

These teachers are the apples of kids' eyes

Golden Apple Award honors educators for their commitment to excellence

By Tracy Dell'Angela, Tribune staff reporter. Tribune staff reporter Lisa Black and freelance reporter Deborah Kadin contributed to this report

March 15, 2007

If it hadn't been for a nasty dog bite, teacher Melinda Wilson would not have been standing in front of her dance class Wednesday holding a basket of apples.

That bloody bite--which made her faint a decade ago--convinced her she didn't have the stomach to go to medical school. So she turned to another love--teaching dance--and spent the next nine years pushing students to new heights at Curie Metropolitan High School in Chicago.

The extraordinary academic rigor of her classes and her personal commitment to students made her one of this year's 10 winners of the Golden Apple Award--an honor Wilson called the "Super Bowl of teaching."

"She's always pushing you to be the best, not only in dance, but in everyday life," said Curie senior Dario Martinez, who nominated his teacher for the award. "When I came into her class, there was such a sense of relief and freedom where you could just be yourself."

Six Golden Apple teachers were honored Wednesday--two from private schools, two from suburban schools and two from Chicago public schools. Three more will be named Thursday, and fine arts teacher Gina Williams of Lake Forest Academy was surprised last week with the honor because her school is on spring break this week.

"I value academics and discipline," said Wilson, 45, whose students turn in 20-page term papers for their midterms. "I love my kids, and I want them to realize that there are no limits to what they can achieve in my room."

Meanwhile, when Golden Apple presenters arrived at Evanston Township High School, history teacher Aaron Becker, 38, and his students were sitting on rugs and pillows, studying their lesson in a classroom filled with ornate drapes, maps and Middle Eastern memorabilia.

Senior Peter Brody stopped by to give his teacher a hug and said the Middle Eastern-themed classroom is just one way that Becker makes students feel comfortable. "You can tell he absolutely loves the subjects he teaches," Brody said.

At Fenwick High, a Catholic school in Oak Park, Rev. Joseph Ekpo leaped into the air when he learned of his award. The Nigerian-born theology teacher was forced as a child to fight in a rebel army, was ordained as a priest in 1986, and later fled to the United States after he was marked for execution.

"I am dedicating this to God, to Jesus, to America, to Nigeria and to Catholic priests," said Ekpo, 45. "God sent me to make religion meaningful, for students to experience God and to help them relate to God."

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Besides Wilson, Becker and Ekpo, the other winners named Wednesday are:

Samuel Dyson, a physics teacher at Payton College Prep High School in Chicago, who offers his students weekly seminars on the Zulu language and culture and organized an exchange program with a South African school.

David Derbes, a physics teacher from the University of Chicago Laboratory High School, who teaches his students to challenge scientific truths.

John Naisbitt, a Hinsdale Central High School history teacher, who found his calling by building the confidence of his students.

A total of 803 high school teachers from Cook, Lake, Will, Kane and DuPage Counties were nominated for the award, first presented in 1986. The 32 finalists were chosen in January.

Each of the 10 Golden Apple Award winners will get a tuition-free fall-term sabbatical at Northwestern University, a personal computer and \$3,000.

The non-profit Golden Apple Foundation, based in Chicago, rotates the award among three categories of grade levels each year.

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Teachers thrilled by prestigious Golden Apple

Hinsdale Central, Fenwick have winners

By Deborah Kadin and Rhianna Wisniewski
Special to the Tribune

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Rev. Joseph Ekpo doesn't teach poetry at Fenwick High School, so he probably wasn't the one who paraphrased Wordsworth's definition of poetry on his blackboard Wednesday morning.

But the theology teacher sure put forth a "sudden/spontaneous overflow of passionate feeling" when he learned he'd been awarded a Golden Apple.

The beloved instructor, who has taught at the Oak Park school since 1995, jumped up and down, beamed and bear-hugged Brigid Duffy Gerace, a former Golden Apple recipient, after she gave him the traditional basket of apples.

Ekpo was one of six Apple winners announced Wednesday, including John Naisbitt, a history teacher at Hinsdale Central High School.

After learning of his award, Ekpo burst into a short, ebullient responsive chant with his freshmen Scripture students about God and the power of faith.

"I am dedicating this to God, to Jesus, to America, to Nigeria and to Catholic priests," he said later. "God sent me to make religion meaningful, for students to experience God and to help them relate to God."

Students and staff cheered the 45-year-old priest upon hearing the news.

"He is personable, someone to look up to. He is a big brother, a teacher, a friend, he teaches us that God is real," said Matt Brooks, a junior from Western Springs. "He defines what the Golden Apple award is all about."

Ekpo said teaching is a great gift given to him by his father, who taught elementary school. The lessons he imparts--about how faith and perseverance can trump adversity--also come from real life.

A native of southeastern Nigeria, he was kidnapped when he was 9 and forced to fight in a rebel army for more than three years while Biafra was trying to gain its independence from Nigeria. Ordained a priest in 1986, he was jailed in 1989 for two weeks and marked for execution as an enemy of the state but escaped during a time when the government was forcing the country into becoming an Islamic state.

He arrived in the United States in 1990. He returns to his homeland but only with extreme secrecy. He sends money to Nigeria to help pay for medical care and schooling. He plans to return this summer to help build homes.

While he teaches his students that life should never be taken for granted, he has gained a lot from them in return.

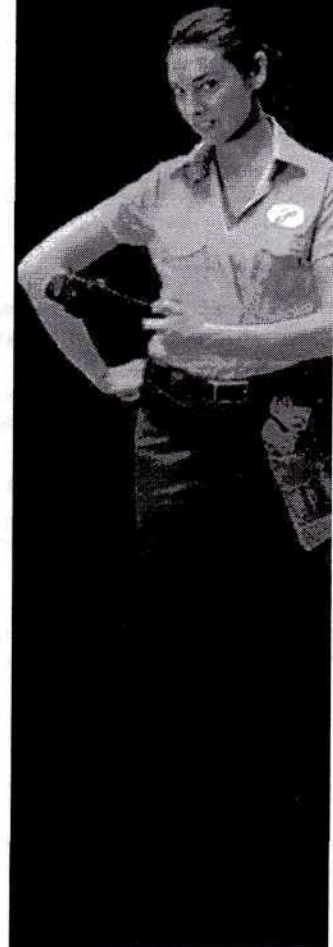
"They are like medicine, they bring me back to life," said Ekpo, the school's third recipient of the Apple award.

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Earlier in the day, shock, surprise and humility washed over Naisbitt at Hinsdale Central as a crowd of family and colleagues greeted him when his award was announced.

His classroom is full of unconventional decorations that reflect his fun, engaging teaching style. But he also helps his students learn beyond the borders of the classroom.

He involves them in big-picture projects to aid people in need.

"He teaches us not just the stuff we need for school but about life," said Courtney Evans, 17, a junior in Naisbitt's U.S. history class.

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Naisbitt formed the Citizen Club as an outlet for his scared and confused students to discuss politics and current events.

That group now helps to carry out charitable project ideas, including a recent drive that collected 3,000 Beanie Babies to send to soldiers in Afghanistan. The soldiers use them to break the ice with Afghani children.

The Citizen Club also established an Urban/Suburban student exchange. Hinsdale Central hosts students from Clemente and South Shore High Schools in Chicago and sends students to those schools. After seeing South Shore's nearly empty library, Naisbitt's students raised \$10,000 for books and computers.

"I do think that there is a greater responsibility that we have as teachers to educate students on what it means to be a responsible citizen," said Naisbitt, who has taught at Hinsdale Central for seven years.

After his students learned that one of their classmates was absent because of leukemia, they staged a fundraiser, Laps for Leukemia, that raised \$10,000 for leukemia research.

Pam Bylsma, Hinsdale Central assistant principal, nominated Naisbitt for his excellence as a teacher, coach and activity sponsor. Naisbitt, who often spends up to 15 hours a day at school, coaches tennis and sponsors the school's chess team. He is the school's first Apple recipient.

Three more Apples will be awarded Thursday, and last week, Gina Williams, a fine arts teacher at Lake Forest Academy, was honored because her school is on spring break this week.

A total of 803 high school teachers from Cook, Lake, Will, Kane and DuPage Counties were nominated for the award, first presented in 1986.

The 32 finalists were chosen in January. Each finalist was observed in their classrooms and their principal, colleagues, students and students' parents were interviewed. The award alternates every third year among early elementary, middle elementary and high school teachers

Each of the 10 Golden Apple Award winners receives a tuition-free fall-term sabbatical at Northwestern University; a personal computer; \$3,000; and membership in the Golden Apple Academy of Educators, which now has 210 teachers who work together on professional development and teacher training.

The winners will be honored May 12 at the Hyatt Regency Chicago.

Besides Ekpo and Naisbitt, other winners include: David Derbes, a physics teacher from the University of Chicago Lab High School; Samuel Dyson, a physics teacher at Walter Payton College Prep High School; Melinda Wilson, dance teacher at Curie Metropolitan High School; and Aaron Becker, history teacher at Evanston Township High School in Evanston.

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Praise of Golden Apple is music to teacher's ears

By Jo Napolitano
Tribune staff reporter

March 16, 2007

David Eanes knew something was up Thursday morning when he saw his wife walk into his Dolton classroom followed by an entourage of family, co-workers and photographers.

"Aren't you supposed to be at work?" he thought.

Aline, his wife of more than three decades, was there to deliver the prestigious Golden Apple Award to her husband, a music teacher at Thornridge High School for 21 years.

Students and staff say Eanes has a gift for bringing out the best in students, no matter what the obstacle.

"This is an honor well-deserved for a man who believes in children," said J. Kamala Buckner, superintendent of Thornton Township High School District 205.

As a teacher in a district plagued by financial and other problems, Eanes has helped his students win numerous awards, including top honors at the annual All American Music Festival in Orlando.

And while Eanes is proud of the band's performance and its ability to outplay others with far greater resources, it's not all about winning trophies. It's about meeting his and his students' own standards.

"When you get a kid to put forth that work ethic, it's magic. I don't care what kind of odds you have, you are going to achieve it," he said of student goals.

Eanes' passion for music and his rapport with students helped make him one of 10 winners of the Golden Apple, an honor bestowed upon some of the best teachers in Chicago and the suburbs. He was one of three teachers honored Thursday. Seven teachers were named earlier this week and last week.

Eanes said he doesn't limit his students' potential by thinking they can only perform at a certain level because they're in high school. A band is a band, he said, and if they play before an audience, they better be good.

He works as much as 12 hours a day and often on weekends, especially before important performances. His wife, also a teacher, said he was missed at home, but that his mission was worth the sacrifice.

"In the beginning it was hard, but when I saw how dedicated he was, how much he loved the kids and how he loves music, how can you deny that?" she said.

Brandon Evans, an 18-year-old senior who was one of two people to nominate Eanes for the award, said the teacher cares about far more than his musical ability.

"I was in the band my sophomore year, and I was doing horrible in school," said Evans, a drummer. "I was

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going to fail two of my classes, but he made sure I spent my free time in his classroom doing homework."

Evans said Eanes taught him that it's OK to make mistakes, that life affords us a chance to correct them. It's a lesson he'll take with him this fall when he starts at Texas Southern University in Houston.

Timothy King, also 18 and a senior, said Eanes is a father figure to many of his students.

"He's honest with us, and he tells us what we need to do," he said. "He knows our potential and wants to bring it out of us."

King credits his teacher for helping him earn a full scholarship to Eanes' alma mater, Grambling State University in Louisiana.

Eanes, who grew up on Chicago's South Side, was fortunate to have many mentors during his youth--men he looked up to in the way his students now look to him.

He said his father wasn't present for most of his childhood and that he was angry at his absence. Eanes said he had to walk through three gang territories to get to school and many of his friends fell into drugs and crime. Eanes fears he would have followed had he stayed in Chicago, but he got a chance to go to Louisiana.

Many of Eanes' students come to him with problems similar to those he faced as a kid.

"When I see these kids, I see myself in them," he said.

About 800 high school teachers from Cook, Lake, Will, Kane and DuPage Counties were nominated for the award, which was first presented in 1986. The 32 finalists were observed in their classrooms, and their principals, colleagues, students, and students' parents were interviewed. The award alternates every third year among early elementary, middle elementary and high school teachers.

Each winner receives a tuition-free fall-term sabbatical at Northwestern University; a personal computer; and \$3,000.

The other winners Thursday were Danna Dotson, a math teacher at Lindblom Math and Science Academy in West Englewood, and Kraig Conyer, who teaches adapted physical education at Hinsdale South High School in Darien.

Dotson's students tie a rubber band around a Barbie doll's feet and toss her off a balcony--known as the "Barbie Bungee jump"--as part of an algebra lesson on linear patterns. Conyer, in his sixth year running a program for special needs students, was honored for his extraordinary ability to motivate and inspire kids.

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Math creativity + caring = Golden Apple

By Stephanie Banchemo, Tribune staff reporter. Tribune staff reporter Jo Napolitano and freelance reporter Steve Schmadeke contributed to this report

March 16, 2007

One might wonder how tying a rubber band around Barbie's feet and tossing her off a high school auditorium balcony could pass as a math lesson.

But Danna Dotson's students know that the "Barbie bungee jump" is just one of the many inventive experiments their teacher uses to explain hard-to-understand math concepts. The teenagers pitched Barbie, a Bratz doll and a Harry Potter action figure off the balcony as part of an algebra lesson on linear patterns.

"She makes math fun, and she makes it interesting," said Sinead Garnett, 15, a sophomore at Lindblom Math and Science Academy in West Englewood.

Dotson's commitment to finding creative ways to teach algebra, geometry and trigonometry helped make her one of this year's 10 winners of the Golden Apple Award, an honor bestowed upon some of the best teachers in Chicago and the suburbs. Dotson was one of three honored Thursday.

Seven other teachers were named earlier this week and last week.

"I'm humbled and shocked," Dotson said after a raucous award presentation in her classroom. "There are so many wonderful teachers out there. I feel honored to be chosen."

A Chicago native, Dotson fell into teaching. As a teenager, she was fascinated with computers and mathematical equations. She enrolled at DePaul as a computer science major.

"But then I started to volunteer at the YMCA and, after working with the kids, I totally changed my mind about a career," Dotson recalled. "I loved math and I loved computers. But I loved working with the kids the most."

Dotson's grandmother, Ida Simmons, who was at Lindblom on Thursday to help pay tribute, said her granddaughter is the perfect math teacher: logical thinker, serious, determined and focused. But Simmons said that when Dotson was younger, family members wanted her to follow in her mother's footsteps and become a nurse.

"I'm glad she never listened to us because she is such a wonderful math teacher," Simmons said.

Garnett, who nominated Dotson for the award, recalled spending many early mornings and late afternoons in Dotson's classroom going over difficult algebraic equations.

"If you don't understand something, she just keeps staying with you and staying with you until you get it," she said. "She won't give up, and she won't let you give up."

Lindblom principal Alan Mather said Dotson is the rare teacher who shows passion for her students inside and outside of the classroom.

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"She gets so involved in the lives of her kids, they become part of her life," he said.

The other Golden Apple winners named Thursday are:

David Eanes, a music teacher at Thornridge High School in Dolton, who has helped his students win numerous awards, including top honors at the annual All-American Music Festival in Orlando.

Kraig Conyer, an adaptive PE teacher at Hinsdale South High School in Darien, who launched the school's Special Olympics program.

A total of 803 high school teachers from Cook, Lake, Will, Kane and DuPage Counties were nominated for the award.

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'Delayed gratification'

(<http://www.dailysouthtown.com/news/299413,162NWS1.article>)

March 16, 2007

By Duaa Eldeib Staff writer

Tears streamed down David Eanes' cheeks while he carefully stroked his face, reflecting on 32 years of demanding greatness from his students.

His three grandchildren wrapped their little arms around him, his daughter cried and his wife breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

"Finally," Barbra Green-Kenan, Eanes' assistant, said to the crowd of about 15 family members, co-workers and students gathered Thursday at Thornridge High School in Dolton to surprise Eanes with the prestigious Golden Apple Award for excellence in teaching.

The veteran music teacher was experiencing for himself something he's been preaching to students for years.

"Delayed gratification," a stunned Eanes said. "This proves it's worth it."

Brandon Evans, one of two who nominated 53-year-old Eanes for the award, is a prime example of the influence Eanes has had on his students.

When Evans walked into Eanes' class four years ago, he was a loner with a 1.9 grade point average. He constantly skipped classes, and when he wasn't ditching, he was getting suspended.

"I was horrible," Evans said.

When his mother signed him up for band, he was forced to attend Eanes' infamous summer camps.

Marching, exercising and dancing from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day, Evans was tempted to give up.

"This is crazy," Evans thought, especially since he was pretty sure he wasn't going to make it to graduation.

But Eanes doesn't build quitters. He builds leaders.

As a senior this year, Evans is drum major and president of student council. His grades have improved to a 3.0 grade point average. In July, he's heading to Houston to train as a drum major at Texas Southern University -- on a full music scholarship.

Beyond the academic influence, Eanes was a father figure to Evans who "knew of" his father but never knew him. His dad left when Evans was just an infant, and it was Eanes who spent the time imparting discipline, leadership and determination.

"He showed me how to be a strong black man and how to accomplish anything as long as I stay focused," Evans said.

Although she was raised by him, Eanes' own daughter, Natasha Harris, didn't truly discover who her father was until she was his student.

When Natasha was a small child, Eanes spent long days at school. By the time he got home -- sometimes 8, 9 or 10 p.m. -- she'd be asleep.

"This is where he spent his time," Harris said, pointing to a room full of drums, clarinets and saxophones.

When she was his student, she witnessed his passion and dedication firsthand. She wiped away tear after tear simply contemplating his impact on her life.

"He taught me to be a dedicated, confident leader," she said.

Parent Debra Burt-Frazier appreciates the same characteristics in Eanes, which is what moved her to nominate him.

"He truly cares about his students and bringing out the best in them," Burt-Frazier said. "Their excellence is a tribute to Mr. Eanes. He's the reason why."

Few of those present for the award could fight back tears.

"This has been probably the most moving (presentation) I've been on," said Penny Lundquist, director of professional development at Golden Apple Foundation. "It's so obvious how well-deserved this award was."

Eanes beat more than 800 teachers in five counties who were nominated for the award. The 10 winners will receive a tuition-free fall-term sabbatical at Northwestern University, a personal computer, \$3,000 and membership to the Golden Apple Academy of Educators.

"This is a great honor for us, a great honor," District 205 Supt. Kamala Buckner said. "It couldn't have happened to a more fabulous person."

Aline, his wife of 33 years, knew this day was coming.

"He's just an all-around beautiful person," she said.

Beautiful is exactly how Eanes expects his students' music to sound. He won't settle for "good for a high school band," either. When his students play, it should sound like magic.

After graduating from Chicago Vocational High School in 1971, he attended Grambling State University and later received his master's degree from Vandercook College of Music.

His planned to become a professional performer, but he knew he didn't need a degree to perform, so he majored in music education.

Once he entered the classroom, however, he realized he had a gift to change people's lives, which takes on a whole new meaning in a school that's lined with security guards.

Jesse Andrews, who graduated from Thornridge High School in 2005, doesn't know where he'd be today had Eanes decided to perform instead of teach.

Like many former students, Andrews still drops by the school from time to time to visit with Eanes.

"I just like to be around him," Andrews said. "I never told him that."

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