

Alaskan teachers awarded presidential awards for excellence

by Louise Sagmoen
Tundra Times

President Ronald Reagan announced the selection of 104 teachers throughout the United States to receive the Presidential Awards for Excellence in Science and Mathematics Teaching. Teachers were selected on the basis of classroom performance, student progress, and professional endeavors.

The White House announced, from every state an outstanding science and mathematics teacher was selected as recipient of the coveted award.

Two Alaskan teachers, Elaine Jacobson of Fairbanks Lathrop High

"It's made me excited about teaching . . ."

School and Irene Murphy of Barrow High School traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with 102 other honored teachers.

Murphy who excelled as a mathematics teacher deals with approximately 90 students in her calculus courses, algebra courses, and a geometry course. Before being hired by the North Slope Borough School District five years ago she was told there were no teaching positions open. She heard that twice before she was hired.

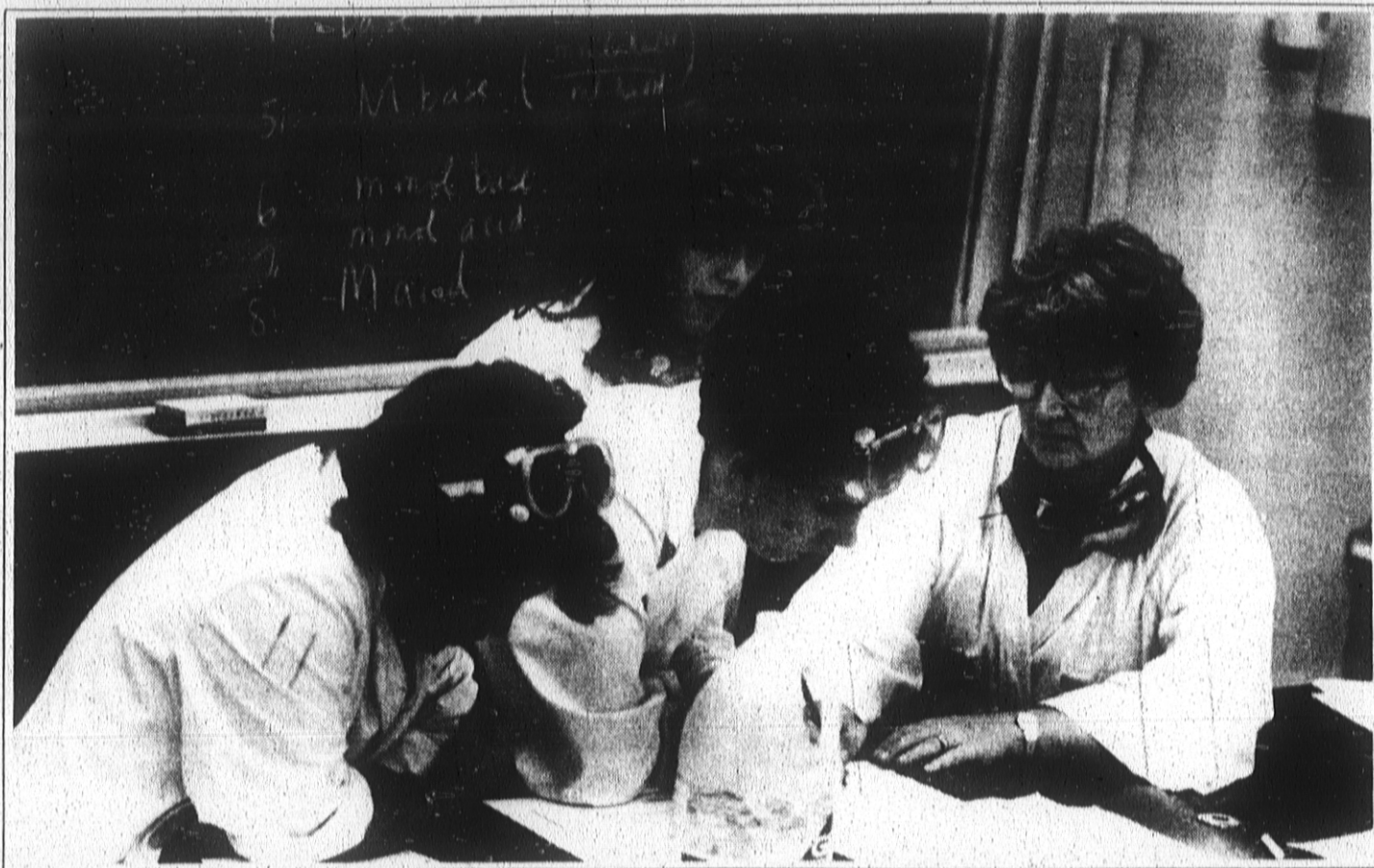
"The fact that I won the award sinks in more and more. Just the other day the mayor recognized me. I'm really excited about the award and my students are too. It's made me excited about teaching," Murphy said. While she's expressed pleasure about teaching she also feels her students enjoy the math courses. "My students enjoy math. I don't think they would take that much math if they didn't enjoy it," she said.



J. Irene Murphy, 1985 Presidential Awardee for Science and Mathematics teaching with student Gwen Rexford.

One of her students, Mike Howell thinks she's the best math teacher he's had. He says he excelled in math on his Scholastic Aptitude Test. "I just moved to Barrow last year and she's really helped me adjust to the higher academic standards of Barrow High School. If the majority doesn't understand she'll review everything. My other math teachers wouldn't do that. She gets down on the students' level." The Barrow senior is taking an advanced calculus course from Murphy.

Rick Miller, another senior has been a student of Murphy's for three years. He plans to attend the University of Alaska, Fairbanks then transfer to the University of California, Los Angeles. Last year he completed his math requirements for graduation but he took a math class this year to "prepare for



Anita Torres, Suzie Fuzzard, Doug Dunn, and Elaine Jacobson.

photo by Rich Isaacson

college." Miller said, "She's an understanding teacher. If you have a personal problem she can also help you."

Another senior, Helen Albert, plans to go into the science field where she feels a strong math background is necessary. "I'm taking a physics course. The previous math courses helped me." In describing her math

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teacher she said, "She's not only a teacher, but a very good friend. Her work doesn't end in the classroom. She's always there as a friend."

While Murphy has the ability to make one of high schools' most dreaded courses enjoyable she also makes college easier for students. "I've had a lot of students go into engineering. Two have graduated from West Point. I'm more into preparing students to go into college." Mentioning the SAT she said, "They have to do extremely well in mathematics to excel in math (in the SAT)." Murphy also explained what gave her the greatest pleasure. "Barrow students excel in math. I'm just as pleased about that."

The 35-year-old teacher ended up in
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Elaine Jacobson, 1985 Presidential awardee for Science and Mathematics teaching.

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Barrow when her husband was transferred there in his field of work. "I'm not a person who can live apart from my family," she said.

Lathrop High School teacher Elaine Jacobson who excelled in science teaching was in her classroom when her husband brought the letter to her. "My husband brought the letter into me. The letter just said the White House. You don't get that very often," she said describing when she was first notified.

Rather than making college preparation a main goal Jacobson feels it's important to make high school students enjoy the process of learning although she said, "Every year there seems to be one or two that major in chemistry." She feels the approximately 90 students who are in her chemistry and science courses can apply science and chemistry anywhere, not just in college. "It applies just as well in the kitchen as in college. Learning is a life long process. It can be a lot of fun."

Jacobson, who moved to Alaska

before statehood has taught at Lathrop 14 years. She got her bachelor and master degrees from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. She and her husband, William have two children and four grandchildren.

In addition to the presidential citation and the four-day, expense paid trip to the capitol city, Jacobson and Murphy received \$5,000 grants from the National Science Foundation for their schools which can be spent over two years.

Begun in 1983, the Presidential Awards program is designed to identify outstanding junior high and secondary school science and mathematics teachers who can serve as models for their colleagues. The program is also designed to provide increased status and rewards for demonstrated professionalism so that high quality individuals will be encouraged to enter and to remain in teaching.

Teachers may be nominated by colleagues, administrators, students, or parents of students. Winning teachers are judged on their effectiveness in the classroom, their impact on students, and their professional goals and activities.



J. Irene Murphy with Sens. Stevens, Murkowski, and Congressman Young.