

# Teacher looks for unique ways to reach his students

- Outstanding Educator uses humor, ventriloquism to help children learn.

By MATTHEW MERITT  
Star-Gazette  
[mmeritt@stargazette.com](mailto:mmeritt@stargazette.com)

WESTFIELD -- The real work for educators comes when things aren't going well, according to Bruce Weaver.

A fifth-grade teacher who has been at Westfield Area Elementary School in Tioga County, Pa., for the last 32 years, Weaver has had his successes and his frustrations with students.



"You can't keep trying to get it through to them the same way if it's not working. You have to find some other way to explain it to them, and that's really hard," said the Twin Tiers Outstanding Educator for November.

If there's one thing that can be said about Weaver, it's that he's not afraid of finding some other way.

Whether it's his ventriloquism, talking to people on spaceships through his ham radio, his trademark sense of humor or running the school newspaper -- The WAES Chronicle - - Weaver does what he can to keep students excited.

His efforts have worked, said parent and Westfield kindergarten teacher Nancy Young, whose 10-year-old daughter Allison is in Weaver's class this year.

"My daughter just loves coming to school. She does great this year. She's doing better than she ever has," Young said.

The sponsor of the November Twin Tiers Outstanding Educator Award is Seneca Beverage Corp. Weaver will receive \$500 as part of the honor, and Westfield Elementary will also receive \$500.

The awards recognize educators who have touched the lives of their students. A community panel of judges chooses the winner from nominations sent by students, parents and colleagues. Douglas Tifft, vice president of administration at Hardinge Inc. in Horseheads, is chairman of the panel.

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**(Continued)**

# Teacher grabs them with laughs



Photo by MILES B. NORMAN/Star-Gazette

**Bruce Weaver uses a ventriloquist's dummy, Aunt Gabby, to present awards throughout Westfield Area Elementary School recently.**

- **Westfield educator aims for ways to engage his students.**

By **MATTHEW MERITT**  
Star-Gazette  
mmeritt@stargazette.com

WESTFIELD -- To get students to tune in to their studies, Bruce Weaver has them tune in to a radio.

The fifth-grade teacher at Westfield Area Elementary School in Tioga County, Pa., is a licensed ham radio (also called amateur radio) operator. His students use the equipment he keeps in his classroom to talk to people all over the world and even in space.

In May, Weaver's class used the radio to speak to Mark Shuttleworth, the South African businessman who paid \$20 million for a ride aboard a Russian vessel to the international space station.

"It's something different, out of the ordinary," said Weaver, the Twin Tiers Outstanding Educator for November.

"This is awesome," said one student, adjusting his seat to get a better view as Weaver used a computer screen to track the progress of a space satellite transmitting ham radio signals.

The radio is one of many ways Weaver, who has been with the district 32 years, keeps his students engaged.

A professional ventriloquist, he often brings his ventriloquist figure Aunt Gabby to class to help with his lessons.

"She's cool," said fifth-grader Makayla Phillips, 10.

"And what are you saying? I'm not cool?" Weaver responded.

Weaver also arranges contests and encourages students to write for the school newspaper, which he has run since 1976.

Aunt Gabby is the pen name Weaver uses as a writer for various children's magazines. He had the ventriloquist figure created last year based on his vision of Gabby, letting students help decide how she would look.

These devices are more than just props. Weaver uses them to teach. For example, he explains angles, degrees and something called an azimuth -- a geometrical term -- when demonstrating how radio transmissions pass through satellites.

"I think you've got to find something that they're interested in and relate whatever it is you're teaching to that," said Weaver, a native of Wentlings Corners, Pa.

Throwing in a few jokes doesn't hurt either.

"Mr. Weaver is really fun," 10-year-old John Vasco said.

John looked forward to being in Weaver's class, saying of all the teachers he's had, "He's the funniest."

Weaver is a fixture around Knoxville, where he lives. **(Continued)**

"Everybody in the community knows him because he's an educator at heart, and it relates to how so many people know him," said longtime neighbor Cheryl Edgcomb, who nominated Weaver for the Outstanding Educator award.

"The kids click with him, so do the adults," Edgcomb said. "I've watched him be dedicated for 30 years. ... He still manages to keep the kids excited."

Weaver's ham radio generated one of the most exciting events in his career.

In 1991 his class spoke to a group of Pearl Harbor survivors who kept in touch through ham radio.

The students invited the veterans to their class and 38 of them from 11 states showed up. CNN covered the visit and used clips from its coverage on a program commemorating the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor.

One of the veterans, Lawrence Kuehn, of New Ulm, Texas, donated money for Weaver's class to purchase new radio equipment.

Despite the publicity, Weaver is a modest, soft-spoken man. "He doesn't like to toot his own horn," said reading teacher Jane Spohn. "You know, he still gives it his all, even after 30 years," Spohn added. "He's on the ball every day."

Weaver wanted to be a teacher ever since high school, when he noticed that younger students looked up to him.

"I like working with the kids. I like seeing the look in their eye when they finally understand something that's been giving them trouble," he said.

Weaver estimates he has taught more than 800 students during his more than three decades in the classroom.

For the most part, he said, his teaching style and his jokes have pretty much stayed the same.

"That's what's nice," he said. "Kids move on and you get a new group and they haven't heard any of it."

### **Bruce Weaver**

- Occupation: Fifth-grade teacher at Westfield Area Elementary School.
- Age: 54.
- Residence: Knoxville.
- Education: Bachelor's degree from Clarion University.
- Family: Wife of 31 years, Jan; sons Brad, 29, and Philip, 21, and daughter Natalie, 25.
- Hobbies: Amateur radio, writing for children's magazines, ventriloquism, and computers.
- Quotable: "I do like to joke around a lot, and that kind of keeps their attention."
- Teaching philosophy: "I want the kids to enjoy learning. There's a lot of hard work involved in it. ... I think if you can find something that really interests a child and relate what you're teaching to something they can identify with. That's one way to get through to them."

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