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### A celeb Zoom bomb, care of her students

By: Madhu Krishnamurthy



For a special “Best In Class Hour” on her show, actress and singer-songwriter Kelly Clarkson helps 17-year-old Paige Erath and her South Elgin High School classmates give their choir teacher, Amanda Brex-Castillo, left, the surprise of a lifetime Thursday.



Kelly Clarkson



Amanda Brex-Castillo

What was meant to be an interview about the challenges of teaching choir classes in a pandemic turned out to be Amanda Brex-Castillo’s national television debut with “American Idol” superstar Kelly Clarkson.

Brex-Castillo, choir director for **South Elgin High School** and **Kenyon Woods Middle School**, got the jaw-dropping surprise of her life when Clarkson Zoom-bombed a call with her students. Their interaction aired Thursday on “The Kelly Clarkson Show” as part of the “Best In Class Hour” teacher appreciation special.

“I literally was just, like, shocked,” Brex-Castillo said, and was touched by the way her students took the initiative to show their appreciation.

“One of the things I teach is gratitude, and it was really cool to see it come back to me.”

South Elgin High junior Paige Erath, 17, nominated Brex-Castillo for the honor. She and classmates arranged the surprise visit last month under the ruse that an NBC reporter was going to interview Brex-Castillo.

“She works very hard to make online choir feel just like regular choir, and one way she does this is by playing really fun music during our Zoom meetings,” Erath said in her nominating video. “She always goes the extra mile for the group but also for us as individuals. ... I also want her to know how much she is appreciated and that we see her hard work.”

Clarkson recognized Brex-Castillo and other teachers from across the country for their dedication during the most challenging year of their careers. She rewarded them with a OnePlus 8 smartphone to support their classroom work.

“You are the ones keeping our kids inspired and on track whether it’s in person or online,” said Clarkson, an actress and singer-songwriter. “Your work has never mattered more.”

Clarkson spoke about her own mom who was a teacher who “poured her heart and soul into her students while raising kids.”

“And it was tough,” Clarkson said. “I can’t imagine what a lot of you are going through right now.”

Brex-Castillo has been teaching online since the March COVID-19 lockdown.

Zoom calls make it hard for all 85 of her students to be singing at the same time.

“I call it the Amanda Brex-Castillo live show,” she said. “The students think I should have my own ... YouTube channel because I’m hilarious.

“It’s been challenging. It’s a lot of me singing instead of them. And I’m just doing my best to stay positive ... and keep them motivated or at least make them smile if they haven’t all day, with a little bit of music thrown in.”

Brex-Castillo said having a pre-pandemic relationship with most of her students made the transition to online learning easier.

Her students typically stay on camera for the entire 40-minute class, so she knows they are engaged.

“I feel very lucky because I know there are many teachers right now teaching to black boxes,” she said. “They (her students) tell me that this is their favorite part of the day ... but I think pandemic-wise some of them are really struggling.

“This is a coping mechanism for them and many of them tell me that. This is a way for people to really express themselves and music changes lives.”