

BY EMILY THORNTON CALVO

Positive Change

By Connecting the Classroom to the World

The Golden Apple Award is the “Oscar” of the classroom.

Each year, the Golden Apple Foundation reviews the nominations of over 1,000 Chicago-area educators noted for their teaching excellence. Ten teachers are chosen for the award, which not only highlights teachers who are a positive influence on their students, but it strives to advance the profession by sharing insights that deepen children’s learning experience.

Saint Xavier is proud to share the stories of four Golden Apple winners who are among our alumni.

John Naisbitt: **Be the Change**



John Naisbitt's classroom is a reflection of his expansive world view, an eclectic assortment of popular icons, such as *Simpsons* and *South Park* characters—and thousands of small photos of students who have crossed his path. Oak bookcases line the walls, and maps and globes inspire students to think beyond their affluent Hinsdale, Ill., suburb.

So after an Elmhurst, Ill., family had a house fire that began with a candle used to mourn the loss of a family member who died in Iraq, Naisbitt's class was quick to raise money to help. Likewise, when a student was diagnosed with leukemia, another student, Ariana Staes, launched her own fundraiser that garnered \$1,200 for research. The experience sparked an appreciation for helping others. Now in college, Ariana is majoring in special education.

"Ghandi said, 'Be the change you want to see in the world,'" says **John Naisbitt '92**, a Golden Apple winner who teaches history at Hinsdale Central High School. "I want my students to learn this and not be intimidated by distance, cost or limitations that deter others." They aren't. These sophomore and junior students decide where and how to put their energy—and distance is irrelevant. When they learned that children in Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, lose 20 percent or more of their meager nutrition to worms and parasites, they sponsored a badminton tournament to fund medication. The kids raised \$20,000, which helped 1 million children. The students also launched a fundraiser to eradicate malaria among African children. While Naisbitt usually inspires these activities in his classroom, the generosity is contagious and often migrates to clubs and other organizations in the school.

Naisbitt credits his mother for instilling his sense of compassion—and being a role model as an educator. His mother taught school in Evergreen Park, Ill., for 30 years, but he didn't commit to the profession until later. In fact, his high school creative writing teacher sparked an interest in being a writer. So, when entering Saint Xavier in his mid-20s, he focused on a career as a journalist, but was soon captivated by the power of affecting change as an educator.

"We're all citizens of the world," says Naisbitt. "History is an appreciation of that reality and we can help make that world better." Consequently, Naisbitt's educational philosophy is as much about affecting events as it is about learning them.

"There's a cliché about being satisfied knowing you've affected one person," remarked Naisbitt. "That doesn't resonate with me. I can't be satisfied until I've reached *all my students.*"

Mr. Hollander's Opus: Inspire Thinking



When a student's running shoe flies out of the classroom door at Kennedy Junior High in Naperville, Ill., that means **David Hollander '89**, is preparing his eighth graders for their exam on the U.S. Constitution. The exercise induces a benign form of chaos—a firsthand experience that sparks an unfamiliar need for order; for process; for mutual respect. It sparks a discussion about natural rights and rules, which is a perfect introduction to the need for government. This is just one way Hollander inspires students to experience history, to WANT information and to THINK about the relevance of what they learn.

Hollander, a math wiz in high school, approached college as an adventurer. He registered for classes that were less familiar—like history. While at DePauw University in

Greencastle, Ind., he met John Baughman, a brilliant aging storyteller and WWII veteran who made history come alive. In the professor's class, Hollander wasn't simply taught about dates and events. He learned to think about what they meant. And, he got excited about history.

After graduation, Hollander grappled with his future. Teaching had always interested him, but the prospect of a profession with low pay and minimal respect failed to excite him. He returned home to Chicago and was encouraged by his future wife to try it. At Saint Xavier University, Hollander encountered other professors who reinforced his commitment to teaching and he earned a master's in education.

"My class is a success when students want to go to the next step," says Hollander. And he's rewarded when he sees students arrive early to class. They start discussing the

lesson because they enjoy reasoning their way through the historic tapestry. He watches discussions migrate to the hallway when class ends. "I try to bring energy to the classroom," adds Hollander.

Beyond the creativity, books and exercises are fundamental beliefs that also enhance Hollander's effectiveness as a teacher. "I try to discover what each student has to offer and then make the most of it. All kids are different—and they grow and change. You have to accept where each one is at and say, 'Everyone has something to offer. Let's see what you can do and make the most of it.' In doing so, Hollander watches kids discover a new thirst for knowledge.

Mary Kennedy: Accomplish the Unfathomable



“**T**o be or not to be,” chimes an eighth grader dressed in Shakespearean garb. Like the student, the classroom is decorated to be more reminiscent of castles and kings than the children’s running shoes peeking under the robes.

Teaching *Hamlet* to eighth graders may seem like asking for the moon, but for **Mary Kennedy ’01**, it’s simply inviting students to be stars. At St. Bede the Venerable in Chicago, her students learn by acting it out with costumes, hats, swords and other props from Shakespeare’s period, which brings the play to life.

“Some students think I’m setting them up to fail,” says Kennedy, “because *Hamlet* is so difficult. I tell them that if they pay

attention and do the work, they’ll all get an A or B.” Her students amaze themselves by doing just that. Kennedy brings her own love of literature and art into the classroom—and mastering the play teaches even “A” students that they can achieve more than they expect.

Kennedy always wanted to be a teacher. She remembers her first grade teacher and many after that, who showed they cared about their students and sharing their knowledge. At St. Ignatius High School in Chicago, Kennedy’s teacher was such a wonderful inspiration—who was also a Golden Apple winner—she asked to be in his Greek class. At Saint Xavier, Professor James Rabbitt’s unbridled enthusiasm and pride was contagious.

But teaching isn’t always easy. When a student isn’t giving his or her best, Kennedy requests “a sidebar at the podium.” There, she asks the student to give the class a chance.

“I talk them out of how they’re seeing themselves and convince them they can do it,” says Kennedy. “Students need to be seen as people and I owe it to them to awaken something in them.” Other teachers, and her exceptionally positive principal reinforce a positive attitude that helps ride out the rough moments.

For Kennedy, winning the Golden Apple Award was an honor, but she also feels the responsibility to take students even further. “It’s all about moving forward,” she says, “and not looking back.”

John Nieciak: Collaborating to Find Truth



In spring of 2007, in the multipurpose community room at the Japanese American Service Committee on Chicago's North Side, John Nieciak's students unveiled an exhibition remembering victims of Japanese internment during World War II. Community leaders, educators and survivors studied sculpture, paintings, poetry and a moving multimedia presentation depicting the chaos and suffering endured by Americans who had been interred.

For **John Nieciak '85, '98 and '07**, who teaches reading and writing to middle school children at Mark Sheridan School in the Bridgeport neighborhood of Chicago, the exhibition was an example of collaborative learning. When his students learned about Japanese internment during World War II, they were moved—and wanted to share the story. Through collaboration between Chicago Arts Partnership for Education and the Japanese-American Service Committee, students from Mark Sheridan School and

Northside College Preparatory High School created a multimedia project depicting this American episode. Kids met camp survivors. They learned about overcoming obstacles. The process fostered a deeper perspective and students cultivated a “taste” for truth.

“Today, literacy means being able to communicate with a variety of people in a variety of media,” says Nieciak. Therefore, collaborating with community members to create relevant multimedia projects presents outstanding learning opportunities.

At the end of the presentation, a woman, who had been held in the camps stood up. She explained that after being interred, she spent the first 20 years ashamed and never spoke of her experiences. During the second 20 years, she spoke to everyone. Now, after seeing the student's message, she felt she could let it go. Her story was told.

“No test score can measure a new perspective,” explains Nieciak, but through this project, students met or exceeded their

literacy goals.

“There are always going to be kids who can't get into it at first,” adds Nieciak. “I try to take the pressure off the child and put it on myself. It's my job to find out what interests a kid and create a place for him to fit in.” Nieciak experienced this method firsthand. “Saint Xavier did an excellent job of educating me, which means drawing me out.” The goal is to spark interaction that broadens viewpoints and creates community.

These Golden Apple winners exemplify the positive attitude and belief in their students that not only affect the children they teach, but also live on in how the students live their lives. As Golden Apple winners, teachers have an opportunity to share their insights with other teachers in order to further the profession, which then affects even more students through the Chicago area and beyond. **SXM**

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