

Award-winning chemistry teacher has all the right formulas

By Beth Jachman
Staff Writer

"Chemistry puns? I'm in my element," a Chemistry Cat meme says.

Kathleen Kitzmann of Redford can relate to that and more. She was recently honored with the top national prize a high school chemistry teacher can receive, the James Bryant Conant Award in High School Chemistry Teaching.

A teacher at Mercy High School in Farmington Hills, Kitzmann is in her 40th year of teaching, including 23 years total at Mercy, two years at Taylor University in Indiana and 15 years at Redford Catholic Central.

"It's sort of like the pinnacle for a high school chemistry teacher. It's incredible in that regard," Kitzmann said.

"It definitely surprised me," she said "I'm absolutely thrilled and very honored and very humbled."

She's come a long way since her high school chemistry classes at Thurston High School.

It's a field traditionally dominated by men and back when she started studying it there were not that many women in chemistry. "There's more now, of course," but there are still mostly men in the field. "When I took my second-year class in high school it was 12 boys and me," she said.

Even though chemistry has always come easy for her, she entered college as an undeclared



Kathleen Kitzmann explains a lab procedure to one of her AP chemistry students. She is wearing purple because the title of the lab is "Crystal Violet Kinetics." Her lab apron says "Chemistry is just like cooking ... Only don't lick the spoon!"

major. "I liked a lot of things. I didn't know what I wanted to study for sure," she said.

Positive experience

But after her freshman year in which she had a very good chemistry instructor, she made her decision. She received her bachelor's degree in chemistry from Taylor University in Indiana and a master's degree in medicinal chemistry from the University of Michigan.

"It's all that I've ever taught. I don't even really have a teaching minor," she said.

She tries to instill an appreciation for any of the sciences in her students at Mercy, an all-girls Catholic school. "We have a strong science department," she said. "We just want the students to not hate science, basically."

Kitzmann literally wears her love of chem-

istry: She wears chemistry-related jewelry such as pieces that depict elements or the periodic table – she even has earrings in the shapes of a beaker and a flask.

She wears a color to match that day's lesson, and she teaches about the water molecule with Mickey Mouse ears, because it has a similar shape. She wears hot air balloon earrings when she teaches about gas laws and she has a bumper sticker that has "teacher" spelled in element symbols.

And Chemistry Cat, the humorous Internet meme, is also welcome in her classroom.

Her spirit of fun and enthusiasm inspires her co-workers.

Lisa Schrimsher teaches with Kitzmann at Mercy and nominated her for the award.

"It seems like teachers are the brunt of a lot of criticism these days. It



Kathleen Kitzmann of Redford teaches chemistry at Mercy High School in Farmington Hills. Here she is pictured with one of her AP chemistry classes last fall.

is great to tell everyone about someone who does it right. After 12 years of teaching chemistry with Kathy, I know she has made me a better teacher," Schrimsher said.

"She sings chemistry songs, pulls out dozens of moles for mole day, comes up with creative and fun activities for science club, and doesn't shy away from teaching the tough stuff," she said.

Honored in Dallas

Kitzmann received her award, which includes \$5,000, in Dallas on March 18, and one of the highlights was that one of her former students, now a PhD chemist at Shell Oil, attended, she said.

She has also taught another student who is now a PhD chemist as well as pharmacists, doctors and nurses, she said.

She stays active in her field and attends work-

shops to get new ideas and presents at workshops to share her ideas with other teachers, Schrimsher said.

Kitzmann also heads the Metro Detroit Science Fair at Cobo Hall each year as a judge and co-fair director.

From all that you might think chemistry is Kitzmann's only interest, but you'd be wrong.

She plays cello, piano, guitar and a little bit of banjo. She began cello and piano at age 10.

"I always say chemistry is my vocation and music is my avocation," Kitzmann said.

She plays cello for all the musicals at Mercy High School in Farmington Hills, as well as weekly at her church, Trinity Church of Livonia.

She also started a band six years ago called "Chrome Folk Bar-B-Que," which has now evolved into "Chrome

Smoke."

And did we mention theater? She also is on the board of directors at Trinity House Theatre in Livonia.

That affiliation started in 1993 when she auditioned for a part. Since then she has worked as stage manager and assistant director among many other positions.

Retirement is out there in the future, but for now she still enjoys being in the classroom.

"I don't think I'll ever be out of the field. I want to still be involved with teachers and students somehow," she said.

"I think what I like best is being able to share my enthusiasm and my love for chemistry with students, and then see them when they have those light bulb moments when something makes sense ... when they are just amazed at some little chemistry thing we're doing," she said.