

Zuni science teacher named N.M. Teacher of the Year

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Managing Editor
Friday, 05 January 2024 06:13



Every year the New Mexico Public Education Department names a “Teacher of the Year.” This year, the award went to Zuni Public School District third-year science teacher Dr. Roy Basa.

Basa’s family, members of the NMPED, members of the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association, and state officials all attended the Dec. 18 ceremony to honor Basa.

At the ceremony, Sen. George Muñoz, D, spoke highly of Basa.

“Every person has at least one teacher who changes his or her life for the better. From visiting with his students, it is clear Dr. Basa is that teacher for many students in Zuni,” Muñoz said. “Dr. Basa is a creator of leaders and opportunities. This recognition is not only significant for Dr. Basa and his family, but the entire community of Zuni.”

NMPED Secretary Dr. Arsenio Romero also praised Basa.

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“Dr. Basa has built strong relationships with his students and community,” Romero said. “He works with the Zuni community to teach in a culturally appropriate and respectful manner and is doing great things with his students.”

IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING

Before he moved to Zuni, Basa taught for over a decade in his home country of the Philippines. He moved to the U.S. in 2019 and began teaching at a school in Arizona.

When asked what made him want to teach in the U.S., Baca said he saw it as a learning opportunity.

“I wanted to learn and explore more. Teaching is not just about reading a book; you need to go out [into the world] if you really want to learn other things,” he said. “Life in America, or should I say teaching here in America, exposed me to so many things that were different than my country.”

Twin Buttes Cyber Academy is an alternative high school for students who may not fit into the traditional format of high school. As the school’s science teacher, Basa teaches biology, physical science, and environmental science.

He said his favorite part of teaching is helping students with hands-on experiments. In one such experiment, Basa helped his students work with biodiesel, which is a renewable, biodegradable fuel which can be manufactured domestically from vegetable oils, animal fats, or recycled food grease.

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"It's a very hands-on activity where students need to extract oil from different native New Mexico plants using an oil extraction machine. The kids really love the activity," Basa said.

That biodiesel project won Basa's class the grand prize in the governor's STEM Challenge.

"After that, my students were excited to learn more, eager to learn more, and eager to participate more in competitions," Basa said.

In an interview with the *Sun*, Twin Buttes Cyber Academy Principal Ray Hartwig discussed what he thinks makes Basa a great teacher.

"I think it starts with a basic belief that he can reach every kid, that he can work with them if he's patient enough, if he's persistent enough. These are both qualities I've witnessed in his classroom and [they are] very important qualities," Hartwig said.

For Basa, teaching the subject of science is more than just sitting at the front of a classroom and rattling off theory. He said that providing students the chance to work with their hands makes them better learners.

"At the end of each of those activities I am giving them a chance to reflect because I want them to become a reflective learner, not just a passive learner," he explained. "I want them to apply these skills and lessons in their real life because I know these children will work someday, and [maybe] they can apply [these skills] in their future career."

Another experiment Basa's students did in his classroom also helped the Zuni Pueblo community. They tested the community's drinking water and found that it had a high percentage of arsenic in it, which made it unsafe to drink.

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“These are the things we’re doing in our classroom. We’re not only learning the theory, but we also apply [it] and share [it] with the community because that’s the essence of the teaching and learning process, to give back to the community,” Basa said.

FURTHER OPPORTUNITIES

The 2024 Teacher of the Year award is not the only award Basa has recently won for his teaching. He also won the 2023 New Mexico Academy of Science Outstanding Science Teacher award in November, a second-place award in the National Science Teachers Association’s lesson plan competition in October, and a third-place award for the same competition in March.

NMPED partners with NMOGA to celebrate amazing teachers with the Teacher of the Year award every year. In 2024, Basa will have the opportunity to pursue professional development opportunities that will continue to enhance his skills in the classroom through a \$10,000 grant provided by NMOGA.

In a NMOGA press release published Dec. 21, Basa spoke about what the sponsorship means to him.

“I am deeply honored to receive this recognition and grateful for the support from NMOGA and the NMPED,” he said. “This sponsorship will enable me to further enhance my skills and contribute to the development of my students for the challenges and opportunities of the future.”

In accepting the award, Basa also took time to thank his community.

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"I'm very thankful for being chosen as the 2024 Teacher of the Year. But this recognition is not just an 'I' or a 'me' recognition, but it is a 'we' victory because at my back is the Zuni community, especially my students, my colleagues, ZPSD, our superintendent, and my principal," he said.

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