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A 'great, great' teacher gets his just deserts

By DEB NICKLAY, Of The Globe Gazette

MASON CITY — Gary Sinnwell is the last person who would talk about himself — but there are plenty others who would do it for him.

“What would I say? I would say ‘master teacher,’” said Mason City High School Associate Principal Dan Delaney. “That’s what I would say. A great, great teacher.”

Sinnwell, 44, a mathematics instructor, has been selected the Iowa recipient of the 2006-2007 Siemens Award for Advanced Placement. He was chosen by the Siemens Foundation and the College Board and is the only Iowa teacher to receive the award. Criteria is based upon scores achieved by Advanced Placement (AP) students taught by Sinnwell.

The award recognizes the best in teaching.

“Mr. Sinnwell’s enthusiasm for teaching AP and his willingness to go above and beyond to ensure students’ success is noted as outstanding,” by the Foundation, said school officials in a press release.

The Mason City School Board honored Sinnwell during its meeting on Monday.

Sinnwell has taught at the high school for 20 years. Before that, he taught at Iowa City Regina High School.

Sinnwell is a Waterloo native, the eighth of 10 children. He graduated from Waterloo Columbus High School in 1980 and the University of Northern Iowa in 1984. He is in the process of completing his master’s degree.

He credits his own “excellent” high school teachers for inspiration, adding that Monsignor Walter Brunkan, then Columbus principal, embodied all the qualities of an effective, caring educator.

Brunkan now serves as pastor of St. Mary’s churches, Greene and Roseville.

“He exemplified the Christian attitude of being a servant and helping people,” Sinnwell said.

Sinnwell volunteered at Waterloo West High School while he was in college and found his calling.

“Working with young kids, I thought, ‘This is my niche.’ I liked the idea of impacting and influencing young people.”

He says he has not been disappointed, working in the classroom and for a time coaching girls basketball and golf teams. In addition to this high school position, he serves as an adjunct instructor at North Iowa Area Community College.

He dismissed the notion that he is any kind of superstar in the classroom — he said his colleagues, especially instructor Cheryl Ross, are far better than he.

“This entire school district does great things, in many areas,” he said.

He does allow that he is “demanding, yet fair.”

“I ask a lot of the kids, but at the same time, they come to expect a lot out of me.” His goal: He wants students to work cooperatively and be self-directed learners.

“That when they go to college, they seek out the things that they need; that they do not wait for someone to do something. They must be forward-thinking,” he said.

Senior Abby Goetzinger, a student in pre-calculus and AP calculus, said Sinnwell is “tough, but fun, too. We can joke a bit — but pretty soon, we’re right back on task,” she said.

Sinnwell is at school by 7 a.m. to help students and regularly stays late, “up to 9 p.m.” to do the same, Goetzinger said.

He said he will continue to teach until it’s not fulfilling any longer — but he cannot imagine that ever happening.

“I couldn’t picture ever leaving the job that I have,” Sinnwell mused. “At the end of the day, I think, ‘This is a great day.’ I feel that way every day.”

