

W E D N E S D A Y  
**JOURNAL**  
*of Oak Park and River Forest*

Tuesday, May 13, 2008

## Late bloomer scores a Golden Apple

*For Donnell White, getting to teach is reward enough*

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Donnell White

Photos by Tanya Harris/Contributor



Donnell White, an Oak Parker who teaches math at Michele Clark Preparatory High School in Austin, is a winner of the Golden Apple Award.

Both were surprised in their classrooms May 6.

White moved to Oak Park in 1980 and still lives in the village. His own children attended school in Oak Park, where White was active parent leader.

Looking much younger than his 52 years, White admits he's still a big kid at heart.

One of the things White likes to do is use games to help teach difficult math subjects. Among his more popular is a racing car math game, where his seventh and eighth graders race remote-control cars while answering math questions.

"Sometimes when I'm teaching, it's kind of a game," said White. "We got the remote-control cars. When I was kid I was like, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we did something with that?' "

He also has a small basketball and net in his classroom, where his students can get bonus points by making baskets if they've completed their homework and answered questions in class.

"I, honestly, sit at home and try to devise these different approaches," he said. "The funny thing is that when I was a kid, I used to think of different things to disrupt the class-something new to pull, a new joke or angle. And now, I use it to teach."

It took some time for White to become a teacher. He was a postal worker for many years.

The married father of four credits Oak Park with helping his career. His children attended Lincoln Elementary and Emerson Middle School (later Gwendolyn Brooks Middle School). White is a former president of Emerson's APPLE (African-American Parents for Purposeful Leadership on Education), and was a co-chair of the Dist. 97 PTO Council.

"I got to do a lot of things," he recalls. "I liked Oak Park because it was progressive enough to let me get in those positions, considering that I was a male without a college degree."

Donnell White wanted to be a teacher since he was in the sixth grade. But it took him over 30 years to achieve that goal.

Last week, the self-proclaimed former class clown—who finally became a teacher in 2002—was named one of this year's 10 Golden Apple winners for Chicago-area schools.

The award honors teachers recognized for excellence in the classroom. White teaches math at Michele Clark Preparatory High School, in the Austin neighborhood where he grew up in. Fellow Clark teacher Samina Khan was also named a Golden Apple winner.

White remarried while living in Oak Park and set his sights on being a husband and father. Still, White yearned to be a classroom teacher. He would drive to his old May Elementary School, which is right across the street from Clark, and, is where he first got the teaching bug.

"I had thought that I was supposed to raise my kids and forget about teaching because it would take time away from me being a parent. But every summer it would hit me emotionally," White said. "So, around graduation time, in particular, I would drive up and park in front of May School and just dream about being a teacher, and I would literally cry."

White's wife, April, pushed him to follow his dream, encouraging him to quit his postal job after more than 20 years.

"My wife, she's the catalyst," he said. "That's where it all started."

White went back to college, earning a bachelor's degree in education from Triton, and later applied for a job at May. After being turned down there, he asked for a job at Clark, and has been there ever since.

White acknowledges his nontraditional teaching techniques and says Henry West, Clark's principal, encouraged his instinct to have a classroom filled with "productive loudness." West nominated White and Kahn for the Golden Apple award.

White's mother, Alice, who also lived in Oak Park but has since moved to Chicago, was so happy with his award that she called everyone.

"They did not tell us nothing definite," she said of the Golden Apple Foundation, which alerts family members only a day or two before classroom visits to keep it a surprise to winners. "We thought that he would get it but we weren't for sure. We just thank God that he did get it."