

## Faculty Spotlight with Dr. Anita White:

We had the chance to catch up with Dr. Anita White, PROMISE Program Director and Science faculty member at IMSA. As the director of the PROMISE program, Dr. White oversees all programs associated with PROMISE. This includes the Leading Students to Success program, which is offered to seventh and eighth graders. Another component of the program includes the Early Involvement program being offered to ninth graders. Both of these programs meet on Saturdays beginning in October and concluding in January. In addition, Dr. White oversees the SEAMS program, which is the third major program associated with PROMISE. SEAMS is a program offered to rising high school freshmen. This program meets for ten days over the summer and is a residential program. All of the components of the PROMISE program aim to offer activities and instruction in math and science. English and an SAT prep course has been added to the SEAMS program to assist prospective students applying to IMSA. These programs also focus on developing leadership skills in the students they serve. The other hat Dr. White wears includes her role as a science faculty member at IMSA. Dr. White is currently in her 12<sup>th</sup> year at IMSA after coming to IMSA in 2008. Primarily, Dr. White teaches Organic Chemistry. Orgo 1 in the Fall and Orgo 2 in the Spring. Check out her interview.

**Q.** Can you tell the alumni a little bit about your background?

**A.** "I obtained a bachelor's degree in Chemistry from Lincoln University, a Historically Black College in Pennsylvania. In addition, I earned a Ph.D. in Chemistry from the University of Illinois. I also have a specialty in Biochemistry. Upon completion of my Ph.D., I worked for Searle, a pharmaceutical company, as an Analytical/Insilico Toxicologist. During my tenure, Searle became Monsanto followed by Pharmacia before becoming Pfizer. After the birth of my youngest child, who is now a student at IMSA, I took up a suggestion from my husband to become an educator and I have not regretted my decision to change careers. In fact, the career change led me to the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. I love to tell the story of how I arrived at IMSA. While I was searching for full-time work on Career Builder, I noticed an employment opportunity listing for the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. Prior to seeing this listing, I had never heard of IMSA. The listing stated that IMSA was a residential high school for gifted and talented students. I was intrigued by the listing and noted that the listing stated the position did not require a teaching certificate. I thought the listing was too good to be true so I decided to call and ended up speaking with Steve Zant. I asked Steve if the listing was true. Steve confirmed it was true and I, immediately, began telling Steve about myself. I, sort of, started the interview process without even being offered an official interview yet. I was, then, offered a phone interview followed by an on campus interview. While I was writing the thank you cards for my interview the following day after the on campus interview, I received a call from Steve offering me the teaching position I applied to. I started teaching at IMSA shortly thereafter and have not regretted the decision to come to IMSA. I absolutely enjoy working with the students and have had a great experience here."

**Q.** What is your favorite IMSA memory?

**A.** "I don't have a single favorite IMSA memory. I have multiple that typically involve the students. Those memories include when I wrote letters of recommendations for students applying for a scholarship and those students notifying me that they obtained those scholarships. Another favorite memory took place about two years ago when all four of the commencement speakers at IMSA's graduation were students of color. In addition, when Dr. Bob Hernandez approached me about leading the PROMISE program, a position that did not exist prior to my arrival, I was excited at the opportunity and it became one of my favorite memories along with being recognized as one of the top 100 most inspirational women in STEM. Finally, one of the most prominent favorite IMSA memories includes me seeing many of the kids I have worked with over the years walk across the stage at graduation to receive their diploma. "

**Q.** What is your biggest motivation?

**A.** “My biggest motivation and drive includes the students. Seeing their faces light up when things are going right or when they did well on a test is motivating. Despite having tough course loads, I listen to them having fun in the HUB right outside of my office knowing what I’m doing has very tangible results. In industry, there is a great paycheck, but you don’t get to see the fruits of your labor. Here I get to see the fruits of the labor. Kids come back all the time to see me. They send emails telling me that they are who they are, partially, because of something I’ve done or said to them really made an impact.”

**Q.** What are some of the biggest challenges you face?

**A.** “One of the biggest challenges for me prior to my arrival at IMSA included being an African American Woman with a Ph.D. and not seeing a lot of individuals that look like me. Building relationships became a bit of a challenge. You don’t always have someone to bounce ideas off of. At IMSA, My biggest challenge includes not having enough hours in the day to get everything done. You know what you’re doing is making a difference, so you want to do as much as you can, especially when it’s directly impacting your students. My challenge includes not putting in too many 60-hour work weeks.

**Q.** What is your personal vision for STEM?

**A.** “My personal vision for STEM is to increase the number of minority and CLED students in STEM. I have a personal goal to increase the number of students applying to the PROMISE program and getting accepted to IMSA along with increasing the number of CLED students who graduate from IMSA. I would like to find ways to make the experience of students of color more of what they expected it to be when they came here. We know there are students here who feel unsafe and don’t feel as though they are treated equally. I would like to get to a point where an equity and excellence policy isn’t even needed, but consider it a long-term goal. I would like to help continue to push IMSA forward to being recognized by the world as a leader in equity and excellence, not only in STEM, but in everything. Similar to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I dream of a world where individuals are not judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character and that we have equity and excellence throughout the world.

Finally, Dr. White left a note of advice for the alumni of IMSA.

“Never let anything stop you from your dream. If you can dream it, you can create it. Realize that sometimes the road to accomplishing that dream may not be smooth, but that is not a sign that it is time to give up. The average time to get a Ph.D. is 4.5-5 years. I was in grad school for 7 years. While I was in there, I got married and had one child while pregnant with my second. I, kind of, took a winding road but I never believed that I would not achieve my goal. Don’t give up. Don’t be afraid to hit that bump, to hit that curb. It really matters where your heart is. Keep believing that it’s going to happen but it may not happen on your timing. Finally, don’t forget where you came from. Reach back and help someone. Nobody ever does it by themselves. We are trying to develop the PEEP program and I can see alumni playing a key role in the development, serving as contacts for students to reach out to and just to get encouragement from to keep them going.”