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Ag foundation's teacher of the year isn't afraid to get hands dirty

WALTON, Kan. – For Walton 21st Century Rural Life Center fifth-grade teacher Carol Budde, learning is doing, and she isn't afraid to get her hands dirty in the process. When her students take turns scraping uneaten fruits and vegetables from lunch trays for the school compost pile or transfer those leftovers to the vermiculture bin containing red wiggler worms, she's right there with them.

Budde, a 10-year teaching veteran, was recently honored as the 2010 Janet Sims Memorial Teacher of the Year by the Kansas Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom (KFAC). The KFAC award recognizes teachers who instill a passion for learning about agriculture within their students. The Foundation honors one teacher annually who has successfully integrated agricultural education into his or her pre-existing curricula.

Three years ago the Walton 21st Century Rural Life Center switched to an agriculture-based experiential learning model, and Budde notes that this model gives her an excellent view of what's important to her students and what they find most interesting. "I take the information I have gathered with these projects and enrich activities to take [my students] to a deeper understanding based upon their interest levels," adds the Kansas State University graduate.

In addition to composting uneaten produce for greenhouse plants, Budde's students also work in the school greenhouse and raise feeder pigs and baby rabbits. Her class has the unique opportunity to be a 4-H club, and they are known as the "Walton '5' 4-H Club." They attend regularly scheduled monthly meetings, and they also work on 4-H- and agriculture-related projects during that academic day that relate to state standards. "These projects provide countless opportunities for all types of students to gain knowledge that helps them with academics and in their daily lives, from teamwork to perseverance," says Budde.

Experiential learning-based projects, such as raising feeder pigs, aren't just one day or two week projects; these projects are on-going in Budde's classroom. Her class' market swine project begins in the fall, when students are introduced to swine and how the food supply chain relates to these animals. They participate in an additional class offered by Harvey County Extension on pork quality assurance, so that they are knowledgeable about the proper techniques of raising quality pork. Trips to local fields are planned, so they can see crops planted and grown, which helps them understand where swine feed comes from. The sows of the class' future piglets are artificially inseminated at a different location, and students become familiar with this process.

In the spring, Budde's students are able to practice the skills they have learned in the fall and winter months. In preparation for the piglets' arrival, students design and develop a pen suitable for the animals. They learn how to clean and show pigs. Each student writes a persuasive essay which is critiqued by community members to determine who will show the market swine at the local fair in the summer.

As with any experiential learning-based project, some outcomes are unexpected or the results don't turn out as planned. These instances may be something Budde or her class didn't have control over, but she's the first to admit those experiences are still valuable for the students. "Before we begin a project, we discuss what we need to do to make our project a success. If, for some reason, our project does not turn out successfully, we talk about what we could have done differently," explains Budde. "This is just all part of our learning experience."

Budde was honored with the KFAC award at the Kansas Agriculture Day celebration on March 18 in Topeka, where she got to meet Kansas Secretary of Agriculture Josh Svaty. At the awards ceremony, Cathy Musick, KFAC executive director noted "We are delighted to honor Carol for her work with students that increases their knowledge about agriculture. She is definitely a role model for her peers."

As KFAC's Teacher of the Year, Budde will attend the National Agriculture in the Classroom (NAITC) Conference which will be held in Baltimore this June. At the conference, she will have the opportunity to attend sessions on a variety of topics, participate in traveling workshops (tours) and meet teachers and AITC staff from across the country. She is looking forward to seeing what other educators have been incorporating into their curriculum that reinforces state and national standards. "This will give me a fresh look on what else I can do for the students I serve," said Budde.

Budde, a Harvey county native, remains involved in the Newton community where she was raised. In addition to teaching, she currently serves on the Harvey County 4-H Program Development Committee and Extension Council, is a 4-H Ambassador Advisor and is a past officer and current member of the Harvey County Free Fair board. Her husband Tracy is a partner in the family-owned painting business Budde and Son, Inc., and they have two daughters, Brylee, 4, and Brynn, 15 months.

The Janet Sims Memorial Teacher of the Year award is named in honor of Janet Sims, who passed away in June 2007 from Lou Gehrig's disease. Sims, an educator herself, had served on the KFAC board from November 2005 until her death.

"Being selected as KFAC's Teacher of the Year is a tremendous honor. I am humbled by this opportunity and excited to share my educational experiences," said Budde.

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