

The Capital Times

## Local environmental studies teacher wins award

[Susan Troller](#) — 11/14/2007 11:26 am

Add another name to the legendary voices from Wisconsin that have made the world a better place by speaking up for the environment.

On Thursday, local teacher Deb Weitzel will receive the nation's first Bartlett Award to honor leadership in environmental education at a ceremony in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Like Aldo Leopold, Gaylord Nelson and John Muir, Weitzel has been an inspiration whose lasting influence goes far beyond her own passionate commitment to the natural world.

A long-time environmental studies and chemistry teacher at Middleton High School, Weitzel has a legion of former students and other fans who say she has thought globally, acted locally and taught countless hundreds of others to do the same.

Janet Kane, a former Middleton school board member and long-term supporter and board member of the Friends of Pheasant Branch nature conservancy, nominated Weitzel for the prestigious national award.

"It's wonderful news that Deb has won the award and it really is a huge honor," Kane said. "It's also amazing that Deb is the first winner. She will set the standard for all those who follow."

Kane also added that in a time when the funding crisis in public education is making it more difficult to pay for things like field trips, the \$5,000 prize that comes with Weitzel's award will be welcome.

"It can help defray some of the cost of giving kids the opportunity to get out into the field so they can see the places where their studies actually become real. It also lets them see professionals working in jobs that benefit the environment, and it's what helps them think, 'I could do this.'"

Since beginning her career at Middleton in 1978, Weitzel has been a pioneer for environmental studies at the high school level. She has grown Middleton's program from a single course called Our Environment to a popular and challenging series of classes that includes an advanced placement environmental course as well as two elective courses, Environmental Studies I and II. She advises the ecology club, coaches the successful Envirothon team and leads educational but demanding trips for her students every year to places like Costa Rica and the Rocky Mountains.

In a unique twist, Weitzel co-teaches her classes with Middleton social studies teacher Mike Duren so students have a broad perspective on the political and cultural forces shaping policy toward the environment as well as the scientific background necessary to thoroughly understand the natural world.

She encourages her students to get outdoors and see their studies in action. She also emphasizes the importance of clear communication about what they are doing and why. She encourages them to form partnerships with government and environmental organizations to better understand local issues and she asks them to make individual choices that have an impact on the environment.

### Field lessons

As volunteers, her students have wrestled invasive species like buckthorn and Japanese honey suckle out of overgrown oak savanna ecosystems and have become effective fundraisers on behalf of the environment. Each year, the students host an organic dinner that feeds about 800 people, using the proceeds to help local organizations like the Friends of Pheasant Branch.

"Some of them will decide they can have a five minute shower, instead of a 20 minute shower, or a 30 minute shower," Weitzel said with a laugh. "One mother of a student who I taught a number of years ago told me that they still use cloth napkins instead of paper, so I guess the class had an impact on the whole family."

"Kids are very, very capable," Weitzel said. "They love being outdoors, and making the connections between what they've learned in class and being able to apply that knowledge to a real world situation."

Since the early 1990s, when Weitzel earned a second master's degree through a special program at the UW-Stevens Point for veteran teachers, she has stepped up the pace for herself and for her students.

The advanced placement course she teaches is the equivalent of a first-year college class. In addition, many of her students take on independent studies that have included urban storm water management, working with a limnologist studying Devil's Lake, doing research at the International Crane Foundation, restoration ecology at the Goose Pond Sanctuary and learning the practices of sustainable farming.



Middleton High School teacher Deb Weitzel in her classroom.  
Mike DeVries

## Cheering a cause

Hans Hilbert, now a Middleton alder and Dane County zoning inspector, is a 2002 graduate of Middleton High School who grew up near the Pheasant Branch Conservancy and who took Weitzel's classes, belonged to the school's ecology club and was a member of the Weitzel's successful envirothon teams that won state championships and performed well in international competition.

Hilbert said that Weitzel is one of those inspiring teachers that have a lasting impact on students' lives.

"No one would ever say that her class was a waste of time, or that it didn't affect the way they saw the environment, and their ethics about how we act," Hilbert said.

"These weren't mandatory classes, and they were very diverse. You couldn't say these were classes just for the hippies, or just for the straight-A students. Keeping everyone engaged is no small accomplishment and I'm so glad Deb is getting the recognition she deserves," Hilbert said.

He added that it was always clear to her students that she had unique motivational skills.

"She has a lot of energy," he said. And, he added, in her early years as a teacher, she was a cheerleading coach, skills she brought to her science classroom and envirothon teams as well.

In the recommendation letter Kane wrote in nominating Weitzel for the Bartlett Award, she described how Weitzel shaped environmental education at Middleton High School and led by example through her personal choices, including driving a hybrid car and building a home with salvaged timbers and other recycled elements. In addition to teaching, she dedicates countless volunteer hours to environmental groups like the Audobon Society and the Friends of Pheasant Branch.

"Over the years, she transformed the curriculum to include a richer set of courses and a wide variety of experiences where students develop an in-depth understanding of natural ecosystems, how human activities shape the environment and the importance of sustainable practices," Kane wrote.

## [Community Comments](#)

Fri. Nov. 16, 2007 2:03 pm

Kate Carson says:

Congratulations Ms. Weitzel!

I am a former student of Deb's and to this day am still impacted by her classes. She is one of the most influential people I have had in my life. Her hard work, enthusiasm, and passion for the environment have earned this award. The environment can be a pretty disheartening topic when you look at the way we humans have and are impacting it, but knowing that there are people like Ms. Weitzel in the world gives me hope and inspiration.

The article compares her to Leopold, Muir, and Nelson. This is a great honor and I certainly agree. She has had as much of an impact on me and my way of thinking about the world as any of them. After having her classes and participating in Ecology Club and Envirothon, it became clear to me what I wanted to do with my life. She instilled her passion for the environment in me and I am now working toward a degree in Wildlife Ecology.

I can never express my true gratitude for her and can only hope that someday I may impact even one person like she has impacted me and so many more.

Way to go Weitzel!!!