TEACHER OF THE YEAR

Resiliency key to Vail educator's journey to become Arizona Teacher of the Year

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When Lisa Scott needs to write something in front of her class, she doesn't type into a laptop that projects on a whiteboard. She taps an Apple Pencil, secured to her wrist with a Velcro cuff, on a touch-screen, and her handwriting appears instantly on the TV behind her.



Vail School District's Lisa Scott, a teacher at Esmond Station K-8 School, is the 2027 Arizona Teacher of the Year.

Grace Trejo

It's one of many small adjustments that have let Arizona's 2027 Teacher of the Year keep excelling at what she loves after sepsis cost both her hands and her feet.

“I'm excited to be a champion and advocate for public education in Arizona, because it's something that I believe in wholeheartedly,” she told the Star. “This is where my heart's at.”

Scott, 45, an eighth-grade science and social studies teacher at Esmond Station K-8 in the Vail Unified School District, woke up with a kidney stone the day after Christmas in 2022. She was sent home by the hospital to let it pass, but within 24 hours, she lost consciousness and went into septic shock.

“My husband was told my chances of survival at that point were slim to none,” she said. “But through medical interventions, fortunately, ... I was able to pull through the sepsis.”

She was given vasopressors, which constrict the blood vessels in the hands and feet and force blood to the torso to keep the organs alive, which ultimately led to tissue death in her hands and feet.

“So in May of 2023, once I was medically stable, I underwent amputations and became a quadruple amputee,” Scott said.

The 22-year educator took a year-and-a-half break from teaching at Esmond Station, where she’s been since 2020, to relearn how to “function as a human being,” she said.

“My principal was visiting me in the hospital (and) Mr. Carruth, the superintendent, visited us when I was at my mom's house after I'd gotten out of the hospital,” she said. Without them, she said she most likely wouldn’t have returned to the classroom.



Lisa Scott helps student Gabe Robles during a science lesson at Esmond Station K-8 School.
Grace Trejo

“My principal sat me down and was like ‘Listen, it doesn’t have to look exactly the way it did before’ ... and then my superintendent echoed the same thing,” she said. “I think the turning point for me was when he told me ‘We would make all the necessary accommodations for a student in your situation. Why wouldn’t we do the same thing for a teacher?’”

Scott returned to Esmond Station in July 2024, and in just two years, landed the title of Arizona’s Teacher of the Year.

After the medical crisis

“Who Lisa is as an educator prior to her medical emergency was absolutely worthy of Arizona Teacher of the Year,” Vail Superintendent John Carruth said. “Lisa's somebody that was put on this earth to work

with young people, and as she so eloquently states, teach them science, but also teach them to be great human beings."

Carruth said the first time he visited her family once she was out of the hospital was at her mom's house. When he walked into the house with Baggin's Gourmet sandwiches, he said he was struck by "how intense her medical condition was, and how close to death she was."

"I was struck by her conviction ... how much her purpose drove her to overcome the challenges that she had," he said. "When we have a mindset of serving our purpose, and we have a mindset that we're not going to be defined by our circumstances, what we can accomplish is limitless."



Vail educator Lisa Scott, 2027 Arizona Teacher of the Year, helps Esmond Station K-8 School students Grace Rivera, left, and Houston Peterson, right, with a science project.

Grace Trejo

Esmond Station Principal Lainie Kitzmiller said that once Scott began thinking about returning to teaching, they agreed to host a solar eclipse watch party on campus in April 2024, where Scott could talk to students about the science behind it.

"She didn't look like the same Lisa Scott who had blonde hair and was walking around," she said. As Scott explained to students how the shadow from the sun and moon was created, students "could be like, why don't you have arms, or what happened to your legs," Kitzmiller said.

"Having them then see her the following year, it was like, 'Oh, that's Miss Scott. I met her, and she told me about the eclipse,'" she said. "Kids are compassionate way more than we ever give them credit for."

When Scott returned to the classroom in July 2024, the district made adjustments to accommodate her needs: an iPad and Apple Pencil connected to a larger-than-normal TV rather than a laptop; black tape lines on the floor around tables so students knew to keep their items out of the way so she wouldn't trip or run something over in her power wheelchair; and a power-operated door.



Technology, like an Apple Pencil, secured to her wrist with a Velcro cuff helps Lisa Scott in the classroom. Grace Trejo

She also received a teacher in residence, a year-long person helping her with class activities who might not have an education degree, but wants to become a teacher. Her current teacher in residence, Andrea Andrews, was previously a special education paraprofessional with the school, but wants to be a special ed case manager.

“I think it really gives me room to get experience in another area,” Andrews said of her current position. “I’ve really enjoyed it so far.”

Principal Kitzmiller said that over the past two years, Scott has leaned into her disability in the classroom, even explaining the science behind it to her students and bringing in prosthetists to talk about their careers.

“Rather than shying away from it, she uses it as a learning platform,” she said.

The road to becoming Arizona's Teacher of the Year

Superintendent Carruth nominated Scott earlier this year. After the nomination, Scott filled out narrative-style responses to eight questions on topics ranging from initiatives she started at her school to draft speeches, made a two-minute video introducing herself, and secured multiple letters of recommendation.



Lisa Scott leads her students through a science lesson at Vail School District's Esmond Station K-8 School, 9400 South Atterbury Wash Way. Grace Trejo

"Once we made the top 10, we got notified we had to go up to Phoenix for an interview," Scott said. "You don't know what they're gonna ask. You have a time limit, and they really push you to see how you speak about the profession, and then they made their decision from there."

Scott was notified Friday, Aug. 7, that she was Arizona's Teacher of the Year. The following Monday, the staff at Esmond Station celebrated her by wearing University of Arizona gear, since she's an Arizona graduate, Eagles gear to represent her favorite football team, or the color orange for limb loss awareness.

"Our work is ensuring that the best in humanity outweighs the worst — and it is everyone's responsibility," Scott said in her acceptance speech, Vail posted on **Facebook**. "We must teach the students of Arizona how to develop into good humans and make them feel as valued and supported as my community and students have made me feel."

As part of the honor, Scott will receive "a $15,000 cash award, official recognition with a plaque and medal, and the opportunity to represent Arizona at the National Teacher of the Year Program. Additional experiences include training at Google, travel to Washington, D.C., International Space Camp in

Huntsville, Alabama, and national program induction events," according to the Arizona Educational Foundation.

She will also participate in a Fiesta Bowl Experience Package and parade, and be considered for an honorary doctorate from Northern Arizona University's College of Education.

Scott is Vail's first teacher of the year in 35 years.