

Akiba teacher wins award for innovative teaching

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Staff Writer

Miriam Kass, 3rd and 4th grade teacher at Akiba-Schechter recently received the Grinspoon-Steinhardt Award for excellence in teaching.

The award, presented by the Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA) in partnership with the Harold Grinspoon Foundation and the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, celebrates excellence in Jewish education. Kass will receive \$2,000 in reward funds, half of which is to be used for professional development. This is the first time a teacher from Akiba-Schechter, 5235 S. Cornell Ave., has won the award.

Kass, who attended Akiba-Schechter as a child and whose two daughters Polly and Naomi Hochman currently attend the school, was nominated for the award

by principal Miriam Schiller and parent-toddler preschool director Carla Goldberg for her overall excellence as an educator as well as her strong leadership skills in building the Akiba-Schechter and greater Hyde Park Jewish community.

"[Kass] tries to make class unique. Students don't learn about community — they participate in it. They don't learn about democracy — they participate in it," Schiller said, referring to the weekly town hall meetings in Kass's class.

The student-led town hall meetings consist of patriotic recitation, speeches, book talks and a debate about a question of substance such as "Is it OK to lie" for which all kids must prepare arguments for both sides.

Schiller said she tried to hire Hyde Park native Kass right out of college. After four years teaching at The Latin School of Chicago and four years teaching at a school in Massachusetts, Kass returned to Hyde Park and Akiba-Schechter to raise her daughters. As an active parent in the school, Schiller received an opportunity to make Kass another offer.

"When she came with Polly she spent a year with us and quickly became the connector of people and a source of support for new parents," Goldberg said. "The following year, we quickly asked her to be a co-teacher."

After four years as co-teacher in the parent-toddler program, Kass was promoted to a full teacher in the 3rd and 4th grade class where she has taught for two years.

Goldberg said she is glad that her son Zev is in Kass's class because she comes up with innovative projects that are driven by the children's interests.

"When you have Miriam you feel you've won the jackpot," Goldberg said. "She's creative, meets the kids where they are and gets them excited about learning."

Goldberg who is also a Hyde Park resident said Kass's passion for the neighborhood and Jewish community is just as strong as her passion for teaching.

"She knows what the community's needs are and she knows how to think outside the box and how things can be improved upon," said Goldberg about Kass who served as the president of the Akiba-Schechter board of directors before working there and is now vice president of education at Congregation Rodfei Zedek board of directors.

Kass said she is grateful for the award and is especially excited about the professional development opportunities.

"Teachers only continue to be good if they continue to learn," Kass said.

Kass said helping students grow into strong, confident leaders is a guiding principal for her.

"I like students to feel that they are a community of learners," Kass said. "I like them to feel comfortable taking risks and asking questions and letting them know they all have something to contribute to the community."

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