

## Teacher from Wheaton's St. Francis wins Golden Apple Award

By Bob Sanchez | Daily Herald Staff

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A student once described teacher Susan Harsa as "a little ball of French fire" because of the energy and enthusiasm she brings to the classroom.

Her approach is a big reason the respected French teacher at St. Francis High School in Wheaton has now added a golden highlight to her 38-year career.

More than a dozen friends, colleagues and family members burst into Harsa's fifth-period class Tuesday to surprise her with news that she had received the vaunted Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Harsa is one of 10 winners, all high school teachers, chosen from a field of 562 Chicago-area nominees. She is the only winner this year from the West suburbs, and is the first St. Francis teacher ever to win the award.

"I don't know what to say," a visibly shocked Harsa said as her students cheered and applauded. "I am so overwhelmed. This is far beyond anything I ever dreamed of."

After the initial shock subsided, Harsa said the key thing she learned during her years of teaching - including 31 years at St. Francis - is to tap into the enthusiasm of her students.

"Every day to me brings laughter, sometimes tears, but it's always an experience," Harsa said. "Don't be afraid to embrace new technology, new methodology. A teacher always has to be a student."

Kristina Uelsmann, a junior at the school, remembers Harsa holding a plastic sword and speaking only French to her and her classmates.

"Even if she's having a bad day, she's always energetic," the St. Charles resident said. "She's always willing to teach us something new."

Harsa said one of her goals is to inspire her students to "go beyond their borders and study cultures in other parts of the world." So, for many years she has been planning and leading a summer trip to France for her students. Twenty-three students are slated to make the trip next month.

"Taking children out of the classroom, out of the textbook and making what you teach become alive is such a reward," she said. "It's so exciting to watch their eyes open up."

St. Francis principal Raeann Huhn said Harsa is "an outstanding teacher" who goes above and beyond.

"We have great teachers in our building," Huhn said. "But she is one who has a great connection to everyone - whether it's students in her class, her colleagues, parents. She's just a personable woman who really cares about all people."

While Harsa is St. Francis' first Golden Apple winner, Joan Kustak, a mathematics teacher at the school, was a finalist for the award in 2001.

The Golden Apple, now in its 25th year, recognizes and honors "outstanding teachers for their contributions to building a stronger, better-educated citizenry," according to the Golden Apple Foundation.

"It's like being a movie star who won an Oscar," said Griselle M. Diaz-Gemmati, a Chicago teacher who won the award in 1993 and was a presenter of Harsa's award on Tuesday. "All of sudden, you're recognized. Your work is put forward."

Harsa and this year's nine other award winners will get a tuition-free, six-month sabbatical to study at Northwestern University. They also will receive a \$3,000 cash award and membership in the Golden Apple Academy of Educators, which has inducted 250 teachers.

In the meantime, she's not even thinking about retiring.

"Someday I would like to mentor young teachers, but I'm not there yet," Harsa said as colleagues started cutting the congratulatory cake. "I have a lot of upperclassmen now who are in my French 1 class, so that has kind of revitalized me."