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First love: Substitute teaching leads successful exec back to math and science

[Jeff Tickle \('90\)](#) talks from the Lowe's parking lot, avoiding the race traffic that descends on Bristol when a NASCAR race is on tap. He has just finished another week of teaching math at an alternative high school in his hometown and is working on his "honey-do" list for the weekend.

With a down-to-earth manner, Tickle talks about leaving an executive position with his family business, selling his import business, and becoming a teacher. Through his new vocation, he shares a passion for math and science.

Sharing a passion

"Science and math -- that's where as a nation we are lacking," he says. "We're becoming a service industry as a nation and we need more strong people with a math and science background to be a technology leader in the world."

When he was an executive in manufacturing, Tickle saw that there was a distinct shortage of good engineers, and now in the education field he sees few students genuinely excited about math or science.

Tickle is not one to just talk about this problem. He's attacking it on several levels. Along with teaching math, he also is spreading his passion through an endowment at JMU and a new science center in Bristol.

He recently pledged \$1 million to establish the Tickle Family Endowment for Science and Mathematics at JMU.

His goal is to further develop "an environment at James Madison University, where students pursue courses of study that will stimulate their knowledge of mathematics and science as well as deepen an appreciation of the fundamental importance of these disciplines in our society; and that will, ideally, lead to careers in these fields as K-12 teachers, college professors and professional scientists and mathematicians." He has left the specifics of how the school will use the money in the hands of the College of Science and Mathematics.

Tickle performed well in his own math classes at JMU, but graduated with a business degree. He says his time at Madison was one of the best of his life. "I always wanted to support my alma mater and as I've been able to become more financially secure I've been able to give a little bit," he says.

Mountain Empire Science Center

Along with money, he's giving time to his cause. He serves as the treasurer on the Board of Directors for what will be the Mountain Empire Science Center in Bristol. The center, which is currently in the development stages, is an off-shoot of the Science Center of Virginia. Tickle, who has a 7-year-old son of his own, hopes the Mountain Empire Science Center will give young people a chance to experience science on a whole new level.

"I'd rather do something that inspires me and that Science Center was a neat concept. I wanted to serve on that to help get it off the ground."

Before deciding to go on his own and run an import business, Tickle ran Strongwell, a family manufacturing facility in Minnesota that produced fiberglass products. When he sold that business to his partner, he was unsure what his next move should be. He started substitute teaching at his old high school because he had befriended a principal there, and he soon found a passion for the classroom.

"It's something I've always enjoyed," he says. "Even when I worked in other jobs, the thing I enjoyed most was training other people. I always felt I could do well at it."

A positive role model



Jeff Tickle ('90) establishes Tickle Family Endowment for Science and Mathematics

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Tickle went back to school and earned a teaching license. This year -- his first teaching full-time -- he taught in an alternative high school classroom. This environment allowed him more one-on-one time with students, but also challenged Jeff to motivate students who have had such behavior issues that they can no longer attend their regular high school. Though some students want to quit, Tickle believes there is hope.

"They've given up almost, but if we can be a positive role model, maybe we can influence them in some way."

Tickle isn't sure what the future may hold for him, but he is certain he wants to positively contribute to the lives of those around him.

"My only goals really are to be a good community citizen and do things to help my community, whether it be teaching or working with different agencies, providing jobs -- those are the only goals I have."