

Olivia Johnson  
MC 2011.1  
11/12/22  
Feature final draft

LSU Manship teaching assistant loves playing Taylor Swift, making class meaningful

A roaring crowd of students. Music. Lights up. A star is born.

LSU Manship School of Mass Communication doctorate student and teaching assistant Kyle Stanley, 25, has become the star of a 700-student Introduction to Mass Media course. Every morning, he flashes a smile and turns on his music, inspiring students along the way. He's won the hearts of students with his love for American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift.

"I'm a really big fan of Taylor's lyricism," Stanley says, "and I think you can always find a way to connect with her music whether the songs are directly about a situation in your life or not. She writes in such a way that you can find connections with even in the most obscure way."

Swift is known for her narrative storytelling and carefully crafted lyrics that have inspired Stanley throughout his life. Her songs carry love, growth and maturity themes that have had new meanings as Stanley has grown up. Stanley said he was hooked on Swift's music after his high school girlfriend took him to one of her concerts.

He's been a faithful listener of her music ever since.

Beyond Swift's impact on his life, Stanley plays her music in the classroom to create a more energetic spirit and encourage students, as most are navigating their first semester of college.

"Music has a way of making a connection with people without even having to say a word, and I think that for me to showcase emotion that I can't say," Stanley says.

"It's a way of allowing other people to find meaning in their life. It's just a way of revitalizing a part of your life that may have been dormant or energizing yourself in ways that you couldn't have otherwise. It's a great way of showing connection."

For college students, he would recommend the song "15" by Swift. In his experience, it can help first-year students establish who they are going to be outside of the high school world and the people who can help along the way.

This semester, Stanley has learned a lot from LSU Assistant Professor Will T. Mari, Ph.D., 37, instructor for the Introduction to Mass Media course. Stanley and Mari met spontaneously at the International Communication Association conference in Paris, France, in the summer of 2022.

After they met, Stanley asked Mari about the TA position for his class. Stanley got his first taste of fame, and Mari was starstruck.

"I think Kyle is an example of someone who is good at taking care of himself and taking care of other people," Mari says, "and I think he's a person that students can look up to as a role

model for how to do academic life. He shows up and is engaged. He also knows his limits and when to ask for assistance from other people. I think he's very wise in that way."

Even though playing Swift's music before class isn't a part of his job description, Stanley constantly strives to go above and beyond as a TA. He recognizes his responsibilities, but he values the relationships that he has with his students more than anything.

"For me personally, I think you all chose to come to college for a particular reason," Stanley says, "and it wouldn't benefit you guys for us to come into class and not engage with you. I think you guys don't deserve to be lectured at. You deserve to be lectured along with."

Stanley says that, statistically, students are most likely to drop out of college between their first and second years. He believes that all students should know they are valued and heard in the classroom and in life. Coming into a class with over 700 people can be intimidating, but a friendly face and familiar music make all the difference.

Behind the curtain, Stanley operates the daunting class email, where he responds to all students, no matter how mundane the question. He also ensures that the 50 students who need accommodations and notes from class receive them. Mari says that he never loses his temper or gets impatient with them.

"He's behaving like an experienced faculty member versus a graduate student, where I usually have to do a lot of those teaching things," Mari says. "It feels like he's well-suited for this job."

As he smiles and waves to his adoring students, he also carries a lot of responsibility that he says can sometimes be overwhelming. One of the biggest challenges that he's encountered is having to be constantly available for his students even as he navigates his schoolwork and research with the Manship School.

It's been a struggle for him to find a balance between taking care of himself, being flexible and fulfilling his duties as a TA. Despite the roadblocks, Stanley says teaching this has been an enriching experience. This class has been his favorite.

Stanley loves every second of his stardom but knows he's here to make the students' experience the best possible.

"My teaching methods and the way in which I engage with my students, it's primarily to benefit them, not to benefit me," Stanley said.

"I know how to navigate a college classroom, but it's more to make my students feel comfortable and make them know that they have a safe space in their classroom and with me. I'm an advocate for all students, and whether that be playing music in class, going around class talking to 700 students, I'm here to be a better person for my students."

###