

Carpentersville teacher's special connection with pupils wins her a Golden Apple

Instructor says award reflects on whole school



Nancy Kontney, a 5th grade teacher at Sunny Hill Elementary School in Carpentersville, gets a big hug from fellow teacher and friend Michelle Kern after Kontney won a Golden Apple Award Tuesday. (Tribune photo by Jim Prisching / May 6, 2008)

By Carolyn Starks, Tribune reporter

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Carpentersville teacher Nancy Kontney likes to call her 5th-grade students at home while she's emptying the dishwasher in the evening. She'll inquire about their homework: Did they do it? She tells them to turn off the TV and read.

Kontney's unique teaching style—she allows pupils to stand on their desks and stretch to clear their minds—and her ability to stay connected with them outside the classroom at Sunny Hill Elementary School have won widespread admiration.

On Tuesday, her pupils were standing for another reason, breaking into cheers after their startled teacher learned she was one of 10 teachers in the Chicago area to win a coveted national Golden Apple Award announced this week. This is the first time that a Kane County teacher has won the award.

"This isn't about me," Kontney said through tears after she was surprised by Barrington Community Unit School District 220 administrators. "We did this. We won."

The award, sponsored by the Golden Apple Foundation, recognizes superior teachers in Chicago and the suburbs. Each of the Golden Apple Award winners will receive a tuition-free spring-term sabbatical at Northwestern University, a personal computer from IBM and \$3,000, among other prizes, officials said.

A teacher for 27 years, Kontney spent 22 years at Grove Avenue Elementary School in Barrington before transferring this school year to Sunny Hill where 73 percent of the students are Latino. Kontney, who has taught more than 300 students in her career, doesn't speak Spanish, but she communicated with parents through older siblings of her students. She had been nominated before for a Golden Apple but never filled out the 14-page application. She decided this year she would because the school deserved the spotlight.

"They need the fame here," said Kontney, 48. "I wanted this so badly for them. I wanted them to have something to remember."

Gloria Harper, the chief program officer for the Golden Apple Foundation, observed Kontney in the classroom after she was chosen as one of 31 finalists out of 850 nominees. Her creative style stood out—she brought in egg cartons to help teach fractions—as did the communal tone of the classroom.

"When a student doesn't get it, they help each other," Harper said. "Many kids this age are competitive or they make fun of each other. Her students don't do that. She gives them the responsibility for teaching themselves and teaching others."

Kontney said she invites students to her home for picnics, has met them at the movie theater, calls them often at home and organized a Saturday morning math class with other teachers for students who needed extra help. She said bonding with them is important and they need to see her as a person.

"I let them into my life as much as I can," she said.

Kontney and her husband, Chris, a District 211 administrator, have twin boys and a daughter.

Also getting awards Tuesday were Brooke Tippet Thompson, a music teacher at Peirce School of International Studies, Chicago; science teacher Samina Khan and math teacher Donnell White of Clark Academic Prep Magnet High School, Chicago; Natalie Neris-Guereca, a 5th-grade teacher at Pershing Middle School West Campus, Chicago; Monica Gil, a 7th-grade teacher at Gray Elementary School, Chicago; and John Nieciak, a language arts teacher at Sheridan Math and Science Academy, Chicago.

The other suburban award winner announced Tuesday was 8th-grade teacher Holly Bontkowski at Kennedy Middle School in Plainfield.

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