

Golden Apple finalist special

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BY PAULINE FORTE

Karina Richter grew up with three brothers, two of them who had learning disabilities.

"I thought about teaching. I watched them struggle and didn't want somebody else to struggle as much as they did," Richter said. "I wanted to help kids who struggle to succeed."

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Karina Richter is among 31 Chicago-area finalists for the 2008 Golden Apple Awards for Excellence in Teaching in grades four through eight.

Now, the 47-year-old special education teacher at Daniel Wright Junior High School, is among 31 Chicago-area finalists for the 2008 Golden Apple Awards for Excellence in Teaching in grades four through eight.

A total of 850 teachers from Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake and Will counties were nominated for the award, which was first presented in 1986.

Lake County finalists

Besides, Richter, who teaches eighth-grade, two other teachers from Lake County are finalists, a sixth-grade teacher at Lake Zurich North Middle School in Hubbard Woods and a fourth-grade teacher at Roslyn Road Elementary School in Barrington.

The finalists will be honored on Saturday at the Celebration of Excellence in Teaching at the Hyatt Regency McCormick in Chicago.

The Golden Apple Awards selection committee is comprised of Chicago-area educators. Two committee members will observe each of the 31 finalists in the

classroom and interview their principal, selected colleagues, parents and students.

Richter was nominated for the honor last year. In November, she submitted all the required papers, including essays and letters about her written by colleagues and bosses.

In February, she had an informal visit from a Golden Apple committee member.

"I just taught the lesson that I was planning to teach. It was grammar. It wasn't even something exciting. I just did exactly what I would normally do," she said.

She received positive feedback from the assessor, who told her that her students were very engaged in the lesson, were very supportive of each other and demonstrated a great deal of knowledge in the subject.

"I think it was all my students. I would like to give all the credit to the students," Richter said.

Daniel Wright Principal Josh Carpenter, who has never had a teacher finalist for the Golden Apple Award, said the school is very proud of Richter.

"She is an outstanding teacher, and the students she works with are really given a unique education given by a passionate educator," Carpenter said. "She's a shining example of how communication with students and parents can positively impact student learning."

In April, Richter will have Golden Apple visit her classroom again, which will help determine whether she is among the 10 winners to be announced in mid-April. They will be honored at an awards ceremony in September in Chicago.

Each of the 10 winners will receive a tuition-free fall-term sabbatical at Northwestern University, a personal computer, \$3,000 and membership in the Golden Apple Academy, which has inducted 220 expert teachers in the last 22 years.

Richter has a case load, which means she teaches all the eighth grade students with special needs. For a certain subset of these 14 students, she teaches a special reading and language arts class. Her instruction follows the curriculum and addresses specific learning issues that each child has, such as reading comprehension and writing.

"Then I support all of the students in the rest of their classes. I'll go into the social studies and math classes, for example, and work with the students in the classroom setting," she said.

Richter said her motivation comes from trying to get the children excited about learning and to recognize their strengths.

"They're willing to take risks if they feel empowered. My strength is to show the kids what they're good at so that they can advance themselves," she said.

Special education

Richter is the only special education teacher out of the 31 finalists.

"Special education is not always recognized, and it's very important," she said. "We're trying to get the kids to be successful and move forward. To be a Special Education teacher you have to be a jack-of-all-trades. You have to know the curriculum in all the subjects areas and be able to assist the kids in all subject areas."

"She really prides herself on communicating with the parents and students so they understand what the expectations are this year and what to expect next year when they transition to high school," Carpenter said.

Richter got a bachelor's in political science from Northwestern University and a master's in learning disabilities from Teachers College at Columbia University in New York. She also received certification in English and social studies.

"I feel very honored, to have been nominated and made it this far," she said. "It's a very special recognition for a teacher."