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Bryant High School teacher honored for special project

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Douglas Vann is the recipient of a 2014 Bessie B. Moore Award for integrating economic principles into the classroom. He teaches chemistry and Advanced Placement chemistry at Bryant High School.

Douglas Vann of Bryant said he learned about economics at an early age.

"I've been working since I was 8 years old," he said with a laugh. "My dad was an engineer and a pastor. We had money when he was an engineer; when he was ministering, we were very poor."

Vann, who teaches chemistry and Advanced Placement chemistry at Bryant High School, is among 13 Arkansas public-school teachers who were honored for integrating economic principles into the classroom. As a winner of a 2014 Bessie B. Moore Award, Vann received \$1,000 and an inscribed glass plaque for his classroom.

"This was my third time to enter and my third time to win," he said. "This was the largest monetary award, however."

Vann said his winning project was actually carried out during the 2013-14 school year and submitted during the summer of 2014. He said the 2014 winners are not allowed to enter the competition for the 2014-15 school year.

He also received a \$700 grant that was deposited in the school account for supplies he used to undertake the project, including medallions and trophies he gave for top projects and top grades.

Vann and 12 other teachers were recognized during the 19th annual Bessie B. Moore Awards luncheon

in the Great Hall of the Clinton Presidential Center in Little Rock on Nov. 13.

The Bessie B. Moore Awards Program was launched in 1995 by Economics Arkansas, a nonprofit educational organization that promotes economic and personal-finance literacy among Arkansas K-12 students.

For the competition, Vann titled his project The Chemistry of Economics: What Really Matters!

Vann had his students select a job or profession that uses chemistry every day and research the profession. As part of the project's research, an interview with someone in the selected field was required.

"I took the high school economics standards that they learned in their economics class in the ninth grade and incorporated those with chemistry concepts," he said. "It was a refresher for them to use those standards. It was also a chance for them to use the concepts they had been learning in chemistry."

Vann took the 17 economics standards and used them as questions the students had to answer.

"For example, I asked, 'What kind of incentives are offered? What kind of an education is needed? What kind of salary does it offer?'"

Vann said he offered the students multiple ways to present their projects.

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"Some presented their projects like a science-fair board," he said. "Some turned to technology, such as Prezi, which is a form of presentation that is interactive and done online. Some took videos of the person they interviewed and made a movie. Others used Animoto to create their videos.

"One girl presented her project in storybook form. She actually created a children's book that featured several careers."

Vann gave the students a list of jobs that use chemistry.

"Welding uses chemistry," he said. "My sister is a barber. Do you know how much chemistry she has to know when dying someone's hair to not burn the scalp? There are hundreds of jobs that have chemical applications. A lot of them we know about, like a nurse. Any health-related job requires chemistry."

Vann said he allowed the students to work alone or in teams of up to three people.

"I allowed a lot of flexibility," he said. "That helped them buy into the project."

Vann said an added attraction of the project was that "it actually allowed them to think about what they might want to be one day."

Vann said Arkansas requires a course in either physics or chemistry to graduate under the Smart Core curriculum, which is required for students to qualify for the state's Academic Challenge Scholarships, funded by Arkansas' lottery.

"Most students complete the Smart Core requirements if they have any possible plans to pursue higher education, but it isn't required for all students," he said.

Vann said he did not require the AP chemistry students to participate in the project.

"I just had my regular chemistry classes do it," he said, adding that the project included about 110 students and was done over a nine-week period, including spring break.

"That gave them time to do the interviews," he said.

Although Vann was born in Arkansas, he has lived in several states.

"Since my dad was an engineer and a pastor, we lived all over the place," he said, "but Arkansas is home."

Vann graduated from McClellan High School in Little Rock. He attended Lyon College in Batesville and transferred to the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, where he received a bachelor's degree in chemistry with a minor in biology, math, economics and business management; and a master's degree in secondary education with an emphasis in math and science.

Vann said that while he was in college, he wanted to be a doctor, so he took math and science courses to prepare for that career.

"I was actually accepted to medical school, but I deferred for a year," he said.

"I had an uneasiness about it. I prayed a lot about it. Dad stood back and let me make my own decision," Vann said.

"I knew I wanted to work with kids. When I was in the third and fourth grades in Carlsbad, New Mexico, I helped Spanish kids learn to read in English," he said.

"When I was in the sixth grade in Washington state, I worked with first-graders, helping them with reading skills. One day, I had as many as 12 students and came back to my regular class exhausted. My sixth-grade teacher wanted to know what was wrong, and I told her, 'I don't think I can keep doing this job with that many kids,'" Vann said.

"She was shocked to find out that I had about half of the class. After she spoke with the principal and, apparently, the teacher, I started working with about four each day again," he said.

"When we were in Spokane, Washington, I baby-sat three children three to five nights per week for almost a year before they moved across town," Vann said.

He said he made enough money baby-sitting to buy a clarinet so he could be in the band.

"My parents paid the last \$50 because I had kept up all of my weekly payments from my baby-sitting and lawn-mowing money," he said.

"I wanted to be in the band," he said, smiling. "I wanted to play drums.

"My dad used reversed psychology, you might say, by asking me what songs and melodies I would use in church with the drums. (This was before we really used drums in our churches like we do today.) So I chose the clarinet after the dentist didn't recommend me playing a brass instrument due to a possible overbite with my teeth."

Vann also bought books and gifts for his sisters for birthdays and Christmas.

"I also sold all-occasion and Christmas cards door to door from the fifth to the eighth grades," he said. "You got like a dollar for each item sold."

Vann talked again of his uneasiness about going to med school.

He said he had worked with kids through his church (Salem Baptist Church) while he was in college and was with families during some medical tragedies. These tragedies included a family whose baby had a heart transplant, a student he had taught in Vacation Bible School who had leukemia, and a young man Vann had taught in Sunday School who had drowned in an icy pond and was taken to Arkansas Children's Hospital by helicopter.

"When I found out about the young man [who had drowned] through a phone prayer chain, I went to the hospital. As I came into the emergency area, my pastor met me and told me that he had not made it," Vann said.

"I went home and prayed and then went to the grandparents' home to tell them and be with them until their other son from Texas could arrive. I thought I could work for St. Jude [Children's Research Hospital] and help kids but soon realized that the Lord put it on my heart that some children go into the hospital, and they don't get better, which made my heart very heavy. I wasn't sure that I could emotionally deal with the days that the kids didn't get well," he said.

"I felt led [to working with children] still and can now see that working with kids when I was younger may have been God's preparation for me to be a teacher later in life," Vann said.

"I was always told that teachers don't make enough to earn a living, but it's not as bad as that. It's OK. You can make a living as a teacher. We get decent pay now.

"I feel teaching is a calling."

Vann said he has experience in the corporate world as well.

"I worked in the corporate office of TCBY in Little Rock while I was in college," he said. "Since I went to college at night, they let me work from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. I was the manager of a department and worked as a legal assistant as well. I did that for six or seven years."

Although Vann will not be allowed to submit a project for the next Bessie B. Moore Awards competition, he conducted a similar project in his classes this school year, with the projects being completed after Thanksgiving break.

Vann has also set up a money system in his classes as a way to motivate students.

"It's called Chem Bucks," he said. "They can earn bucks by making an A or B on tests, by making the highest grade in the class, things like that. They also receive a birthday card with Chem Bucks inside it. The students can use these Chem Bucks to buy things, like suckers and other fun things.

"It's just another way to connect with the students."

Vann also publishes a newsletter every week.

"The newsletter is a form of communication to parents and students via email that is usually sent at the beginning of most weeks that tells students and parents what is coming up for the week," he said. "It includes major concepts, strategies for studying, links online for help, test dates, due dates for some assignments and other important announcements, like flu shots, report card dates, etc."

Vann is in his 21st year of teaching.


His first teaching job was at Mabelvale Junior High School in Little Rock and was just for 10 weeks of the school year while he was still in college working on his master's degree and working at TCBY.

He taught math and science for 10 years at Bryant Middle School, worked for two years as a math specialist in the Bryant School District, traveling from school to school, then went to Bethel Middle School, where he taught math and science for two years. He has been at the high school for the past six years.

Vann said his teaching philosophy has developed over the years.

"I believe in developing as much hands-on experience as possible with real-world and integrated subject connections, labs and activities," he said. "I have incorporated much more technology over the years as well.

"I want to still make sure I explain difficult concepts but give application and practice with all concepts through problem solving, lab inquiry and analysis with critical-thinking group work, some problem-based projects such as this project (The Chemistry of Economics: What Really Matters!) and others in the past."

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