommendation letter for Colte. "Our school has developed a reputation as forward-thinking and a true 21st-century school. That [wouldn't] be the case without Mrs. Colte's involvement and relentless energy and commitment to teaching and learning!"

THE POWER OF CODE

At present, Hale Kula has 920 students, but the school population can fluctuate widely as military families are assigned permanent housing. Kids can be at Hale Kula for as little as two weeks before moving to another school district, or they can stay for years. How do you help transient students, guardians at home, and deployed parents feel like they're a part of the library *ohana*?

Colte's solution includes providing play-centric and engaging programming, hosting family-friendly events (such as book fairs and research contests), and maintaining a library website that keeps deployed parents up to date on their children's activities. The site offers information about class projects, slide shows, research resources, photos, videos, and links to fifth graders' individual websites. "For most local students in Hawaii, their aunties and grandmas and grandpas can look on the refrigerator to see their work, or they can go to the play or the sporting event," says Colte. "For our families, the weekly website became that refrigerator work."

Colte, who is a former coordinator and vice president of programming for the Hawaii Association of School Librarians, believes she wouldn't be the librarian she is today if she hadn't had mentorship from Harada and librarian Karen Muronaga, another University of Hawaii faculty member. When she needs inspiration, Colte will take to Twitter, read education blogs, and virtually mingle with educators late into the night. She is constantly combing her community for ideas. "Each of my [own] kids is the kind of student that the traditional school doesn't address," she says. "That's really challenged me as a librarian, because I'm thinking, 'What can I be sure to do so I'm reaching each student at his or her strength?'"

Coding, Colte discovered, is an activity at which some students who struggle academically excel. In December 2013, she organized the participation of every Hale Kula student in Hour of Code, a global event in which newbies are introduced to computer science for one hour. Students' participation garnered a \$10,000 donation to Hale Kula from the educational nonprofit Code.org. "Coding is a language, and so I think it is one of the literacies," Colte says. "As an educator, my job is to promote digital literacy, informational literacy, and, of course, reading literacy." She runs a coding class for students third grade and up as well as a coding club.

Colte used the Code.org donation to purchase Chromebooks and Nexus 7 tablets. She is always looking for ways to supplement her \$10,000–\$25,000 annual budget, including entering contests, holding book fairs, and applying for grants. "I don't know if she sleeps or not," says Pemberton.

GLOBAL VISION

Hale Kula students participate in Poem in Your Pocket Day, Read Across America, the Global Read Aloud (in which kids worldwide read and discuss one book via social media), and several other reading-centric events. For last October's Global Cardboard Challenge,

during which children build constructions from cardboard and other recycled materials, students created items such as racecars and board games and soldier volunteers built an elaborate maze. “We have a lot of soldier support and we use it,” says Pemberton, whose seven- and ten-year-old daughters attend Hale Kula. “It’s really neat. [The soldiers] really like it.”

The library may sometimes sound more like a playground than a place to study, but the atmosphere exemplifies Colte’s belief in the importance of making time for play. She has plenty of other solid advice for recent MLIS graduates, including “Foster a growth mindset,” “Get involved with local and professional organizations,” and don’t worry about failure—that’s where the real learning begins.

Thanks to a \$26.6 million grant from the Department of Defense and \$6.6 million from the Hawaii State Department of Education, an overhaul by Architects Design partners Incorporated of Hale Kula’s facilities is underway. This past spring, Colte and her colleagues went through the library’s over 16,000 print titles, selected some for the temporary library space, and packed up the rest. Colte had significant input into the design of the new library/media/student center, which is scheduled to be completed by 2016.

“The greatest joy is seeing students when that light bulb goes off,” she says. “Seeing them empowered, seeing that they’ve learned something and they’re going to go help someone else.” Such moments are why Colte loves being a librarian. Such moments make her feel *laki*—lucky, indeed.