

# Excellence in Teaching Awards

A+ Teachers

by Tony DiMartino

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Next to family, teachers have the greatest impact on a child's life. Emerson, a St. Louis-based global manufacturing and technology company, recognizes this through its Excellence in Teaching Awards, honoring 100 local educators annually with a cash grant to support professional development and matching grants to their schools. Recipients are nominated by their institutions. Three of this year's honorees come from the heart of the LN reader area.

## Christine Bugnitz

It's unlikely that Christine Bugnitz's students will grow up hating gym. "Not everyone is naturally coordinated," says Bugnitz, who has taught physical education at Community School for 21 years. "But given the right instruction and a supportive environment where they don't feel self-conscious, any child can learn the joy of running around and playing."

Bugnitz, a former high school athlete, focuses on the early childhood group, nursery school through second grade. She takes a nontraditional approach to PE, incorporating visualization and relaxation techniques and emphasizing overall fitness, not just athletics. Twice a week, she and a fellow teacher combine PE with French class. "It's amazing how fast kids learn to say 'play' and 'throw' and 'run' in French when they're actually doing those things," Bugnitz says. When asked the secret of good teaching, she doesn't hesitate. "Empathy and love," she says. "I love these kids. I'll do whatever I can to help them get through life."



"I just love these kids!" Christine Bugnitz teaches PE at Community School.  
Photo by Jason Mueller

## **Joanne Curran**

Joanne Curran got off the bus after her first day of school and said, “I want to be a teacher when I grow up.” She’s been teaching now for 29 years, 23 of them at Ladue Horton Watkins High School, and hasn’t regretted a single moment--even though many of her students prefer Facebook to homework.

“Some of the kids refuse to open a book outside of class,” says Curran, who teaches reading strategies to grades nine through 12. “But the upside is that they’re funny, energetic, enthusiastic and honest. And there’s nothing more satisfying than seeing that light bulb go on when a student finally gets it. That’s what keeps me coming back to the classroom.”

What makes Curran an award-winning teacher? “I’m kind, I’m caring, but I always tell the truth,” she says. “If students are willing to work with me, I can give them customized strategies to solve their reading problems.”

She recalls a former sophomore who was reading at a sixth-grade level. “By the end of the year, we brought her up to a 12th-grade level.” The girl visited Curran the other day with good news: “She’s just been accepted at Southeast Missouri State,” Curran says with pride. “She wants to be a pediatrician!”

## **Tracy Nondorf**

Tracy Nondorf’s students have Mrs. Brown to thank. “She was my phenomenal fifth grade teacher, and she made history come alive,” recalls Nondorf. “I made up my mind that I was going to make learning as much fun as she did.”

Nondorf has taught history and political science at Ursuline Academy, an all-girls school, for 20 years. “They’re on Facebook; they’re texting nonstop; so it’s all about staying current and getting them hooked visually.” Unlike previous generations of students, they don’t necessarily watch the news or read the paper, she admits. “But they’re totally plugged in. They get some exposure to news online, so I make the most of it. I tap into things they’re interested in and build on that.”

What interests her 11th and 12th grade students? “The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the economy,” she says. “I try to weave the study of history and politics into current events, and make it as relevant as possible to their experience. They’re opinionated and I value their opinions--but I also present as many different sides to an issue as possible.”

Nondorf says that she loves learning, and enjoys sharing and exploring what she knows with others. “But the most satisfying thing about teaching is when we have a good discussion in class and they ask insightful questions. That’s when I know I’m doing my job--and if you can get a response from a teenager, you’re doing OK.”