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Area teacher gets \$25,000 surprise

By *BRITTANY BROWN*

Fourth-grade teacher Aaron Wilson never dreamed he'd leave Woodley Elementary School on Thursday \$25,000 richer than when he arrived that morning to teach math and science.

Wilson - and everyone in the Hattiesburg Public School District - was surprised during a 1 p.m. school assembly with State Superintendent of Education Hank Bounds, Mayor Johnny DuPree and other special guests.

Wilson - along with students, teachers, administrators and officials from other schools - expected Bounds to address raising the bar of excellence in Mississippi schools.

"It's kind of confession time for me," Bounds told the crowd, earning awkward stares from faculty members. "You were brought here under some kind of illusion. We're really here to do something else."

Bounds introduced Jane Foley, a representative with the Milken Family Foundation - a California-based group that began honoring outstanding educators in 1987.

"Even in California, we've heard wonderful things about what you're doing at this school," Foley said. "And today I came to tell you a secret. One of the best teachers in the country is right here at Woodley."

Foley spent about 30 minutes teasing the crowd with hints about the Milken Family Foundation National Educator Award. The prestigious title includes a \$25,000 check and expense-paid trip to a national educator conference in April in Los Angeles.

With each of Foley's rousing hints, teachers became antsy students, squirming in their seats and whispering in anticipation.

"We have found one person here to represent the body of excellence at this school," Foley said. "I can't tell you who it is. But Mr. Bounds can."

Bounds stepped to the microphone, a navy blue envelope in hand.

"Just like the Oscars, we have an envelope too," he said, the auditorium resounding with cheers. "And it says Aaron Wilson!"

The auditorium exploded.

Students stood in chairs, clapping and screaming.

Teachers jumped up and down, embraced in hugs.

Some even wiped away tears.

Twenty-nine-year-old Aaron Wilson remained seated, staring in disbelief.

"I can't believe this," Wilson said, as he slowly pushed through the crowd to stand with Bounds, who held a large, green, cardboard check.

"I want to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and the Hattiesburg Public School District for giving me this opportunity," he said.

After the crowd was calmed and dismissed, Wilson eased into a corner and pulled his cell phone from his pocket. He slowly punched some buttons, the grin on his face growing wider with each number dialed.

"We're going to have to clean out the back seat of the car for this \$25,000 check I have here with me. I just won a teaching award at school," Wilson calmly told his wife, Tenise Wilson, who was on speakerphone.

She instantly laughed.

Moving into the library for a reception, Wilson was congratulated by Superintendent Annie Wimbish.

"What Mr. Wilson has done is prove we not only have the best teachers in the state but in the world," she said. "I am thrilled."

Wilson's achievement came after being chosen by a state-appointed blue ribbon committee that identified candidates for selection.

Principal Michelle Johnson nominated Wilson, who's entering his sixth year of teaching and leads other teachers in science curriculum.

"He is a good role model for everyone here," Johnson said. "I knew we'd nominated him for an award back in January, but we had no idea it was this."

The national award was also awarded to Rosie King of Horn Lake Elementary on Thursday morning. Since the foundation's start, the award has been given to 63 educators in Mississippi.

The \$25,000 given to each recipient is for his or her personal use.

Wilson of Petal, who is anxiously awaiting the birth of his first child, said he's unsure how he'll spend the money.

"All I know for sure is that I will tithe," he said.