

Apple-winning teacher is homegrown

EDUCATED, EDUCATING LOCALLY



John F. Kennedy Middle School eighth-grade teacher Holly Bontkowski (right) is hugged by her friend Kimberly Perona on Tuesday morning in Bolingbrook after Bontkowski won the Golden Apple Award. (STEVEN BUYANSKY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

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By Patrick Ferrell pferrell@scn1.com

PLAINFIELD -- Holly Bontkowski was using fruit to teach poetry to her eighth-grade students when her husband and two children walked in with a basket overflowing with apples.

"It was kind of ironic because we were using fruit and they walked in with a basket of apples," said Bontkowski, a language arts teacher at John F. Kennedy Middle School.

Bontkowski's fruit taught "imagery and sensory poetry." Her husband, Rick, and the couple's children used apples to send a message: Bontkowski was named a Golden Apple Award winner for 2008.

"It's been quite a whirlwind day," the teacher of 15 years said. Bontkowski -- an alumni of Plainfield School District and graduate of the University of St. Francis -- was not told she won the award until Tuesday morning. "It's just so surprising."

Bontkowski was nominated by Nancy Voise, the principal at the school at 12350 S. Essington Road. Voise said Bontkowski emerged as a leader from the moment the new school first opened in August.

"Right away, Holly stood out as far as the things she did in and out of the classroom," Voise said. "She is so humble, too. Nobody would know the things she is doing; she is not one to toot her own horn."

Voise said Bontkowski agreed to mentor new staff and, as a member of the state's ISAT writing team, provided workshops to other teachers on how to better prepare students for the state test.

"Education is absolutely my passion," she said of winning the award. "For me, I can't even describe it. It's an incredible honor. Teachers who have won this award in the past are just incredible."

About 850 teachers of grades 4-8 from Cook, Lake, Kane, DuPage and Will counties were nominated for the award. Thirty finalists were named in March. Members of the Golden Apple Foundation conducted site visits and interviewed the principals of all finalists. Ten winners were selected, and they will be honored at a banquet in September.

Each winner will also receive a tuition-free fall-term sabbatical at Northwestern University, a personal computer, \$3,000, and membership in the Golden Apple Academy.

Bontkowski said she plans to study as much as possible at Northwestern, focusing on issues such as technology and changing learning styles.

"With all the technology out there, students' brains are changing, and we need to change the way we reach them," she said.