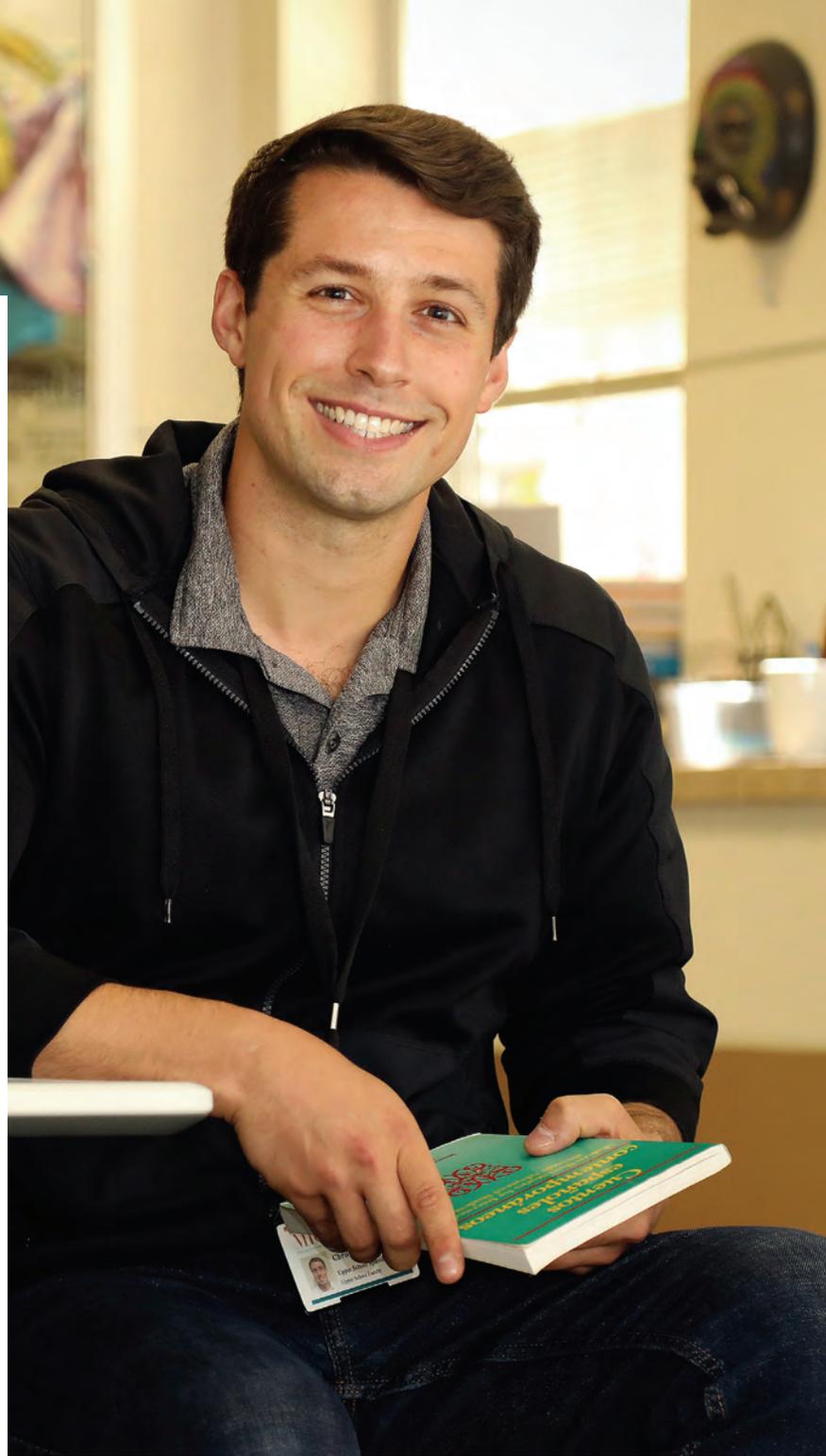


Experience Drives Everything

Upper School Spanish Teacher Christopher Barker intentionally incorporates a “jobs unit” into his full-immersion language classes. His students are always amazed at the variety of work he’s done over the years, and the unit capitalizes on their curiosity to foster questions and conversation. It’s a sneaky trick for a teacher and perfectly expresses Barker’s creative style. He strives to tap into the interests of his students and make learning the language fun while also incorporating serious themes along the way. His unique experiences motivate his philosophy of teaching. “There’s an expression in Spanish that experience drives everything,” he said. “It doesn’t matter how big or small, but experiences define what we truly learn and acquire over the course of our life.”



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Barker, born and raised in South City St. Louis and one of four children, grew up exposed to parts of the Hispanic culture (mainly food and music). His mother was born in Puerto Rico and taught English, and is now the Director of Education at the International Institute. He never dreamed he would follow in her footsteps. "I liked school more for the social aspect than anything else," he confessed. "I wanted to be a chef for a while, then a firefighter. Then I thought I could combine both and cook at a firehouse."

Instead, he studied history at Truman State University, enjoying a focus on non-western, Latin American studies. His final thesis explored immigrant populations living in Spain and how language is used around those populations. With a newly-minted history degree, he planned to buy a one-way ticket to Spain, find a job, and figure out what he wanted to do next. Instead, a friend called and invited him to interview for a music teacher position at the St. Louis Language Immersion School. Barker, honing his predilection for seizing unexpected opportunities, jumped at the chance.

While he didn't know much about music beyond taking piano lessons as a child, he tackled the challenge with gusto. He found a song he remembered and practiced it until he felt comfortable, rolling it out at an interview audition that included future MICDS colleague **Emily Coppersmith** (Middle School Spanish Teacher) on the interview panel. "I probably looked ridiculous," he said. "There was singing, dancing, and puppets." He must have done something right because the school hired him and launched him on a career path he never expected.

"Since I had lived in Spain and had been around the Spanish language most of my life, it was a cool opportunity," Barker said. He also enjoyed teaching in St. Louis City, a place where he feels most at home. He learned that being around children and making a difference in their lives was exciting. Soon, the school recruited him to expand his role, and within a year, he was also teaching physical education. "I have really fond memories of that first job," he said. "At that age, which was kindergarten through 5th grade when I left, they're excited about music and PE, being healthy, running, and playing

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games." Barker combined storytelling with body movement and incorporated exercise in gameplay. He also helped 2nd grade students as a teaching assistant and took on administrative duties. One of his best memories is of taking a group of 5th grade students to Puerto Rico.

"My responsibilities ran the gamut there. I like to work. Ever since I could ask for a job, I was asking for jobs," he said. He discovered at that first post-undergrad job that even though he had never planned on being a teacher, he loved it. He found that every day as an educator is interesting. After working desk jobs over the summers through college, he realized that he needs to be creative, and his mind requires stimulation. "Every day teaching, I get to be creative," he said. "An active mind is a sharp mind, and I try to keep mine active as much as possible."

He's been teaching for 11 years now, seven of them at MICDS. His favorite part of the day is in the five minutes before class starts. "As a language teacher, what I value is communication," Barker said. "Sometimes I don't necessarily care about their English and Spanish but I enjoy seeing students interacting." He admits that this part has been challenging during the pandemic and worries that students are not finding many opportunities to interact and enjoy interpersonal conversations. Listening to other people's stories is imperative to developing the ability to treat everyone with humility and tolerance, so Barker looks for ways

to take his students' attention away from their phones, computers, and other distractions, encouraging interaction with each other. He'll play an interesting song, for instance, and the students will engage and start talking about it. "It feels like a really fun, active party with no pressure and no grade; it's just doing what I think we are meant to do as humans, which is to find connections with each other, read body language, and engage," he said.

Sometimes Barker grabs their attention by sharing memories of one of the many jobs he's held. He has worked as an interpreter, a pizza parlor magician, and a dog walker, in a deli, in a book warehouse, and as an unpaid comedy show roadie for his older brother in Edinburgh, Scotland (he did get to crash with the other comedians at their rented flat). He challenges students to think independently, asking questions like, "Does our work define us, or do we define our work?" The conversation, in Spanish of course, is lively and interesting for students. "No matter what I do," he tells his students, "I find a way to enjoy it and be passionate about it."

His passion for teaching has grown since he first took a leap to try out the profession. He recently completed a master's in teaching Spanish and found that this time around he truly enjoyed being a student. "I was able to revisit those things I looked at before, and I'm fascinated by the language itself," he said. "I try to explain to my students how language is not static. The textbook makes it seem like it never changes, but Puerto Rican Spanish, for instance, is full of

slang that is impossible to keep up with. It's kind of like English. We laugh about it and have a good time. They can see that learning language is not simply memorizing one word and that's all you use. Each country has its own flavor of dialect they bring to the Spanish language."

While Spanish is his second language of choice, he doesn't necessarily feel that it's the best world language for MICDS students to learn. "Everyone should be learning another language," he said. "The world has opened up with each generation and there are opportunities, so learn and build on language." He recalls learning Russian in grade school and says that thanks to Spanish if he hears a song in French he can understand the main message. Learning one language opens up other languages, and language in general. It sparks connections on how things tie together and how things change. "I love talking linguistics with my students," he said. "Language is not static. It's dynamic and continues to change; it's cool."

He encourages his students to explore relevant issues and current initiatives through the framework of a foreign language, and he hopes to inspire them to continue pursuing their language after leaving MICDS. By sharing his passion for Spanish with students, he's helping them dip their toes into new cultures and new experiences.

Barker's own experiences continue to grow at MICDS. In addition to teaching Spanish in the Upper School, he serves as an advisor and coaches Middle School soccer (boys in the fall and girls in the spring). This allows him to engage with students of a variety of ages and in different settings. "Advisory is a big challenge right now," he admits. The limits of the pandemic mean losing an important part of connecting and hanging out, but he still works hard to forge connections. His openness encourages his students to share stories about their life experiences. "We live such busy lives and in close communities, we miss the opportunity to give people whose stories deserve to be told that space." He is proud that the students in the Barker Advisory always want to do more, and he wishes that this year, their senior year, he could have given them off-campus outings and experiences.

Spending time on the field with Middle School students is an entirely different encounter. "Middle school feels not as serious as high school. We don't care if we win or lose," he said. "I love when they're just having fun and being silly." When the class size doubles in 7th grade at MICDS, it's essential to make sure the new students become part of our community and that becomes easier

on the field, he says, especially in the first 10 minutes of practice when players are talking and engaging with each other in a silly, positive, friendly way.

He has managed to bring some of that irreverent Middle School sports spirit into his classroom by inventing Barker Ball, an active game that transforms his room into a playing field. His students and advisees love the game so much, they share it with their friends which results in students he's never taught or advised stopping by during free periods for a fun, quick game that isn't tied to a grade, reward, or recognition. The eponymous game is briefly on hiatus due to the pandemic, but Barker looks forward to opening his classroom for friendly competition again.

Barker comes back again and again to the one thing that makes the difference: experience. Whether he's taking students on a trip to watch their language level grow or creating space for students to relate in non-academic ways in the classroom or on the field, he's constantly seeking ways to help people connect with each other.

This philosophy extends to his own life, too. He lives "in the moment," recognizing the opportunities available even when sitting in a traffic jam. He loves to travel, typically revisiting favorite places for longer stretches to sink into the culture and community. He was elected president of the Puerto Rican Society in St. Louis, leading a board to connect with others of PR descent and raise funds for scholarships to local Latinx students. He works to keep a sharp mind by honing his skills and learning new ones. He keeps up to date with his magic tricks, which are mainly card tricks now, and he enjoys working on the home he recently purchased.

It's clear that whatever Christopher Barker decides to do, he does it with intention and a desire to glean every bit possible out of the experience. It's this delight—in language, in teaching, and in living—that makes him such a successful educator, although he would probably have been an excellent firehouse chef, too.



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**CHRISTOPHER BARKER,
UPPER SCHOOL SPANISH
TEACHER**