2007 Pleas Award winner

TIMELY RECOGNITION—Dr. Connie Jones-Wade, left, accepts the 2007 John Pleas Faculty Award from the educator for whom it was named, psychology professor Dr. John Pleas. Jones-Wade has served as chair of the Department of Elementary and Special Education in the College of Education and Behavioral Science at MTSU since 2002; before leading the department as chair, she served it for 14 years as a faculty member. Her professional and community contributions include membership and elected service in Delta Kappa Gamma educational fraternity, civic workshops, chairing the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools committees for K-8 public schools and serving as project consultant at the Discovery Center, to name only a few. The Pleas Award is presented annually to a minority faculty member at MTSU who has set a standard of excellence and contributed in significant ways to the university and community.

photo by J. Intintoli

2-year GRITS grant will raise awareness for girls

by Randy Weiler

There's a new item on the externally funded MTSU programs menu: GRITS—Girls Raised in Tennessee Science.

The program, which will cover East, Middle and West Tennessee, received a $199,908 award from the National Science Foundation last fall. It will run from Jan. 1, 2007, until Dec. 31, 2008, said grant writer Dr. Judith Iriarte-Gross and Karen Claud, who will be program director.

Chemistry professor Iriarte-Gross wrote in the project summary that a GRITS "Traveling Roadshow" and companion Web site with supporting materials will traverse the state to show middle school and high school girls, particularly from low economic areas, how they can explore careers in the STEM areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Claud said the first areas they plan to target in 2007 are Hamilton and Shelby counties to reach each of the state's grand divisions.

"We're going statewide," Claud said. "By the end of two years, we want to say we've hit all 95 counties. We have an ambitious goal."

"It's doable," Iriarte-Gross said, "but two years is giving us plenty of time. The National Science Foundation thought we could do it."

Iriarte-Gross said what she and Claud want to achieve is "more girls considering science and math as viable majors in college."

Added Claud, "We want to work with parents, teachers, guidance counselors and adult role models to show why it's important" to consider science, technology, engineering and math careers.

'We want to say we've hit all 95 counties. We have an ambitious goal.'

Karen Claud
GRITS program director

A key aspect will be targeting economically deprived areas, they said.

"We're targeting some areas in Tennessee that are at-risk economically to show there's a way to have a better future for girls in Tennessee," Claud said, adding that she studied Tennessee Environmental Council annual data on 10 indicators—from employment and earnings to the pregnancy rate for teen girls.

"I looked at the indicators and picked ones more relevant for girls and looked at counties and saw how many counties showed up in the top 10, and that gave us an idea of pockets of areas economically at-risk," she said.

A second objective will be to "include a new focus on how science is done, which will highlight women and minority scientists from Tennessee," Iriarte-Gross said in the project summary.

A final objective will be to "provide educators and parents in East and West Tennessee with assistance, knowledge and materials on how to encourage middle and high school girls to explore STEM careers by planning and hosting a regional Expanding Your Horizons (in math and science) Conference," Iriarte-Gross said in the summary.

MTSU held its 10th EYH last October. EYH reaches girls in grades five through eight in Middle Tennessee. Stacey Roberts-Ohr, EYH national coordinator, said she would support GRITS efforts, according to Iriarte-Gross, who added that local sections of the American Chemical Society "have expressed an interest in us."

For more information, call Claud at 615-904-8253.

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With time, word of Ring's program has spread beyond middle Tennessee.

"A couple of years ago we got a call from somebody at the Jay Leno show," Ring recalled. "Every year, we videotape what goes on, and they were interested in that."

At the convention, students are divided by grade levels, then Ring subdivides them into project categories. She consistently uses the invention categories of "Games" and "Things to Make Life Easier." By the end of the day, 18 trophies will be awarded, as will participation certificates for every contestant; Ring said she also awards students' projects with an "X-factor."

"We give a 'Judge's Favorite' award to a kid with a really unusual project who didn't get a trophy in his or her category," she explained. "We also give an award for the best presentation."

In addition to developing a presentation, participants must develop working models of their inventions. Ring said the pressure to develop functioning models pushes children to stretch their creativity and makes their feats more impressive.

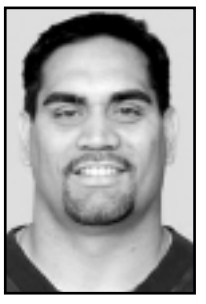
"You find that most kids make games, usually ones that help them learn what they're studying in school, and their 'Things to Make Life Easier' [items] usually help them with household chores," she explained. "Also, in recent years, I've seen more involvement with technological inventions."

Similar programs exist throughout the United States, but Ring said her program remains unique in several aspects. Rather than bind contestants to an overriding theme, for example, Ring said she prefers to explore another option.

"Each year, I pick an everyday object of interest and feature it," she said. "We make a poster about it, so people can learn about its background. This year we're focusing on a tape measure."

Ring's office currently is home to past-featured objects such as sunglasses and Frisbees, both of which are emblazoned with the Invention Convention logo.

In addition to an invention of focus, Ring also tries to bring in keynote speakers she feel children will enjoy. This year's speaker, for example, is renowned Tennessee Titans center Kevin Mawae, a 13-year veteran of the National Football League and a six-time Pro Bowl honoree. Mawae, a native of Savannah, Ga., and a graduate of Louisiana State University, played for the Seattle Seahawks and the New York Jets before joining the Titans for the 2006 season.



Mawae

This year, in addition to prizes for children, Ring said she will give a special award to teachers who support the program.

"Some of these teachers are with us every year and provide great support. Without them, we wouldn't draw nearly the entries we do."

Ring said she also plans to honor students who participate all three years of eligibility.

"The goal is to get these kids interested and get them involved around MTSU and college in general," she said.

Judges for the Invention Convention come from MTSU's Department of Elementary Education and from the local State Farm insurance offices, whose staff members help sponsor the event.

Ring said she urges the community to visit and enjoy this year's event. For more information, please contact Ring at 615-898-5500.

Ashlea Ramey is a sophomore majoring in mass communication.