

Volunteer Spotlight

An Interview with SPS Volunteer Flavia DeSousa and Educator Julie Sahlas

It didn't take long for Flavia DeSousa to find her niche again in Somerville. As a Winter Hill Community School and 2017 Somerville High School graduate, Flavia and her family had moved to Medford, but she missed the Somerville community she'd grown to love. A newcomer from Brazil at age five, Flavia and her family were closely connected with the Winter Hill school and Somerville community.

When we met in September 2019 at a volunteer orientation, Flavia was taking a semester off to work and help defray college costs. Flavia had just changed her major to Early Childhood Education at UMass Boston, and was wanting to gain more in-class experience during this hiatus. An eloquent, enthusiastic and thoughtful speaker, Flavia made an immediate impression among community attendees as she shared her positive experiences as a student in Somerville. Bilingual in Portuguese and English and proficient in Spanish, and intends to use her linguistic and interpersonal skills as a future educator, hopefully in the community she knows so well.

We spoke November 18 at the Winter Hill Community Innovation School, after Flavia had been serving every Monday with educators Julie Sahlas and Maureen Cronin, in addition to working as a nanny.

SPS Volunteer Coordinator Jen Capuano: Thank you for taking time out to reconnect. Volunteers come to our schools through different paths and interests. How did you learn about volunteering with Somerville Public Schools?

Volunteer Flavia DeSousa: I googled Volunteer Somerville and the SPS Volunteer webpage popped up so I self-registered. I live in Medford now but I figured I'd be okay to come back.

JC: Why did you want to return to Somerville and specifically your elementary school?

FD: I love Somerville and still feel really connected here. I ran into my former principal a little while ago (former WHCIS Principal Steve Tuccelli) and he remembered my name. This is like seven years later, and he knew me. That's what it was like here. They know who you are and remember you.

JC: That's very cool. What were your first impressions when you returned to your elementary school?

FD: I couldn't believe how different the school looked. The walls are now covered in Dr. Seuss quotes and art and lots of students' work. It's still the same school but now it's more interesting and vibrant. The new playground is amazing. It's not what we had, but we still had a lot of fun.

JC: What were your favorite subjects in elementary school?

FD: I loved science, writing and history. And I loved third grade.

JC: Why third grade?

FD: It was really fun and teachers were great. I had the same teachers I'm working with now. We did a lot of fun things and we had a smaller class with some of my closest friends.

Educator Julie Sahlas: I think we had just 10 students in Flavia's class that year. The students became tight-knit, they knew each other well and supported each other. The relationships I was able to build with each student and their families was incredible. You can't do that as well with a larger class.

JC: What do you think Flavia brings to your students?

JS: Our students know that Flavia went to Somerville High School and is now in college. They know that she was one of my students, so they're always asking her what she did in third grade and if she did the same things. They're making real connections to what they may see themselves doing in a few years.

FD: Third graders are kind of fearless and they'll ask just about anything.

JS: I'd love to tap into Flavia's language [Portuguese] skills more here, with parent/teacher conferences or meetings.

JC: What kinds of things do you do in class?

FD: I do whatever is needed—sometimes I grade papers, or organize or hang up students' work, circulate and answer questions during math or literacy blocks, or help students line up, tie shoe laces or help with coats. And Julie always has something I can do.

JS: It's wonderful having another consistent adult in the classroom, and someone I know well and trust completely. It doesn't take a lot of time to make sure she has something I or students could use help with.

JC: Do you want to share a favorite volunteer moment so far?

FD: I was invited to have lunch with teachers in the teachers' lounge. That was pretty amazing.

JS: Seeing her in the teachers' lounge, after having her as a student and now seeing her as a colleague.

Maureen Cronin (Grade 2 Educator): Flavia has been terrific. I've been meaning to email her because so much was accomplished during her time in my class. She has been so helpful and patient with the second graders, they love to see her enter the classroom. Instinctively, she notices who needs a little help and goes right to them. She was an exemplary second grader and is now an exemplary volunteer.

Educators Julie Sahlas and Maureen Cronin both responded within 24 hours of Flavia's volunteer referral, with an overwhelming YES to wanting Flavia to serve in their classrooms. Flavia splits her time between their classrooms. She is planning to continue to work part-time, and return as a full-time student in January to UMass Boston, Early Education major, and experienced community-builder.



*Third Grade Educator Julie Sahlas and Volunteer Flavia DeSousa
Winter Hill Community Innovation School*

Photo credit: Jen Capuano, SPS Volunteers, November 19, 2019.