

Press Release
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Award-Winning New Mexico Science Teachers for 2011

The New Mexico Science Teachers Association (NMSTA) is dedicated to providing a network for educators throughout the state to work collaboratively towards improving science education from pre-kindergarten through college. The NMSTA assists classroom teachers to enhance science education by providing guidance and sharing strategies through professional development.

On October 20-22, NMSTA held a fall conference along with the Environmental Education Association of New Mexico. The joint conference in Farmington was generously hosted by Piedra Vista High School and attracted more than 200 teachers and informal educators from around the state. Teachers attended a variety of sessions geared for elementary or secondary grade levels with topics ranging from teaching methods to science content areas.

Several New Mexico teachers were presented with teaching awards during the conference. A new *Excellence in Teaching Science Award* from NMSTA was presented to teachers at the elementary, middle and high school levels for 2011. This is the first year for these awards from NMSTA, and the winners were selected from a pool of applicants by an NMSTA awards committee. Scientifically Connected Communities (SC²) awarded \$150 to each teacher. Bonnie Dodge, who teaches science at Infinity Alternative High School in Belen was the award recipient for the High School level. Brian Claar, a science teacher at Camino Real Middle School in Las Cruces, NM was presented with the Middle School award. There were two awardees for the elementary grade level: Jennifer Evans from Mesa and Nizhoni Elementary schools in Shiprock and Thelma Peterson from Riverside Elementary School in Gadsen. The 2011 awardees *Excellence in Teaching Science Award* is a new award and the winners were selected from a pool of applicants by an NMSTA awards committee.

Bonnie Dodge has taught science at Infinity High School in Belen for 6 ½ years. Bonnie designed a 4-hour block for science that combined classroom, lab, and field classes to address state standards and career opportunities. The first year Bonnie taught geology. After some background instruction, students hiked the hills around Socorro with New Mexico Tech professors, and learned to identify rocks and minerals as well as about careers in the field of geology.

The next year students studied life science at the Sevellita Refuge by mapping plant and animal life, hiking, and other activities in other areas. Again, they were led by professors from UNM and other professionals. They got hot, sweaty, and dirty, or cold and dirty as they drew grids and mapped life in the grids.

Students have studied environmental science and been involved with the Bosque Education Monitoring Project (BEMP) project through Bosque Academy in

Albuquerque, and the Whitfield project in Belen. They mapped the new Infinity High School campus and landscaped it with appropriate plants, drainage, and other materials.

Bonnie will be announced by the National Association of Geo Science Teacher as their choice for the *Outstanding Earth Science Teacher for 2011-2012 in the Southwest Division*. This organization is encouraging Bonnie to apply for a national fellowship in Washington DC to advise and work with education.

Brian Claar is an enthusiastic middle school science teacher who instills curiosity and love of science in his students by integrating inquiry-based curriculum in his classroom. Mr. Claar keeps live animals in his life science class as teaching tools for students as they learn about adaptation, appropriate care and environments for specific species. His classroom is an active learning experience for students.

His love of rocketry and space science has given Camino Real students opportunities to participate in a variety of events. Brian's students designed and constructed an experiment that was chosen to be included in the rocket for the 2nd Annual Spacegrant Student Launch, co-sponsored by NASA, held at the Virgin Galactic Spaceport in southern New Mexico. Their experiment, entitled *Heat & Elements*, focused on the effects of space flight and thermodynamics on different metals.

Brian encourages student participation in a variety of community events. He sponsors several STEM clubs on his campus. Every year, his students provide a booth for the Science Education Alliance (SEA) Fair in Las Cruces for K-6 students to engage in hands-on science projects. Brian serves as a role model for life-long learning by representing New Mexico in the NASA Teacher Astronaut Training Program in Houston. He also facilitates teacher professional development workshops in his district.

Jennifer Evans teaches gifted classes at Mesa and Nizhoni Elementary schools in Shiprock. 2nd-5th grades. Her gardening projects have re-connected students to the natural environment that is an important part of Navajo culture. The schools received \$2,500 from the Home Depot Building Community grant and \$5,000 from the Albert I. Pierce Foundation. Hundreds of students from both schools have helped to dig, plant, water, and care for the gardens while they learned about Navajo names and uses for plants. This year Jennifer wrote a BP grant for a community sized dome greenhouse ecosystem. She plans to continue her efforts to enrich the lives of all her students, including the gifted students, and help them design a sustainable future both for themselves and the Shiprock community.

This journey began with Bio-regional Outdoor Education Project (BOEP) training. She learned about her home on the Colorado Plateau with its related science, Navajo culture, and integrated curriculum. She began teaching her gifted students on a two-year rotation; one year about land and the past, the second year about water and the future. She used many of the BOEP activities and helped other teachers to teach science based on their standards.

Jennifer and her gifted students worked on two distance learning projects with two classes in Hawaii. Her third grade students worked with a third grade class in Hawaii to investigate and compare shadows in each location. Ms. Evans' fourth graders worked with a fourth grade class in Hawaii to design an investigation about olivine crystals found in our local volcanic rocks. This year all three of the second grade classes will work with three second grade classes in Hawaii on an investigation.

Jennifer learned how to integrate technology to make virtual field trips which are online for everyone. This year, her gifted students are working with the Shiprock High School environmental science class to do a water quality study in the San Juan River. The field trips will be real, but she will share them virtually through a district blog as well. They hope to find that the San Juan River at Shiprock will support fish life and stock some endangered Pike Minnows.

Thelma Peterson teaches at Riverside Elementary school in the Gadsden Independent School District, located between Las Cruces, NM and El Paso, Texas. Because Thelma loves science, she finds many ways to explore science while incorporating language arts with her elementary students. She creates a world of science within in her classroom where students experience earth, space and medical science. They often dress the part when learning about a scientist through their literature projects. Ms. Peterson keeps her students excited in every subject area, and demonstrates to her students that they are always learning with everything they do, that science is everywhere.

Thelma is on a team of 21st Century Southern New Mexico Engineering, Mathematics, Aeronautics Academy (SEMAA) teachers. Her outstanding performance has led her to become one of the professional development instructors for teachers new to the SEMAA program.

The ***Excellence in Science Teaching*** Awards will be given to teachers again next year. New Mexico Science Teachers Association hopes that many teachers will apply for this outstanding honor. Applications are available online at <http://nmsta.org> under the links for *Annual Conference* and then for *NMSTA Science Awards*.