



Teacher Brooke Tippet Thompson (left) is swarmed by her students after receiving the Golden Apple award Tuesday morning; Donnell White (right) smiles after learning that he won. (Sun-Times)

## 2 teachers at W. Side school win 'Oscars'

**GOLDEN APPLE AWARDS | 'Felt like deja vu' at Clark Magnet, 6 others also recognized**

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BY [RUMMANA HUSSAIN](#) Staff Reporter [rhussain@suntimes.com](mailto:rhussain@suntimes.com)

Sometimes on a hot summer day Donnell White would drive up to his elementary school alma mater and cry.

The veteran mail handler was distraught because he had yet to pursue his lifelong dream to teach in his native Austin neighborhood, where he admittedly had been more of a class clown than a straight-A scholar.

After 23 years at the U.S. Postal Service, White, at his wife's urging, went back to school.

"I don't have to cry anymore," White said Tuesday, smiling after he was surprised with the prestigious Golden Apple Award at Clark Magnet High School, 5101 W. Harrison, where he landed his first teaching job in 2002, at the age of 46.

Clark, which serves sixth- to 12th-grade students, is just across the street from May Academy, the school White stared at while shedding tears years earlier.

"Being a teacher is not even a job. This is the most fun thing I get to do," the math teacher, now 52, said, flanked by his family and the wildly applauding class White described as a "smarter, sharper version of me."

"I was born to do this."

Minutes earlier, White's colleague at Clark, Samina Khan, was also given a Golden Apple Award for excellence in teaching, along with colorful mylar balloons and a bag of apples.

The daughter of Indian educators, Khan was born halfway around the world in Ethiopia and raised in Nigeria. An emotional Khan said teaching was in her genes and that she had always wanted to work with students who looked like her African friends "back home."

"Teachers think of it as winning an Oscar. For me, it's winning the Nobel Prize," said Khan, who is in her late 20s. Students said the science teacher, who immediately called her parents overseas to tell them the good news, was both a mentor and a mother.

"She humbles us, so we can be better people," seventh-grader Tiara Hobson said.

"I don't like her. I love her," Simone Thomas added.

Although two teachers from the same school have received a Golden Apple in the same year before, it is a rare occurrence, Golden Apple Foundation officials said.

As 13-year-old Clark student Darius Devone summed up the awards to both White and Khan: "It felt like *deja vu*."

Six other Chicago area teachers were also named Golden Apple recipients Tuesday, including Natalie Neris-Guereca from Pershing West Magnet; Monica Gil from Gray Elementary; John Nieciak from Sheridan Math & Science Academy; Holly Bontkowski from Kennedy Middle School in Plainfield and Nancy Kontney from Carpentersville. Mayor Daley personally presented Peirce School of International Studies music teacher Brooke Thompson her award Tuesday.

"Every child has music within them. . . . Not every child is going to be able to sing. Not every child is going to be able to play an instrument or dance like these dancers here. But every child has it within them to create something musical," Thompson said.

Two other area Golden Apple winners are expected to be announced today.

All 10 winners, selected from among 850 nominees, will receive \$3,000, a tuition-free spring term sabbatical at Northwestern University and a computer.

**Contributing:** *Fran Spielman*