

Lead. Learn. Innovate. Inspire.

TEACHER magazine

January/February 2007

www.teachermagazine.org



STEVEN DRUMMOND

Forever YOUNG

“A child that comes in is a child that I support,” says Paddy O’Reilly, who’s been teaching for more than a quarter of a century.

How do the best educators stay fresh after decades in the trenches? A few award-winning teachers share their secrets.

“Will you be our teacher?”

It was an odd question for me to hear. I was a student teacher in 1992, and I’d only just walked into this classroom as part of my daylong observation of high school educators. But after watching the grizzled American history teacher for an hour, I saw why the girl had asked me.

He’d been on the job for about 35 years, and, as he told me later, he’d passed up a buyout offer because he was at the top of the union scale, and didn’t want to

By Steven Drummond

give up his paycheck. The man was apparently having a rough year, though—they'd finally replaced the old textbook he'd been relying on for years.

The students who needed an A or B to get into college—mostly girls—sat up front and quickly filled in the blanks of a Louisiana Purchase worksheet the teacher had passed out. The rest of the class—mostly boys wearing jeans and black T-shirts—played cards in the back, but he didn't appear to mind.

Minutes before the bell rang, a girl raised her hand. There seemed to be two possible answers to one question on the worksheet. The teacher looked confused as he tried to find the correct one in the textbook. Finally, he pulled out the old textbook, flipping through pages before shaking his head and saying he'd give credit for either answer.

It was a required course, and the students were stuck with him. Even the ones who did the work weren't really learning anything. Knowing very little about me, a few of them quietly told me as I wandered around that they wished I could be their teacher. Not that I'd done much more than walk into the room: I simply wasn't the burned-out guy up front.

Nearly 15 years later, this memory still sticks with me. I think about those kids wanting so badly for someone to actually teach them. As a journalist who's covered education for more than a decade, I've spent lots of time in schools and seen many exceptional educators—people who love their subjects and their students. And I've always wondered how, as they teach the 20th or 30th school year of their careers, they keep from becoming that man I watched go through the motions. So I eagerly seized an opportunity last April to watch how four seasoned Chicago-area educators keep their teaching fresh.

What I learned is that none of them does quite the same thing in the classroom twice, and none teaches like the other. But they do have one key trait in common: they're self-propelled. Their best source of professional develop-



STEVEN DRUMMOND

Mathias Schergen, known as “Mr. Spider” in his art classes, works in a low-income, all-minority school where he balances discipline with humor. “He’ll treat you like you’re his own family,” says 12-year-old Raymond McDonald.

ment isn't a mandated chalk-and-talk or some perky pep rally, but their own curiosity. They're always looking for new ways to approach subjects and present material. They analyze students and their parents. They tear apart each lesson and look for the weak spots. They've each found a unique formula for making their teaching not just as good as it ever was, but better than it's ever been before.

“I'm always looking for the nuance of the thing. Where's it going to be different? What can I do to make it different, year to year?”

That's Mathias “Spider” Schergen, one of the teachers who'd been recognized as a top Chicago-area educator by the Golden Apple Foundation—a non-profit that seeks to advance the profes-

sion in Illinois. Each year's winners, selected through a vigorous vetting process, are awarded \$3,000, a personal computer, and a one-semester sabbatical.

Scherger, who had just returned from his, teaches at the Edward Jenner Academy of the Arts, a preK-8 school of about 600 African American students, 98 percent of whom receive free or reduced-price meals. Even in broad daylight, the streets surrounding Jenner in the infamous Cabrini-Green neighborhood are scary. Giant concrete-and-steel buildings are stained with rust and graffiti. The gang- and drug-related violence—exemplified by the 1992 shooting death of a 7-year-old as he walked to Jenner with his mother—is not as prevalent as it once was, but the poverty is still palpable.

Most teachers working in such a neighborhood would consider surviv-

ing just one year an achievement. Schergen's been at Jenner for 13. When I asked what keeps him going, his answer summed up what I'd noticed about all four honorees I observed during my visit: "The older I get, the better I get, and that's really exciting."

Schergen is an art teacher, and looks it. Think of Sylvester Stallone playing a beatnik poet, wearing a black beret, goatee, jeans, and black Converse All Stars. He has a relaxed, easygoing way of talking that changes markedly when he's in the classroom. There, he becomes "Mr. Spider," a joking, cajoling hipster. Now 53 years old, he created the nickname—and the persona—on his first day at Jenner. "I thought, 'How can I make a splash?' I love spiders, and so I told the students my name was 'Mr. Spider.' It got them all curious about me. I kind of put that metaphor out there that 'you're in my web,' and it caught on like wildfire."

It was nearing the end of the school day as I sat in on his origami lesson with 3rd graders, and the students were a little rowdy at first. "Some people ain't even listenin'," Schergen told them. "Stay calm, stay cool. I like you guys." The 17-year teaching veteran walked them through the folding of papers to make little hats, pausing at times to help those who'd fallen behind: "Oh, sorry, baby girl—fold it like this."

The lesson went well, but an hour later, waiting for students to show up, Schergen seemed unusually nervous, pacing up and down the hallway outside his classroom. In a few minutes, he'd be launching an after-school boys' club—an attempt to instill leadership principles in kids while channeling their artistic interests. The plan was to meet once a week to work on music, film, and video-production projects. But students had to audition first. It was a way, Schergen explained, to weed out those who weren't truly committed.

The auditions were to begin at 2:30 in front of four student judges.

The candidates had to either perform a rap song they'd written or play a "beat" with drumsticks. And during a brief interview, they'd have to explain why they wanted to join. At the appointed time, Schergen checked the hallway to see who'd shown up. "Brother Steele ain't out there," he told the judges, "so it looks like Don Wallace is first. All right, Brother Wallace." A shy, thin boy shuffled in, clutching a scrap of paper on which lyrics had been written in pencil. He rapped so softly and quickly, it was hard to follow.

As the auditions continued, I was struck by Schergen's anxiety. But it provided me with an opportunity to broach the big question I'd come to ask. Here was a guy who'd been doing this stuff day in, day out for years. He'd been recognized as one of the best teachers in Chicago, and as with all the educators I visited, he'd been praised by students, colleagues, and parents. Yet because he'd never started an audition-based club like this before, he wasn't taking for granted that it would be at all successful. He was stretching himself. "I guess that's part of the reason to stay excited and stay geeked up about it," he explained, "because I see the progress in my own teaching. I just like the idea of always refining and expanding what I've done already."

Not that teaching is all Schergen does. He likes to create assemblages and shadow boxes using found objects—bits of rope and twisted iron, for example—in a small studio set up in the garage of his home, where he lives with his wife, Vanessa, and their youngest son. It's a place where he can clear his head of the pressures of school and students' lives.

"It's this whole decompression chamber," he explained. "My art gives me the chance to make decisions and make choices that have no other value than ... how I think those things should be done."

Keeping It Real

There are many online and in-person resources for helping veteran teachers stay engaged and energized. Here are a few:

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

(www.nbpts.org)

Nearly 50,000 teachers nationwide have put themselves through this professional development marathon, often with bankable as well as intangible benefits. North Carolina, for example, offers teachers financial incentives for obtaining national board certification, and many states and districts kick in all or part of the \$2,500 cost. From art to world languages, 24 different certificates are available.

Teacher Leaders Network

(www.teacherleaders.org)

This online community of teacher-leaders, designed to address the isolation many in the profession feel, is affiliated with the Center for Teaching Quality in North Carolina. "We find accomplished teachers and give them an opportunity to interact with each other," says CTQ president Barnett Berry. "The goal is to do three things: have their leadership skills honed and cultivated, spread expertise among each other, and elevate their voices on matters of policy." The site includes articles and online discussions with veteran educators on topics such as parent involvement, No Child Left Behind, and "The Importance of Feeling Valued as a Teacher."

The Fund for Teachers

(www.fundforteachers.org)

Based in Houston, Texas, this nonprofit provides grants to preK-12 teachers with more than three years' experience for summer learning sabbaticals around the globe. Since the organization was formed in 2001, it has supported sabbaticals for more than 2,500 teachers from 47 states.

Sabbaticals

Some school districts now allow sabbaticals, but policies covering their duration, required years of experience, and compensation vary considerably. In New York City, for example, teachers are eligible for up to 70 percent of their salaries for one-year or six-month study sabbaticals. And Chicago teachers are eligible for sabbaticals ranging from five to 10 months.

—Steven Drummond

This, as it turned out, was another characteristic shared by the teachers I observed: One enjoys exercising. Another is a nut for the St. Louis Cardinals. The other travels. While they're extremely devoted to their students and subjects, they also know when to put it all aside.

"Teaching, for many teachers, is like one part emergency-room medicine, and the other part a never-ending Broadway performance," says Barnett Berry, founder and president of the Center for Teaching Quality in North Carolina. "A teacher's work is intense," he continues, and so is the need for down time.

I couldn't help but note something else about Schergen: how completely his manner of speaking changes when he's not around students. Vanessa laughed when I asked her about this. "In class," she explained, "he has to speak the lingo, operate with a louder voice—do those kinds of things." At home, she added, "he's quieter, but he's still the same crazy, wacky guy."

Schergen loves the classroom theatrics. "Those little antics and the little jokes and teasing the kids—it really invigorates the group," he explained. "I never thought of myself in this way, but it's like a standup comedian."

It's also an approach that helps him connect with kids whose home lives are vastly different from his own. Less than a third of Jenner's students pass Illinois' standardized tests for reading, math, and science. So isn't it frustrating, I asked, teaching kids who may not make it, no matter how much inspiration he provides?

"It's very sad," he said, "especially when the boys get shot."

"Does that happen a lot?"

"It's happened frequently. The boys, they tend to end up dead; and the girls, they end up pregnant," Schergen said. This forces him to put his involvement with students in perspective: "I try not to overreach or overestimate who I am in the context of the big picture."

But as I interviewed a stocky 12-year-old named Raymond McDonald,

it became clear that his teacher develops real bonds with students. "He's different in his own special way," Raymond said of Schergen. "He has a sense of humor. But if someone's acting up, he won't holler at 'em unless they disrespect him. He won't hurt you. He'll say, 'Get out of my room, son or brother.' He'll treat you like you're his own family. He even invited me to his house before. I went over twice."

Schergen was quick to insist that he's no different than many colleagues at Jenner. He sometimes gripes about the same things: penny-pinching, paperwork, rude or abusive parents. "I have my people at the school I complain with," he admitted. "We have our little powwows and cry on each other's shoulder." But, he added, "I learned very early on from a very wise teacher that you can get caught in the blame game and you don't go any further. It's a way of abdicating your responsibility in the situation."

This is an important point, says Berry—one that separates teachers who stay after class to work with students from those who sit in the faculty room and complain. "The lounge lizards," Berry calls them.

Schergen and his Golden Apple colleagues embody a fundamental idea about teaching laid down early in the 20th century by John Dewey, a philosopher and progressive educator. "Dewey refers to it as the 'cycle of reflective thought'" in his book *How We Think*, says Fredrick Goodman, a professor emeritus of education at the University of Michigan. Veterans who stay engaged, he adds, accept constant analysis and revision as a personal challenge—"a cognitive, or intellectual, or academic challenge that's exciting, and worth doing."

My next stop was the Chicago Academy, which is housed in a 90-year-old brick building that once was a community college named after aviation pioneer Wilbur

Wright. "I attended this thing in 1970," said Paddy O'Reilly, the 60-year-old teaching vet I'd come to see. He's been at the preK-8, 570-student public school since it opened.

The academy is ethnically diverse—half the students are white, 30 percent are Hispanic, and 17 percent are African American. Fifty percent receive free or reduced-price meals, but the school's test scores exceed state averages in most subject areas.

When I asked O'Reilly what year he started teaching, he said, "I'm not sure." And thus began a meandering story involving college, training as a plumber, a brief stint as a prison guard, work in a halfway house, teaching high school, studying in Dublin and then Spain, marriage, a master's degree, Europe again, and, finally, the discovery that he loved teaching little kids and wanted to do just that.

We'd met at 7:30 a.m. in the hallway where O'Reilly was carrying two small bouquets of carnations—one pink, one yellow. In the classroom, he took off his coat, popped the flowers into glass vases, and placed them on two little-kid tables. "How's that look?" he asked. "I met a teacher 10 years ago who used flowers as a teaching tool. I've found that they change the tone of the classroom, and I've been bringing in flowers ever since."

If Spider Schergen calls to mind the beatnik era, Paddy O'Reilly is reminiscent of the 1960s. He sports a ponytail, a beard, and a loving, tender way with his students that's both inspiring and, after a few hours of watching him work, utterly exhausting.

His morning students—a dozen and a half 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds—began arriving in Room 109 at about 8:45. As they entered, O'Reilly got down on his knees to hug them. It was amazing how much one-on-one time he spent with the children. He picked up and cradled a crying little girl. Bent over to tie a shoelace. Adjusted a scarf. Settled a dispute between two boys. Switched effortlessly between Spanish and



STEVEN DRUMMOND

Ramzi Farran, a 35-year vet, has helped his Catholic high school students win a display case full of science-competition trophies. “Classical” in teaching style, he uses his status to avoid school politics and focus on kids.

English. Made sure the kids ate, brushed their teeth, put their crayons away, and sat where they were supposed to.

Academics are important, O’Reilly told me, but for kids this age, the job is really about caring, which is what keeps him going. “I am the godfather of 14 of my former students or their brothers or sisters,” he revealed. “I worship at the same church, shop at the same grocery store. It sounds corny, but I support what the families are doing. A child that comes in is a child that I support.”

I asked him: Does he see himself doing this 10 years from now?

“It depends on the knees,” he answered. “If a child falls, what do you do? As long as that holds out, I’ll be OK.”

Summers are a nice break, he said, but “somewhere in the summer, you get the feeling you’re really missing out: ‘OK, I slept a lot, I read. Now I miss the kids.’”

Kids are also key to keeping Ramzi Farran fresh. The 60-year-old teaches chemistry at Fenwick High School, a limestone-and-brick Catholic school in Oak Park, a mid-

dle-class suburb west of Chicago. The portly man nurtures his students with an easygoing classroom manner, but he’s also a fierce competitor. Talk to him for a while, and you could easily picture him on a football field with a whistle in his mouth. He’s a Vince Lombardi of the chemistry lab, and has the trophies to prove it. The case in the hall outside his classroom is full of local, state, and national science-competition awards. Farran, who’s been teaching for 35 years, is careful to attribute the success to his students, as well as his colleagues at Fenwick. Nevertheless, he loves to compete—and win. Whenever his students bring home a trophy, he told me, laughing, “My wife says, ‘Do I have to take the door hinges off?’”

But there are other benefits to amassing this kind of track record and having 25 years’ tenure at Fenwick. A big one is freedom from the obligatory committees and staff meetings that wear down even the most enthusiastic teachers. “I go to class for the kids,” Farran said with a slight accent that evokes his native Jerusalem. Early on, he had to pay his dues, but now, he added, “I spend more time with the kids and less with the politics of the school. If you do very well in the classroom and have parents behind you, there’s a sense of

power that you cannot measure by any committee.”

His teaching style is best described as “classical.” On the day I visited, the students in a sophomore chemistry class were dressed in traditional Catholic school uniforms and huddled in groups around gas flames and beakers. After finishing the experiment, which involved adding one solvent to another to see how the boiling point changes, they returned to their desks to answer questions. The teacher, in a tie and white shirt, stood writing symbols and equations on the blackboard. It was a scene one could have witnessed 30 or 40 years ago.

“I want the kids to do the real science—the actual labs,” as opposed to computer simulations, Farran explained. “I have been criticized, but look at the outcomes.”

Indeed, besides the ample evidence of his class’s competitive success, he’s a popular teacher: There’s a waiting list each year to get into his chemistry, honors chemistry, AP chemistry, and summer school classes.

Of course, it takes a good administrator to give teachers the freedom to succeed. Fenwick principal James Quaid says it’s his job to make that happen, for Farran and other veterans. “The main thing with really talented people like that is to let them do their job, show them respect, and work with them,” the principal explains. In return, those teachers “understand the mission of the school and will roll up their sleeves and get to work,” he says. “A Ramzi Farran, and so many other names I could mention, they’re tireless in working with the kids.”

While Farran prefers to stay out of his school’s bureaucratic minutiae, fellow Golden Apple teacher Sharon Takahashi immerses herself in the administrative life of Thomas Middle School in Arlington Heights, a middle-class Chicago suburb where she teaches history.



Sharon Takahashi, aka “Mama Taki,” relishes serving as a mentor to students and colleagues.

TMS is a high-achieving school of 840 students in grades 6-8, of whom 89 percent are white, roughly 5 percent Hispanic, and about 5 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. Takahashi, 54, is the California-born daughter of Japanese-American parents who were interned in relocation camps during World War II, and has been teaching since 1975.

I caught up with her at the end of the day, when she still had an after-school student government meeting to oversee. There was also an open house for parents scheduled later that night. Oh, and she wanted to stop by volleyball tryouts, too, to see how those were going. She’s so much a part of her students’ lives that they call her “Mama Taki.”

“I guess I have become kind of a mom figure, or a grandma,” she said. “I was always an eager beaver—you know, ‘Let’s put on a show.’ I guess I still have that enthusiasm, but now I’ve become more of a mentor.” That’s true not only for her students, but also for her colleagues. Takahashi is no less a self-starter than the three

other Chicago-area honorees I interviewed, but her brand of self-directed professional development included liberal helpings of input from her colleagues.

In particular, she said, working with student teachers keeps her creative and fresh.

“When they have the passion, the drive, and the motivation, and they’re willing to take a risk, I just love it,” she said of the college students. Brimming with ideas and idealism, they force Takahashi to reexamine her own teaching. But she also wants to make sure the younger generation of educators shares her passion for the job. “It’s one of the things about passing the torch,” she explained. “You have the fire, and you want them to have the fire.”

Paddy O’Reilly agreed. The Chicago Academy, he pointed out, is like a teaching hospital. “Residents”—first-year teachers—are assigned mentors as part of a leadership-development program, which lasts an entire school year. The reciprocal learning opportunity was the reason O’Reilly left John Greenleaf Whittier School, where he’d been teaching for 21 years, to join the Chicago Academy faculty. “I owe my life to teaching,” he said, “so I gotta give something back.”

Mixing it up, bouncing ideas off of each other, and sitting in on colleagues’

lessons—these are among the most natural means of professional development. They’re also among the most difficult to schedule, but I’ve found that the best veterans make time.

“What impresses me about these people is that most are able to ‘de-isolate’ their craft,” says Berry. “Teaching has long been decried because of the isolation that most teachers are expected to work in. Somehow they have found a way to connect.”

The Golden Apple program provides at least a temporary connection during the sabbatical: In addition to a semester’s worth of free coursework at Northwestern University, each year’s 10 winners meet once a week—usually to cover a specific topic or theme. Schergen and Takahashi’s group, for example, focused on “experiential education”: how to work more field trips, experiments, and simulations into their lessons.

But as much as they appreciated the break, the veterans I observed said they were glad when their sabbaticals were over and they could return to their students and the environment that best fuels their professional growth. “The classroom is who I am,” explained Ramzi Farran.

Sitting on one of the tables in his classroom, as the afternoon sun spilled through the windows, Spider Schergen concurred. “I felt like I was home again,” he said. “This feels right.” ■

Steven Drummond is the education editor at National Public Radio in Washington, D.C. To read a Web-only sidebar to this piece, visit: www.teachermagazine.org/go/young



Golden Apple

All Children Deserve Excellent Teachers