

Golden Apple nominee takes first-graders beyond the lesson plan

By Sara Hooker | Daily Herald Staff

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Golden Apple Award nominee Barbara Cataldo of Naperville teaches first grade at Siple Elementary School in Woodridge.

Scott Sanders | Staff Photographer

About the Golden Apple

The Golden Apple Foundation picked 30 Chicago-area finalists for the 2009 Golden Apple Awards for Excellence in Teaching in pre-kindergarten through third grade. Nearly 1,000 teachers were nominated. The finalists were honored April 18 at the Celebration of Excellence in Teaching at the Hyatt Regency McCormick in Chicago.

In May, 10 Golden Apple Award winners will be selected. They'll join 230 expert teachers who have been selected over the past 23 years. Winners receive a tuition-free spring term sabbatical at Northwestern University, a computer, \$3,000 and a membership into the Golden Apple Academy.

In DuPage County, three people were selected as finalists: Jeanette Hachmeister of Child's Voice School in Wood Dale, Barbara Cataldo of Siple Elementary in Woodridge, and Mia Bohlin of Ardmore Elementary in Villa Park.

This is the first in a three-part series on the DuPage nominees.

Teaching first grade goes far beyond each day's lesson, says Siple Elementary teacher Barbara Cataldo.

It's the emotion, the feeling, the confidence that a child feels he or she belongs, she said.

"What do you remember from first grade? Do you remember a specific lesson, or do you remember the feeling you had about first grade?" Cataldo said. "These darlings that come into the classroom - you validate who they are and the academics come so much easier. That's what the heart of it is.

"You want to be validated. I want to be validated. I validate every little person who comes into my classroom, from the exceptional learner - exceptionally high, exceptionally low and everyone between."

This, among many reasons, is why Cataldo recently was selected as a finalist for the prestigious Golden Apple Award that honors excellence in teaching, says the Woodridge school's principal, Robyne Lewis.

"She's a little unreal," Lewis said of the fourth-year teacher from Naperville, who came into teaching as a second career after her children were in school.

"Some teachers think 'how am I going to get this across?' She thinks 'how am I going to make sure each child is going to understand.'" Lewis said. "She treats kids with such honor and awe just by the virtue of what they are."

Cataldo believes there's no greater learning tool for a teacher than her own children.

"They have given me more insight into teaching than any type of classroom experience. Being a parent you learn patience and tolerance," she said. "From a boo-boo on a knee to being voted off the lunch table, you learn how to handle that. Those are things that are beautiful to transfer to education because you teach the whole child and not just a piece of a child."

With her two children at home nearly grown, Cataldo has embarked on a second career path in education - one that has suited her well.

She initially earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Michigan and worked professionally for AT&T for years before having her

children. She worked as a teaching assistant for seven years and went back to school and earned a master's degree in teaching in 2004.

Cataldo often teaches by song and movement and uses hands-on lessons to focus on the emotional side of learning. Students are currently using a song she created to learn to tell time: "The hour hand's the short hand, the minute hand is the long, say the hour first, and you never will go wrong."

During a recent science lesson on living and non-living things, Cataldo brought in a stuffed bunny to demonstrate, and asked children to describe the differences between this bunny and a living bunny. They began with a few responses, but then Cataldo's friend arrived to surprise the children with a live pet rabbit, Fergie.

"The conversation began to flow from there," she said. "Everyone came up with ideas."

Recently, on a busy day when Golden Apple people were touring, a little boy who had been struggling with his reading came up to Cataldo and handed her a book and said he could read it.

She stopped what she was doing, sat down and listened to him read the book to her, Lewis said.

"It was so important for that single child to be heard at that moment," Lewis said. "It's not 'what's the planned lesson?' It's 'what's really important in that moment.'"

That's why Lewis believes Cataldo is a perfect candidate for the Golden Apple Award.

"She's not just about the lessons," Lewis said, "she's about each child."