

ACKSON COUNTY

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INSIDE: KIDS' ACTIVITIES / 4 WHAT'S UP / 5

I taught for so many years as I was taught. I was the only sage on stage. Now I find, for my classroom to be successful, I have to build on the knowledge that they already have.

Sharon Ladner, Barton Excellence in Teaching Award winner

Winning ways



PHOTOS BY DAVID PURDY/THE SUN HERALD
Pascagoula High School teacher Sharon Ladner, center, talks with Dennis Branch, one of her broadcast students, while Bill Dantzler works on a computer. Instead of providing lectures, Ladner lets her students experience life for themselves.

Teacher uses life as her teaching tool

By JEANIE LUNSFORD
SPECIAL TO THE SUN HERALD

■ PASCAGOULA — The Mississippi Power Foundation awarded Sharon Ladner a 1996 Barton Excellence in Teaching Award this spring because of her ability in the classroom. The irony is this Pascagoula High School language arts teacher doesn't care much for classrooms.

"I'm really big on getting my children out in the world," said Ladner.

And it was Ladner's "classroom without walls" that led parents, students and colleagues to nominate her for the Barton



Pascagoula High School senior Jamie McCarty, center, talks with Central Elementary School kindergartners as part of the Book Buddies program.

Ladner

Continued from Page 1

Award. The award, given annually to a handful of outstanding Mississippi classroom teachers, includes \$500 for the teacher, \$500 for the classroom and a \$1,000 professional development grant for the school district.

According to Ladner, the trouble with a traditional classroom is that there is nothing real in it. That's why she develops programs like LINKS, which stands for Linking Interpersonal and Knowledge Skills. It's a communications project which gives students a chance to fulfill a personal dream or goal. Under her tutelage, students develop their own projects, find community mentors and spend a year doing something that involves at least an element of emotional risk.

"Some had to do something they would never do in normal circumstances," said Ladner. Like the student with the beautiful singing voice, whose shyness kept her from singing in public. Her project involved singing lessons and months of work with a professional coach. By the end of the year, she had won a place in Pascagoula High's jazz chorus.

Life's lessons

Others worked in emergency rooms and neonatal units. One achieved a long-held desire to create a youth ministry. For Ladner, the subject is less important than the life lessons her students learn.

"Over a period of months, what were the outcomes, what did they learn about themselves and what obstacles did they overcome," said Ladner. Each student had to document progress and give a multimedia



Leslie Weathersby, from left, Julie Askew, Bill Dantzler, Heather Dunbar, Dennis Branch and Justin Larsen work on editing equipment in a broadcast

class at Pascagoula High School. The class is taught by Sharon Ladner, a Barton Excellence in Teaching Award winner.

DAVID PURDY/THE SUN HERALD

"I bank a lot of stuff on mutual respect. We come into the class at the beginning of the year with Aretha Franklin's 'Respect' playing," said

Ladner. "It's important for them to know they are safe and free to learn," she said. "I cannot even have a class until

we have that down pat."

■ Jeanie Lunsford is a free-lance writer living in Ocean Springs.

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