



# Chess Educator of the Year

Elizabeth Spiegel is honored at The University of Texas at Dallas.

By **DR. ALEXEY ROOT, WIM**

**O**n February 26, 2019, Elizabeth Spiegel, a renowned chess coach and educator at New York City's Intermediate School 318 (I.S. 318), received the Chess Educator of the Year award from The University of Texas at Dallas (UT Dallas). This prestigious award is an integral part of ChessFest, organized each year by the UT Dallas chess program and the Eugene McDermott Library. With this award, presented by UT Dallas Dean of Libraries Ellen Safley, Elizabeth joins a distinguished group of honorees who have been recognized for their outstanding achievements as chess educators (see *Chess Educators sidebar*).

In 2012, the documentary film *Brooklyn Castle* and the book *How Children Succeed* highlighted some of the work that Elizabeth, a US Chess-rated expert, has done with her students. Elizabeth also wrote about chess in education for her 2007 thesis, *The Game of Kings?: Encouraging Middle-School Girls' Success and Involvement In Chess*.

## LECTURE ON BEST PRACTICES

Prior to receiving her award, Elizabeth gave a lecture to 72 people gathered in the fourth-floor suite of the Eugene McDermott Library. Her topic, "Best Practices for Parents: How to Help Your Child Succeed at Chess and How to Use Chess to Teach Life Lessons," touched on how kids can improve their game—what to spend time on, how to study openings, and what to look for in a teacher—as well as why chess is an effective teaching tool and how to support a child who is nervous or had a terrible tournament.

As part of the lecture, Elizabeth listed the accomplishments of the I.S. 318 chess team, where she began teaching in 1999 (see *timeline*). Since 1999, I.S. 318 has won eight National

Junior High School Championships, four National Elementary School Championships, 20 National Grade Championships, 11 National Girls' Championships, and is the only middle school ever to have won the National High School Championship. The other I.S. 318 chess coaches are International Master Alex Ostrovskiy and John Galvin, who is also the assistant principal and head of the chess program.

## Chess Educators

- 2019 Elizabeth Spiegel
- 2018 Jeff Bulington
- 2017 Andy Soltis
- 2016 Jim Eade
- 2015 Jerry Nash
- 2014 Elizabeth Tejada
- 2013 Katie Dellamaggiore
- 2012 Bruce Pandolfini
- 2011 Elizabeth Shaughnessy
- 2010 Jonathan Rowson
- 2009 Stephen Lipschultz
- 2008 Beatriz Marinello
- 2007 David MacEnulty
- 2006 Erik Anderson
- 2005 Sunil Weeramantry
- 2004 Susan Polgar

I.S. 318 students can choose to devote many hours to chess—up to 25 hours per week for some. Those hours include homework, after-school practices, and Saturday tournaments along with chess classes and lunchtime chess.

Elizabeth said one of her favorite job duties is analyzing a student's game with that student. She asks leading questions: Tell me about that move. Why did you go there? What move surprised you the most? Did you think you and

your opponent played [this part of the game, the opening, the attack, the endgame, the last few moves] well? What did you think your best move was? Show me the longest variation that you calculated. What did you think about here? What was your plan here?

Elizabeth also shared four steps for chess improvement. First, play frequently. Second, go over games, whether with your opponent, a coach, or an engine. Try to isolate specific takeaway lessons and address problems directly when stuck. Third, acquire a manageable yet comprehensive opening repertoire. Fourth, practice tactics.

## BEST GAME

Elizabeth also shared what she considers her best game: a 2007 win over Woman Grandmaster Camilla Baginskaite. "I miss playing in tournaments," she said, adding that she hopes to compete again, possibly alongside her two children if they show an interest in chess tournaments.

## BOGO-INDIAN (E11)

- WGM Camilla Baginskaite (2361)
- WFM Elizabeth Vicary (2157)
- 2007 Frank Berry USA Women's Champ. (7), Stillwater, Oklahoma, 07.19.2007

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nf3 Bb4+ 4. Bd2 Qe7 5. g3 Nc6 6. Bg2 Bxd2+ 7. Nbx2 O-O 8. O-O d6 9. e4 e5 10. d5 Nb8 11. Ne1 a5 12. Nd3 Na6 13. a3 Bg4 14. f3 Bd7 15. b4 c6 16. dxc6 bxc6 17. f4 Rab8 18. Rb1 axb4 19. axb4 Rb6 20. fxe5 dxe5 21. c5 Rxb4 22. Nxb4 Qxc5+ 23. Kh1 Nxb4 24. Qb3 Rb8 25. Qc4 Qd6 26. Qe2 c5 27. Nc4 Qe6 28. Rfc1 Bb5 29. Bf1 Nxe4 30. Qe3 Bc6 31. Bg2 f5 32. Nd2 f4 33. gxf4 exf4 34. Qe1 Ng3+ 35. hxg3 Qh3+, White resigned.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE EUGENE MC DERMOTT LIBRARY

## ADVOCATING FOR GIRLS

Elizabeth's 2007 thesis, submitted as part of her Master of Arts in English Education, was about chess in education. *The Game of Kings?: Encouraging Middle-School Girls' Success and Involvement In Chess* begins with this abstract:

*Chess has traditionally been a man's game. On every level, from the ranks of the world's elite players to the average school chess club, an overwhelming majority of players are male. This thesis tries to understand why this is and what can be done to increase the achievement and enjoyment levels of sixth-grade girls learning chess for the first time. Research on a wide range of related topics—cognitive sex differences, the social and educational difficulties faced by adolescent girls, the impact of gender on achievement in the upper echelons of science and math, and the ways beliefs about intelligence impact learning—is considered. Professional, semi-professional, and serious amateur women players are surveyed about their early experiences playing, their personal characteristics, and their beliefs about the game. This information is used to contextualize classroom research.*

*Five 16-week introductory chess classes are compared. In one the girls are given extra instruction; in two the practice sessions are made overtly more competitive; the final two are left unchanged. After nine weeks, students' enjoyment of chess, attitudes towards competition, mastery of the subject, and self-assessment of their ability in chess are measured and compared. I find that while additional instruction was most effective in increasing girls' enjoyment of chess, both genders demonstrated significantly higher subject mastery in classes with more competitive practice sessions. I conclude that the conventional belief that aversion to competition is a primary reason girls dislike chess is both untrue and flawed in its assumptions.*

## ADVICE FOR PARENTS

As a chess coach, Elizabeth has spent many years observing what parents of chess players should do to encourage their children. She suggests that parents:

- Show emotional support by focusing on how their child feels, not on the result of the game.
- Introduce the idea of judging results by something other than who won and who lost.
- Ask their child to show them the game and explain it, *even if they don't play chess.*
- Listen as the chess coach goes over their child's game.

During a chess game, do not fixate on the game's eventual outcome (win, loss, or draw).

Instead, Elizabeth says it's better to focus on alternative goals: Don't get in time trouble. Sit at the board and work hard the whole game. Predict your opponent's moves (don't be surprised by a move). Come up with a logical plan that fits the position. Play a creative or beautiful idea. Calculate accurately.

Moreover, even if a child has a terrible tournament, the parent should still make sure that, at some point, the games get analyzed. Even more important: the parent should normalize failure. Don't suggest a break from chess. Don't do anything that sends the message that your child is too fragile to handle this setback. Explain grit and recognize it in your child. Talk about how to harness the negative energy of shame and disappointment and change it into anger, determination, and energy for work.

For parents who are seeking coaching for their child, Elizabeth recommends finding someone who assigns homework, whose students' ratings are increasing, who asks for a student's games before the lesson (to provide targeted instruction for that student's strengths and weaknesses), who reviews previously-taught material, and who provides easy-to-understand reference sheets for openings.

She added, "Openings are important so you get the same positions over and over again and can then go deeper into those positions. Except for teaching the basic endgame checkmates, such as king and queen versus king, don't bother teaching endgames to children rated under 2000. Endgames are infrequent in my students' games. It's important that what you teach is seen by the child as useful. If you teach an opening that the kid is going to play, you can't get more motivating than that."

## BROOKLYN CASTLE AND ELIZABETH'S LEGACY

When *Brooklyn Castle* filmmaker Katie Dellamaggiore received her own Chess Educator of the Year award in 2013, she said that the "brilliant, brilliant" I.S. 318 teacher Elizabeth Spiegel was part of her chess education. By following Elizabeth's students for a year, Katie saw the benefits of chess for children firsthand. Katie recalled, "I saw kids who were excelling, becoming more confident, better thinkers, and more self-reflective."

Lisa Johnston and her son Patrick were featured in *Brooklyn Castle*. At the end of February 2019, Lisa wrote about their experiences with Elizabeth:

"Elizabeth was the one I.S. 318 teacher that Patrick had all three years and she really understood him. She not only taught him chess skills and knowledge, but taught him life lessons such as slowing down and thinking about your options and ideas, patience, winning and losing

# TIMELINE

**1975** Born July 8 in England, nee Elizabeth Zoe Vicary.

**1979** Learned chess at age four from her father.

**1987** At age 12, as a sixth grader in North Carolina, began rated tournament play.

**1993** Graduated from William G. Enloe High School, Raleigh, North Carolina.

**1997** Received Bachelor of Arts, English Literature, Columbia University, magna cum laude.

**1999** Began work with Chess in the Schools (New York City).

**1999-2007** Rotated daily among several schools. At first, one day per week at I.S. 318, then two days, then three days.

**2006-2007** Competed in the U.S. Women's Chess Championship two consecutive years.

**2007** Received Master of Arts in English Education, The City College of The City University of New York.

**2007** Left Chess in the Schools to become a full-time teacher at I.S. 318.

**2012** The film *Brooklyn Castle* and the book *How Children Succeed* were released.

**2012** I.S. 318 won the National High School (K-12) Championship.

**2019** Awarded Chess Educator of the Year by UT Dallas.

graciously, self-confidence, and looking at mistakes and learning from them in order to improve yourself. These things carried over into other subjects and into his life today.

"Elizabeth has a way of reaching her students with her patience and guidance. Elizabeth also has this exuberance that's hard to describe. She loves what she does! Patrick is currently serving in the United States Marine Corps overseas in Okinawa, Japan. He graduated I.S. 318 in June 2011 and graduated Neptune High School (New Jersey) in June 2015. Patrick is happily married to his high school sweetheart. He still uses the lessons he learned from Elizabeth in his everyday life. Elizabeth definitely helped shape Patrick into the man he is today." ♦