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JPS teacher honored

Marquita Brown, The Clarion Ledger

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It wasn't until she was at Jackson State University and deciding to major in education that Dawn Michelle Wells began enjoying school.

"I never liked school," she said. But she rationalized, by becoming a teacher, "maybe I can make it better for the children who are out there now."

Now, after 13 years of teaching, she has garnered local and national attention for her achievements in the classroom.

Wells, 37, is Mississippi's 2008 No Child Left Behind American Star of Teaching. She also is a local winner of the 2008 Wal-Mart and Sam's Club Teacher of the Year award, which includes \$1,000 for her classroom.

The fifth-grade special education teacher received her awards Monday afternoon during a special ceremony at Clausell Elementary School. Those surprising Wells with news of the awards were Anne Hancock, a regional representative of the U.S. Department of Education; Jackson Public Schools Superintendent Lonnie Edwards Sr.; Travis Malone, general manager of the Jackson Sam's Club; and other school district leaders.

Wells sat quietly during the beginning of the ceremony, unaware she was the Clausell teacher Hancock described as a team player and an inspiration to those around her. When Hancock called her name, Wells' mouth dropped open and she remained seated for a moment. Then, crying and covering her face with her hands, she went to receive her American Star award.

Later, she was surprised again with the award from Sam's Club. The two awards are not related.

"I was in awe, and I couldn't believe that it was me," Wells said later.

The American Star of Teaching is given to one teacher in each state. A panel of teachers selects those winners from 5,000 applications, which come from more than 97,000 schools across the country each year, Hancock said.

Wells' colleagues credit her with helping to raise the school's ranking from a Level 2, or underperforming, to a Level 4, exemplary. This year, one of Wells' students received all advanced scores on the Mississippi Curriculum Test, second edition, which the Department of Education designed to be more rigorous than its previous standardized tests.

In test scores released last week, 64 percent of Clausell's fifth-graders scored proficient or above on the Mississippi Curriculum Test 2 language arts test, and 80 percent scored proficient or above on the MCT2 math test. The school's averages on the tests were higher than those of the state and the rest of JPS.

Wells, who comes from a family of educators, said she will spend her \$1,000 award from Sam's Club on reading materials for her classroom and on any supplies her colleagues may need.

"I'm just thankful, and I feel blessed I work with a great team," she said. At Clausell, "we all work together as a family. I think that's a large part of why I was able to win the (awards)."

Wells said she chose a career in teaching because of a love of children and a desire to make a difference. She plans to go to graduate school and seek certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

In the classroom, she takes an approach that resolves problems she had as a student. She uses visual aids and other techniques to keep children interested and to make learning fun. She also tries to ensure children don't feel uncomfortable asking for help or asking questions, as she once did.

At Clausell, special education students are integrated into the regular classrooms as much as possible, Clausell Principal Mitchell Shears said. Wells goes into classrooms to support the teachers of her fifth-grade special education students. She also works with those students one-on-one, tutors them during after-school hours and advises teachers on ways to further help those students.

Shears said he has had Wells share her teaching techniques - she uses newspaper and magazine articles as literacy tools - with the rest of the teachers at Clausell. He also has used her lesson plans as a model for other teachers during staff development.

Soon, Shears will have Wells mentor a second-year teacher. There is a lot of emphasis on supporting first-year teachers, he explained, but guidance often is still needed for second- and third-year teachers.

"It's so hard sometimes to find someone who is willing to work with everybody," Shears said. But Wells cooperates with everyone, from school staff and teachers to parents and students, he said.

"She has a spirit of just wanting to be excellent as a professional educator."

Wells "exemplifies what it means to be a holistic teacher," her cousin Latisha Latiker said. "She takes the challenges on head first and heart first."

Kobie Wells, Michelle's husband, said his wife had opportunities to leave Jackson Public Schools and Clausell but stayed because of the children.

"The need is greater here," he said. "When you're teaching students, you have to care for them, too."

Michelle Wells later echoed that thought: "I feel like the inner-city schools need teachers who genuinely care about the students."