

FINDING HER CALLING CLOSE TO HOME: HOW AMERICORPS AND CEN HELPED ONE RURAL EDUCATOR LIVE HER DREAM

Gay Hibbitts, a proud Throckmorton High School graduate, was born and raised just two blocks from the school she now calls home as a teacher. After raising her three sons and caring for her parents through their battles with cancer, she felt a deep pull back to the classroom—but wasn't sure where to begin.

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That changed the day Kristina Gaspar, a local education leader, introduced her to **AmeriCorps' Teach Where It Matters** program—an initiative that partners with **Collegiate Edu-Nation** (CEN) to support aspiring rural educators in earning their degrees while gaining hands-on classroom experience.

“Kristina told me, ‘There's a program that would be wonderful for you. You have so much to give,’” she recalled. “Eventually, I started believing it myself.”

Now teaching 3rd- and 5th-grade social studies and 6th-grade technology, she's seeing the difference every day. Her sixth graders—who started the year typing with one finger—are now writing full paragraphs, creating slide presentations, and communicating online with confidence.

“They just finished a 20-slide project called If I Was,” she said proudly. “These are life and college skills they'll use forever.”



Through **Teach Where It Matters**, she's found not only professional growth but also a family of mentors and peers who walk alongside her. “My mentor, Amy Dick, checks on me every morning—asking if I'm okay or need anything,” she shared. “She helps with lesson plans, makes sure we're meeting standards, and keeps us from feeling overwhelmed. People like her—and CEN—don't walk behind you. They walk beside you.”

“PEOPLE LIKE HER—AND CEN—DON'T WALK BEHIND YOU. THEY WALK BESIDE YOU.”

The support has fueled her confidence as she approaches a major milestone: graduating from West Texas A&M University in May 2025. And she already knows what's next—continuing her journey at Throckmorton ISD, possibly expanding into Career Pathways, a program she's studying now and hopes to teach soon.

When asked what keeps her going, her answer is simple: “The kids.”

Her story is one of perseverance and heart—a reminder that it's never too late to follow a calling, especially when you have a community that believes in you.

“This was a dream. This was my passion,” she said. “And it's something I hope I can succeed at—and make a difference in somebody's life.”