

Lyon SWCD names Wichmann Teacher of the Year

The Lyon Soil and Water Conservation District has named Balaton Public School teacher Lynn Wichmann as its Outstanding Teacher for 2007.

Wichmann was chosen based on his educational projects and involvement in Balaton area conservation activities. In addition to his local award, he will be Lyon County's nominee for the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts' state teacher recognition. The state award winner will be announced in December.

Wichmann said he has been interested in the outdoors ever since his father, Lawrence, taught him about the natural world. Three of the greatest influences involved his father's desire to plant trees as conservation projects, his goal to prevent soil erosion, and his active role in the Balaton Sportsman's Club as one of its charter members. He added that the landscape around Balaton has been another influence since an early age. It includes a large amount of sloping land, some of which is enrolled in conservation set-aside programs. Along with teaching elementary and middle school students in Balaton, he owns a farm in nearby Skandia Township.

"We have land with hills that's in the CRP," Wichmann said. "Having it in conservation has been good for us and for the environment. Even an eight-inch rain wouldn't bother it."

His life experiences motivated him to become a science and social studies teacher. He has been a Balaton faculty member since 1986, and enjoys the opportunity to teach students about their natural surroundings.

"It's important to get kids involved in the outdoors," Wichmann said. "Schools should play a role in that. Through our class activities, we need to demonstrate how the environment is important in everyone's life. We also need to show students how much fun they can have by experiencing it, and how most of that enjoyment is free."

One area of success for Balaton students since the 1990s involves the two-mile Fred Swanson Memorial Nature Trail, located next to a wetland directly south of Lake Yankton. High school students helped to plan and create the trail. After the Balaton district reduced its grades to K-8 in 2000, younger students took over responsibilities associated with maintaining the trail. The new East Bay housing addition has since been developed in the trail's vicinity, providing new housing for Balaton in a way that preserves ecological benefits of the prairie and wetland habitat. Some of the new housing created this spring was for wildlife, as Balaton classes constructed 20 birdhouses that will be placed in the trail area.

Many other class projects also relate to the environment, including a greenhouse, tree planting, visits to the nearby Lake Shetek Environmental Learning Center, Ecology Bus classes, the SWCD poster contest, the SWCD regional Environmental Fair, and class trips to other parts of Minnesota as well as South Dakota. Wichmann said that the school district looks for as many ways as possible to have partnerships with local and regional organizations, including the Shetek learning center, the regional Prairie Ecology Bus program, Lyon SWCD, the city of Balaton and the Balaton Sportsmen's Club.

"Those partnerships are extremely valuable," he said. "They allow us to provide more for the students. We've found that organizations locally and in the region will do as much as they can to help."

He added the some school environmental activities, especially the long distance trips, are funded by a continuous recycling campaign that is supported by many Balaton residents. He credits expanded public interest in the environment as something that helps to build student interest and public involvement.

He anticipates that public interest in topics such as soil, water, trees, wildlife, and the food system will continue to grow in the 21st century.

"People have become more and more aware of the environment," Wichmann said. "I've enjoyed seeing all the changes in farm practices. I also remember not even hunting pheasants for 20

years and then being able to tell my sons that we were going to have some of the best hunting the region has seen in many years. I'm glad for that. We've learned a lot over the years about how to take care of our resources."

Lyon County SWCD administrator Rose Anderson said the county SWCD Board of Supervisors chose to recognize Wichmann as an outstanding teacher because of his achievements in the classroom, and because of the consistent working relationships he has maintained with local and regional organizations.

"Lynn is a very capable, enthusiastic teacher," Anderson said. "His dedication helps to create interest among the students. We've always had a good partnership."



Lyon SWCD Board members with Lynn at the State Convention ~ 2007

Gary Crowley, Lynn Wichmann, Steve Prairie & Jon Mohn