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Sun Prairie educator named Wisconsin Middle School Teacher of the Year

Chris Gleason to receive \$3,000 from Herb Kohl Educational Foundation

MADISON — In a surprise ceremony at his school, Chris Gleason, a band director and instrumental music teacher at Patrick Marsh Middle School in the Sun Prairie Area School District, was named Wisconsin's Middle School Teacher of the Year for the 2016-17 school year.

State Superintendent Tony Evers made the announcement during an all-school assembly. As part of the Teacher of the Year honor, Gleason will receive \$3,000 from the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation.

“Wisconsin needs talented individuals to teach in our classrooms and inspire our young people to seek out careers that will fulfill their dreams,” Evers said. “A Teacher of the Year recipient demonstrates an unwavering commitment to students, and it is an honor to recognize educators who do so much for Wisconsin’s public schools.”

“The Teacher of the Year program highlights the many contributions educators make to our children, schools, and communities,” said Herb Kohl, philanthropist and businessman, who co-sponsors the Wisconsin Teacher of the Year program through his educational foundation. “They are leaders who put forth extraordinary effort to help all children achieve.”

“My teaching isn’t about playing notes on a page or learning a new skill on an instrument. Rather, it is looking at life through the lens of another human or artist; considering the viewpoint of someone trying to convey something that could only be said using music,” Gleason says. He inspires his students to do something many music students don’t do, practice at home. “Chris’s students don’t practice because he chides them or humiliates those that can’t keep up, or even because he is going to check their practice charts,” wrote a teacher in a letter of recommendation. “Chris’s students practice because they understand why it helps, how their brain actually functions and because they have a teacher that holds them in such high regard that he bothered to teach them about the latest in brain research.”

Gleason raises student outcomes while working to close the achievement gap through his Band Lesson Academy, pairing students with community musicians. He also secured funds through grants and donations to finance student lessons for families who couldn’t afford them.

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A special project started in 2009, *ComMission Possible*, has student musicians collaborating with nationally renowned composers to write a commissioned piece of music for middle school band students. The first, based on Georgia O’Keeffe’s painting *Blue and Green Music*, had students intimately involved in the creative process, generating the core idea for Samuel R. Hazo’s work. The world premiere for *Blue and Green Music* was before a packed house in Sun Prairie. A later commission with Erik Morales paid homage to Apollo 11. Bringing the audience to the moon and back, the music contained audio clips of President John F. Kennedy and American Astronaut Neil Armstrong, the first human to walk the moon. Connecting music beyond the classroom and into the world, students raised funds to travel to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry to see the Apollo 8 capsule and the Apollo 11 Training Module. While there, students performed a concert, including a small piece from the commissioned music.

Gleason believes in the power of connecting music to civic pride, getting his students out into the community through smaller ensembles that perform at local events and larger performances at Sun Prairie’s senior care homes, the American Family Insurance Holiday Breakfast, and in the Memorial Day parade. His middle school bands have twice been chosen to perform at the Capitol Rotunda for Music in our Schools month.

Gleason is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire with a bachelor’s degree in Music Education and a master’s degree in Professional Development from UW-La Crosse. Evers will recognize Gleason as the Wisconsin Middle School Teacher of the Year during his State of Education address Sept. 15 in Madison.

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