

## A Golden Apple

### Megan Burns' teaching methods have attracted attention

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BY CARLY A. MULLADY staff writer

"All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up."

Pablo Picasso's words inspire 2008 Golden Apple finalist Megan Burns, a teacher at Gallistel Language Academy and resident of Chicago's Beverly community.



Megan Burns, of Chicago's Beverly community, is a fifth-grade teacher at Gallistel Language Academy in Chicago and a Golden Apple finalist.  
(Carol Dorsett/SouthtownStar)

Burns said her father followed Picasso's inspiration as an art teacher, and she brings that concept into her fifth-grade teaching philosophy.

She teaches at a school that's 185 percent over capacity with a 95 percent low-income, predominantly Hispanic student body.

"They are the most amazing, adorable little human beings you'd ever want to meet," Burns said of her past and present classes. "They are very, very bright."

Many of them are so distracted by gangs, violence, poverty, immigration issues and the lack of English language backgrounds."

She volunteers an hour before school working with her students on target areas that need growth and providing a safe place for them to be.

"I love my job. I love my kids. Aside from my nuclear family, these are the most important people in my life," Burns said.

She's in her fifth year teaching and said she is shocked and honored to be a finalist for the Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Each year, 10 teachers are selected for reflecting the highest standards and practices of teaching, promoting high standards for themselves and their students and creating a learning-conducive classroom environment.

These teachers must show creativity, commitment to students and learning and contribute to the wider school community.

Before those qualities got her noticed as a teacher, Burns spent 18 years as a professional actress, performing a few years with Second City, and eventually leaving the field to start a family.

Then, following in her parents' footsteps, Burns transitioned to teaching through Northwestern University's UNITE program.

Now, she lives with her Chicago-native husband, Peter, their 14-year-old twins, Annie and Liam, and loving dog, Bailey.

"I feel like a goofy actress who by mistake stumbled on an amazing privilege," she said. "Teaching is not at all like acting. My job is being me."

Burns said she learned two things in acting, primarily at Second City, that help in a classroom.

"I learned to know when I'm losing an audience, and I learned to improvise," she said.

She had to improvise last week when Raul The Wonder Hamster, the class pet, escaped.

Rather than force class work down the already-distracted minds of her students, she incorporated a search for Raul into their lessons.

"I was teaching them, but between breaks, the kids were brainstorming ways on how to find and trap Raul," she said. "It was physics. It was science. They made posters. We had students policing the perimeter all day trying to find him."

At the end of the day, without Raul safe in his cage, a student told Burns the hamster might just get homesick for his cage. They left his cage on the floor, and sure enough, the hamster walked right in.

"The kids were so into wondering what Raul was thinking, we made adventure diaries," she said. "In literature, they're studying point-of-view, and they wrote Raul's adventures in first person."

She said her flexibility, the support of coworkers and trusting principal Patrick MacMahon all contribute to a good classroom experience.

But the biggest factor, according to Burns, is the strength of her students.

"It's amazing to watch a child who goes from expressing himself with his fists to coming to me and articulating that he has a problem he needs to deal with," she said.

Burns encourages her class to take ownership of concepts.

Her perspective is being published as "The Art of Reading: A Look at Student Motivation, Self-Esteem, and Self-Perception when the Arts are integrated with Reading Curriculum" in "The Missing Link."

As arts are being cut out of school curriculums, she is seeing great results by adding a little performing arts to general subjects.

Her classes make videos on math concepts and later perform well on standardized exams.

Burns is one of 30 finalists for the Golden Apple. The 10 winners will be announced later this month and will receive the Golden Apple Award trophy, a laptop computer, a paid semester sabbatical at Northwestern University, a \$3,000 cash award and induction into the Golden Apple Academy of Educators.

Burns said she is more than happy just to be nominated.

"I think I feel successful because of the amazing people I learned from and the amazing people I continue to learn from today," she said.

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