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Award-winning teacher: 'Twenty-seven years later, I still like this age'

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NEW BRIGHTON — Highview Middle School teacher Jon Larson has been named 2010 Minnesota Middle Level Educator of the Year.

Larson, a seventh-grade math teacher at Highview Middle School, was recognized with the 2010 award at the Minnesota Middle School Association's state conference last month.

Discussing the award at the Jan. 11 School Board meeting, board member Barb Bollum told the story of how Larson called one night 14 years ago to discuss how well her son was doing in his class.

"To have any teacher take time to pick up the phone, to not talk about a problem but how well the students are doing and how they enjoy having students in their class ... is just an inkling of how wonderful Jon has been over the years in terms of reaching out to students, helping students, coming up with instructional strategies and helping the district with district-wide curriculum changes in math," she said. "I think he's touched many, many lives and will continue to touch many lives."

Board President Jon Tynjala said Larson was among his daughter's favorite teachers last year. "Frankly, I think it reflects that team at Highview," he added.

The press conducted this e-mail Q and A interview with Larson, a Golden Valley resident, last week:

Q: Where are you from? What has been your education and career path to this point?

A: I grew up in Coon Rapids and went to Coon Rapids High School. I graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College and got my master's in curriculum and instruction from the University of St. Thomas. I have been teaching middle school math in Mounds View for 27 years.

Q: Professional burnout is common in your field. How have you been able to avoid that and maintain a good attitude?

A: I have avoided it by enjoying the students and always trying to learn from them. Middle school students are full of energy, and channeling that energy in the right direction is a challenge. Keeping lessons fresh, trying new strategies, telling a joke each day, and getting a SMART Board have all helped to avoid burnout.



Larson helps a student with his lock at a recent orientation event. - Submitted photo

Q: What has been the greatest reward of being a teacher?

A: The greatest reward in teaching is seeing students be successful. I also enjoy seeing students enjoy learning and improving their efforts.

Q: What has been the greatest challenge?

A: Finding ways to reach students who come from difficult situations, or from homes where education is not a priority.

Q: How has teaching been different than you thought it would be before you started your career?

A: I did part of my student teaching in a middle school. My last entry in my journal was "I will never teach middle school!". I found having my own classes and being able to make relationships with middle-school students makes all the difference. Twenty-seven years later, I still like this age.

Q: Do you have a most memorable student?

A: Mike Novotny was a student I had in my first year of teaching. He was a smart, talented kid, but struggled in his middle and high school years and eventually ended up at an alternative school. We kept in touch throughout and he eventually turned his life around, graduated from Bethel University, got his master's degree, and is now a superintendent in a Texas school district.

Q: If you weren't a teacher, in what profession would you be?

A: I always wanted to play professional baseball. Unfortunately you have to have a lot of talent to do that.

Q: What do you do when you're not working?

A: I am married and have two sons — a 10th-grader and senior at Hopkins High School. My wife is also a middle school math teacher. I have coached my son's baseball teams for the past 10 years and enjoy fishing and boot hockey. This is only done after I do my homework, of course.

Q: What's in your five-year plan, personally and professionally?

A: I'm not sure the Twins are looking for a slow, weak-hitting, 48-year-old, so I hope to continue to get better at teaching, find better jokes and get my two sons off to college.

Q: What do you wish the public understood more about the teaching profession?

A: We have tremendous teachers at Highview and throughout Minnesota. There are outstanding things going on in our classrooms and most kids are learning a ton. Teaching has become more challenging in the last 27 years. After 27 years, I still do schoolwork at home every night.

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