

PalatineCountryside

Quest teacher in running for Golden Apple

March 27, 2008

By MARIO BARTOLETTI

It's not an apple you can bite into, but it is intellectually nourishing.

Out of a field of a thousand teachers throughout northern Illinois, the Golden Apple Award for excellence in teaching is down to 30 candidates. Fourth-grade teacher Rebecca Leff of Quest Academy, a private school in Palatine, is one of the finalists.

"It's amazing, really amazing," said Leff, a Buffalo Grove resident. "Almost everyone has heard of it."

Almost anyone can nominate a teacher for the award. Typically a colleague or administrator nominates a teacher, but Leff was nominated by a former student who is now in sixth grade.

"I was on the (school) Web site and there was a link to the Golden Apple award," student Max Sarbman of Arlington Heights said. "And I thought of her and nominated her."

Sarbman said he had a lot of fun with Leff in math class because he was new at Quest and Leff would help new students make friends.

"We were learning about aerodynamics," he said. "She had us make different kinds of paper airplanes, with different wingspans, and we learned why some go further than others."

Ben Hebebrand, Quest's head of school, said the fact that a student went through the trouble of nominating her says a lot about Leff as a teacher.

"And it's indicative of a classroom that is very student-centered," he said. "She's a teacher who is very attuned to students' individual needs and learning styles."

Colleague Beth Blaetz said Leff's global thinking and individual focus is typical of Leff's style as a teacher.

"She's open to new ideas and she's always willing to try something new," Blaetz said. "She takes a lot of different approaches and she's willing to share whatever she's doing that's valuable."

Out of the 30 finalists, the Golden Apple Foundation selects only 10 to receive the award. The Golden Apple Foundation gives the winning teachers a computer, a \$3,000 check, a membership in the Golden Apple Academy and a fall term sabbatical at Northwestern University.

"That's the coolest thing about this," Leff said. "If you win, you get to work with other teachers from other schools and create some very exciting things. The possibilities stemming from the synthesis of 10 different people with strong talents are enormous."

Hebebrand said Leff's enthusiasm for learning is what characterizes her as a teacher.

"She models the joy of learning herself. She became a teacher later in life and every year she makes it a point to sign up for seminars and workshops," he said. "So she has a passion and thirst for knowledge."

Hebebrand said there is a direct correlation between teachers actively engaged in learning --the students they teach are exponentially more likely to be successful.

"And she's very purposeful," he said. "Every lesson she designs there are specific learning objectives where the students are constantly learning."

Leff's love for learning started at home. She has been a teacher at Quest for 10 years. She was a professional musician and has two degrees in music. She played the French horn and worked at a magazine for band directors.

"Then I had kids of my own," she said. "And as I was watching them grow, it was fascinating to watch them learn. So I decided to go into elementary education."

Leff said getting a master's degree in education from DePaul University was a challenge as a mother, but her career in education has been rewarding.

"Quest is a great place to work," she said. "One of the highlights of our fourth grade is our social studies curriculum. We teach American history, and the kids all take on a character and re-enact the events: from coming over on the Mayflower to debating whether England has the right to tax the colonies. It's creative and engaging for the kids."

Although Leff enjoys talking about teaching, she doesn't like the spotlight, Hebebrand said.

"She's modest," he said. "She doesn't want all this attention."

Leff does recognize the nomination as a great honor, she said, "but there are a lot of other teachers at Quest who could be in my shoes right now."

The Golden Apple Award winners are expected to be named in early May and honored at a Sept. 6 awards ceremony.

For more information on the Golden Apple Foundation, visit www.goldenapple.org.