

'Star' teacher turns girls on to science with plants

BY CHARLES LUSSIER
Advocate staff writer

The trial-and-error of the scientific method is no abstraction in Linda Messina's biology classes at the all-girls St. Joseph's Academy in Baton Rouge. It's a philosophy for life.

As her sophomore honors biology students struggled on Friday to understand why the predicted salt levels in the fast-growing *Brassica rapa* plants they had recently planted weren't matching their predictions, Messina spoke passionately.

"No scientific research is perfect," Messina said, "but where we learn, what we learn more from are the mistakes."

These days, though, Messina is having to learn from her triumphs as well.

The U.S. Department of Education recently named her an "American Star of Teaching," one of about 50 school teach-

ers from across the country — five of them like her are from private schools — chosen for the award. On Sept. 26, she flew to Washington, D.C., to accept the honor.

When asked about it all, Messina said: "I still don't think I've earned that award. There are so many better teachers out there."

The national award is intended for exemplary teachers, ones who not only improve student achievement, but do so using innovative strategies, and in the process make a difference in their students' lives.

Messina acknowledged that she could fit that description. "They were looking for innovative ways of teaching, and I do do that," she said.

Messina's innovations came out of a



Advocate photo by CASEY ANDERSON

Linda Messina helps St. Joseph's Academy sophomore Hannah Gassie, 15, prepare for a science fair during class. Messina, who teaches science at the all-girls high school, was one of five private-school teachers in the country who won a U.S. Department of Education 2008 American Star of Teaching award.

>See **TEACHER**, page 2B

TEACHER

Continued from page 1B

simple desire to find real-world activities that her girls could experience and thereby learn biology better. Science, with its history of male dominance, can prove especially intimidating for young girls.

So back in 1999, Messina approached Pam Blanchard, now an assistant professor in LSU's College of Education. Blanchard and Messina started by having students plant trees to restore Louisiana's coastal wetlands.

The first year, Messina's students planted cypress trees. Finding the trees wasn't easy, and the students planted them during a period of extended drought.

Instead of planting the trees in the wild again, Messina and Blanchard decided to turn schools into nurseries that could grow trees for later planting in wetlands.

So was born the LSU Coastal

Another hands-on activity that teacher Linda Messina leads at St. Joseph's Academy is the school's annual science fair each January.

Roots program. Last year, students across Louisiana planted about 3,000 trees. Currently, 24 schools are participating in the program and Blanchard is expecting another 11 or 12 to join this year.

Another hands-on activity that Messina leads at St. Joseph's Academy is the school's annual science fair each January. Over the past 10 years, the winners of this fair have dominated state science fairs and a few have competed in international science fairs. The students start early, coming up with ideas the preceding summer. They work with people in the community,

including doctors and professors, who serve as mentors as they develop their projects.

Blanchard, who has served as a judge at state science fairs, credits Messina for the high level of student work.

"She really brings out the best in those students," Blanchard said. "I've interviewed the girls. They can understand any of the questions you throw at them. I'd put those girls up against pretty much anybody in the state."

Sister Ursula Harelson, a long-time chemistry teacher at St. Joseph's who recently retired, marveled at Messina's efforts.

"She gets those girls to do things that I felt at some point in my life it was impossible for young girls to do," Harelson said. "She has inspired many of them to go into careers in science."

Fourteen years ago, it was a different story. Messina had just started teaching after having spent years rearing her own children and by November of that year, she was ready to quit.

"She was just very, very scared," said Harelson, who worked with Messina the rest of that first year. "She had no self-confidence in her own ability to be a teacher. We worked with her hard on that."

Self-confidence is still a struggle for Messina. Only two years ago did Messina feel that she had come into her own as a teacher and still knows she has a lot to learn, she said.

After the final exam each year, with the class at an end, Messina hands her girls a copy of Veronica Shoffstall's poem "Comes The Dawn," sometimes titled "After a While." It urges readers to tackle life, not wait for it, to plant their own gardens and "decorate" their souls, rather than hope someone brings them flowers.

Here are lines from the poem: "... And you learn that you really can endure, that you really are strong, and that you really do have worth and learn and learn ... and you learn ... with every goodbye ... you learn."