

Honor program helps teaching career seed grow

Golden Apple Scholar spends summer in Chicago school



Katie Lusk of Galesburg, right, poses with fellow Golden Apple Scholar Katie Mundle of Elmhurst. The picture was taken on their last day of classroom work as they waited for the bus.

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GALESBURG — While many of her classmates were sitting beside the pool or working at their summer jobs, Katie Lusk was in a Chicago classroom.

The 2008 Galesburg High School graduate was one of 100 upcoming college students to be named a Golden Apple Scholar, which honors outstanding students who wish to pursue a career in teaching. Lusk is the first student from Knox County to receive the honor in the program's two decades of service.

Students in their first year of the program spent five weeks taking classes at DePaul University and working in Chicago Public Schools classrooms.

“Before, I didn’t really know what I was getting into,” Lusk said of the experience. She worked four weeks at Lazaro Cardenas, a school with a 99 percent Hispanic population.

There was a security guard stationed at the front of the school each day, and all windows were painted over so no one could see inside. That environment, she said, was a far cry from her experience in Galesburg schools.

“The stories that the kids tell you, though, when the kids are just 4 to 7 years old, are nothing you’d hear around here,” she explained. Many of her students told her of young lives marred by violence and poverty.

But Lusk didn’t just learn some very important lessons from her students. Many of the other Golden Apple Scholars told her of their lives and the things that led them to want to become teachers.

“I never realized how privileged I was to have two parents or go on vacations,” she said. “Some of these people have never left Chicago in their lives. They’ve been through so much and they still want to be a teacher in the high schools to give back.”

The classes all the Golden Apple Scholars took — in diversity, ethnical fitness and success in college — also gave the students a chance to learn that not all their students would be the same.

“I had kids telling me, ‘My brother died because of this and I still had to go to school,’ ” she explained. “I think it’ll just help me understand the diversity of the children way more than I imagined. You can’t judge your kids.”

When Lusk begins her college education at Western Illinois University this fall, she will know she chose the correct career path. Her time in the classroom and the other Golden Apple Scholars just solidified her decision, she says.

“They (the seminar teachers) kept asking us, ‘Would you do it for free?’ ” she said of teaching in a school of need. “I would do it for free. Definitely. The education that I’m getting there is something that they can’t teach you in school.”