

How Perseverance Helped Zora Bikangaga Find a Role in an Independent School

CANDIDATE PROFILE

Zora Bikangaga

Campbell Hall, North Hollywood, CA

18 Month Job Search

JOB SEARCH ADVICE

Meet as many schools as you can through CalWest and their Connection Events.

Learn what kind of environment will work for your particular personality and where you can be true to yourself. Finding the right school to teach in is like dating.



“It was really eye opening – the whole job search. I appreciated the professionalism and the proactiveness of CalWest. All my interactions at all the Connection Events were really wonderful. I really did appreciate the whole search process on their end.”

Zora Bikangaga

After majoring in History at Seattle Pacific University in Washington State, Zora Bikangaga originally planned to go right into teaching after finishing school. However, he fell in love with theater and decided to pursue it full time after graduating. Working with a traveling educational theater company for a year made him curious about working in TV and film. He moved to Los Angeles and became involved in improvisational comedy and filming.

Even though acting was enjoyable, Zora still had the desire to teach. His journey to become an educator had a few twists and turns, similar to a Hollywood movie.

Paying His Dues in the Classroom

While acting in Los Angeles, Zora began working as a substitute teacher for an employment agency that sent him to schools all over the area. He gained experience working in public, charter, inner city and independent schools.

He began substituting regularly at Polytechnic School in Pasadena. At first, Zora worked there because he sought a flexible position to give him time to continue acting in commercials

on the side. The school was very accommodating because they didn't require a 30-day teaching credential to sub there. He soon discovered his students there were eager to learn and he enjoyed the supportive environment of an independent school. Someone at the school suggested he apply for Polytechnic's one-year fellowship program. Zora applied and was accepted.

Zora's fellowship with Polytechnic School gave him initial training for a career in education. Due to a very low turnover rate, open teaching positions at Polytechnic School were rare. The program personnel were committed to helping him find a job at another independent school so they introduced him to the concept of working with a search firm. Zora explains, "Polytechnic guides you in the search process and one of the things involves connecting you with CalWest and another firm on the East Coast. CalWest seemed to be the stronger connection. People here tend to stay in southern California and on the West Coast."

Schools Differ on a Past Experience

Zora attended every Connection Event with CalWest and was impressed with how the Recruiting Advisors kept up with him. Every time there was a new

event or an opportunity to meet new schools, someone from CalWest contacted him. "I appreciated how helpful they were as opposed to other search firms. I really enjoyed the people who were on the ground level at CalWest helping." Zora followed all the right steps and in late spring he was able to get an interview with a school in Los Angeles that he thought was interested in hiring him.

After an on-campus interview with the school that went very well, Zora hoped the job would be his. Unfortunately, something unexpected happened to change their mind. "They ended up vetting me online and it wasn't Facebook that they had a problem with or Twitter or anything like that, but they found a sketch comedy video I acted in that was controversial in its subject matter because it focused on race relations. We were a comedy group so we pushed the boundaries." The video was posted online two years before Zora's interview and his name wasn't even in the credits. Nonetheless, Zora was not offered a position, perhaps because the school did not want to be associated with the kind of humor expressed in the video.

Zora felt that even though the school seemed to be a good match at first, the fact that they changed their view of him from seeing his interests outside of teaching made it clear it was not the right place for him. He enjoyed acting and performing comedy about powerful issues in society that impact people of color. He planned to continue to do so.

He refined his search efforts to seek out a school that would be comfortable with his pursuits outside of work. The people at Polytechnic School did not have any issues with his extracurricular pursuits and he continued with them as a long-term substitute after his fellowship year.

Perseverance Pays Off

Thinking about his next steps, Zora was fine with continuing to work at Polytechnic as a substitute until a teaching position opened up there. He stopped attending Connection Events and was rethinking his decision to work in independent schools. He was disillusioned with the job search after his interview experience and unsure of how many schools truly desired to hire diverse faculty. "I did notice that many of the schools with whom I met touted their

focus on diversity, but I did not see it practiced in the make up of their faculty and administration."

When the next hiring season began a year later, CalWest encouraged Zora to continue his search. They advised him to stay open to new possibilities and that finding the right school can take more than one year. Not far into the season, he received a call from CalWest telling him that Campbell Hall in North Hollywood was interested in interviewing him.

Zora was familiar with the school, "I'd met with Campbell Hall the year before but nothing really panned out because they didn't have a job opening. But I did click with them during one of the Connection Events in San Francisco [the year before]. Now they had a job opening and re-approached me and requested an interview." This often happens with schools that have an interest in a candidate but no open positions at the time. Campbell Hall remembered Zora and made sure to talk to CalWest so they could reconnect with him.

"I did click with them during one of the Connection Events in San Francisco...They had a job opening and they essentially re-approached me and requested an interview."

Zora Bikangaga

His interview process was a success and Campbell Hall hired Zora as a 7th grade U.S. History teacher. The school supports creativity and the arts and was open to his interest in acting and sketch comedy. He is now able to teach in a place that values having a diverse faculty and a collaborative working environment. Even the families at his new school value his interests, "A lot of the parents at Campbell Hall are creatives, whether they're actors or writers or they work in the entertainment industry. So, it's a good fit culture wise. If you fit into the general culture of the school I think that helps."

After attending Connection Events, meeting with schools and getting close to being hired for a position, Zora persevered and found the school that was right for him. Now he knows that it's possible to teach and bring his authentic self to the classroom while enjoying the experience of working in an independent school.