

SOUTHTOWNSTAR

South Side teacher wins Golden Apple Award

Mount Greenwood resident wins prestigious award

May 18, 2008

BY ANGELA CAPUTO, Staff writer

To the untrained eye, John Nieciak might look more like a traffic cop than a teacher.

That's because students in his sixth-grade language arts classroom are on the go -- and coming at him from every direction calling "Mr. Nieciak, Mr. Nie-ciak" -- trying to capture his attention.



John Nieciak helps guide Tony Colon, left, and Colin Baker, right, through their projects. (Jason Han/ SouthtownStar)



Teacher John Nieciak talks through a project with his sixth-grade students Nicolina Pascua (left) and Mitchell Chin. (Jason Han/SouthtownStar)



Sheridan Academy teacher John Nieciak speaks to one of his students during class. Nieciak, of Mount Greenwood, recently won the Golden Apple award. (Jason Han/SouthtownStar)

The longtime resident of Chicago's Mount Greenwood community punctuates his gentle tone with a stern message: Focus.

"We're in a crunch time right now," the 45-year-old said while scanning his classroom at Mark Sheridan Math and Science Academy in Chicago's Bridgeport community, measuring up a series of projects that still needs to be finished before school lets out next month.

You've got to keep up with the fast-paced environment to learn in Nieciak's class, sixth-grader Alexxis Gentil said.

"In this class, it's more than books," she said while sitting cross-legged on the creaky wooden floor of his worn, yet warm, sky-blue classroom juggling a laptop computer, a pile of paper and a pencil.

"He shows us you have to work for things - we can't just say 'I'm going to do it,' " the 12-year-old said.

That's the spirit that put Nie-ciak in line to receive a prestigious Golden Apple Award this year. More than 850 Chicago-area teachers were nominated for the honor. He is one of only 10 that were selected.

For Nieciak, being the recipient of the Golden Apple Foundation's top annual prize is about more than receiving accolades or the free semester of courses at Northwestern University, \$3,000 and the laptop computer that come with it.

"It's about being recognized for perfecting my craft," he said. "The passion is still there. Knowing I can make a difference is still there. But now I have the skill to make it happen."

Staying energized

Nieciak was drawn to teaching in the late 1980s after taking a long look in the mirror and asking himself, "What does what I'm doing mean?" he said.

At the time, the St. Rita High School graduate was working as a secret shopper at Ford City Mall. His dad was a Chicago cop, and he was following in his footsteps - well, sort of. Busting kids for stealing, it turned out, wasn't all that rewarding, he found.

What was fulfilling, though, was the tutoring work he'd picked up on the side at St. Xavier University.

"I knew this is where I needed to be because I was making a difference," Nieciak said.

Before long, he had earned a teaching degree at the Southwest Side Catholic university, where he now serves on the advisory board.

Then he went on to teach at St. Bede the Venerable School in Chicago's Scottsdale neighborhood before moving to the Bridgeport school 17 years ago.

Even with all of his experience, two master's degrees and a master teacher certification, Nieciak says his biggest challenges as a teacher have pretty much remained the same. Sometimes it's tough to keep a high energy level, he said. And there's never enough time in the school day to cover everything he wants to share with his students.

The Queen of Martyrs parishioner keeps his students working at a frenetic pace, though, and that appears to propel him, too. He also keeps one foot in the academic world, teaching classes at St. Xavier, to stay on the cutting edge of new techniques he can use to cover as many concepts in the classroom as possible at once.

"I'm constantly learning," he said. "It's not a job. It's a calling."

Angela Caputo can be reached at acaputo@southtownstar.com or (708) 633-5993.