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AMONG THE EXCEPTIONAL

BY MARY MCNALLY

WHITE HOUSE NAMES ALUMNA REBECCA MIELIWOCKI
THE NATIONAL TEACHER OF THE YEAR

OUT OF MORE THAN 4 MILLION TEACHERS in the U.S. and its territories and military bases around the globe, a Cal Poly alumna is this year's National Teacher of the Year.

And Rebecca Mieliwocki (B.A., Speech Communication, 1990) credits Cal Poly's Learn By Doing education for helping her attain her professional success. "It guides every assignment I give and every decision I make as a teacher," she said.

Mieliwocki was chosen for the national honor in late April from a group of four finalists. She received the award at an April 24 ceremony at the White House, where she was recognized by President Barack Obama.

Mieliwocki (pronounced like the city in Wisconsin) teaches seventh-grade English at Luther Burbank Middle School in Burbank, Calif. Her fellow teachers first nominated her as the teacher of the year there last year. In subsequent district and state competitions, she went through intense screening that included personal interviews and nine essays on subjects such as current issues and trends in education, her philosophy of teaching, community involvement, and a typical day in her classroom.

Her essays all featured real stories of her students' successes or hardships. What shone through, she thinks, is that she doesn't give up on her students. "We're going to laugh. We're going to be creative like crazy. We're going to learn how to solve problems," she said. "And if they get knocked down, we're going to get back up – and they know I'm right there with them."

Her essays outlined a creative approach to teaching that involves encouraging her students to try their hand at filmmaking and playwriting and leading field trips to science centers, aquariums, museums, historical neighborhoods and a variety of arts events.

When leaving her classroom, she wrote, her students "know that learning is exciting and strong communication skills will help them make the most of their lives. They

leave able to write clearly and compellingly about what they believe. They know life will throw them many curveballs, but they have all the tools they need to handle them. They leave loving to read and knowing that the great mysteries of life can be answered through close and careful study of the written word."

Mieliwocki was selected as California's Teacher of the Year in November. She was set to receive word about the national honor just as Cal Poly Magazine was going to press this spring.

"Learn by Doing resonates within me," she said, "and it's is part of the model for how I seek to educate my students."

As she designs assignments for her students, she asks herself what she wants them to learn and, more importantly, what she will ask them to do with the knowledge.

"Whatever knowledge I gained at Cal Poly," she said, "I was expected to do something with it – to use that information to perform or lead or solve problems."

Learn by Doing is not only the North Star of her teaching philosophy, she said, it also gave her a head start as a professional "The things that most people do in the first five years on the job, we did while we were at Cal Poly. I left campus accelerated."

That's why she hopes her own son, Davis, age 11, will attend Cal Poly in the future and continue a family legacy that includes her father, William Lipschultz (M.S., Education, 1977) and husband Duane Mieliwocki (B.S., Applied Art and Design, 1989), a camera operator on the hit Fox TV series "Glee."

Two decades after graduating, Mieliwocki said she still maintains many relationships that began at Cal Poly.

"I'm so proud of every single person who comes out of Cal Poly," she said, "They are doing amazing work that matters. We're good people."

Rebecca Mieliwocki speaks to her students at Luther Burbank Middle School. (Photo by Rob Kinnan)