



Huntington Middle School teacher named Outstanding Economic Educator

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Making everyday life relevant to her students is how Huntington Middle School teacher Jan Cotmon makes a difference in the lives of others.

Cotmon has taught economics at Huntington for four years.

She is always thinking of ways to grab her students' attention, since many people have the misconception that economics is a boring subject.

"It's important for them to see the connection of what they're learning in class to real life," said Cotmon, who lives in Hampton.

"If students don't see the relevancy in what they're being taught, then they're not going to get excited about it, and I believe this is true with any subject."

One example of how she made a lesson in economics relevant:

"The other day in class, I had my students play the lemonade stand game," said Cotmon. "Each of the students had to buy the supplies for their stand and lemonade, and then track their profit.

"One of the students said to me, 'I'm in school, but I'm playing a game and learning.' The game illustrates basic supply and demand, a key concept in economics."

Another lesson involves getting the students to look at the labels on their clothes and school supplies to see where they were made.

"This helps illustrate global economy, said Cotmon. "I'll start writing all the places the clothes and supplies are made on the board, and then we pull the map down to see exactly where they came from."

Cotmon's work in making both economics and civics relevant has paid off for her as a teacher. This month, she was named Economic Teacher of the Year by the Virginia Council on Economic Education.

The award came with \$100 and materials to use as teaching tools.

Cotmon was recognized at a banquet held at the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond on Dec. 4.

She was nominated for the honor by Gemma Kotula, director of the Center for Economic Education at Christopher Newport University. The pair met at one of Kotula's economic workshops.

After being downsized out of the corporate world, Cotman went back to school to become a teacher because she loves kids. She was in Pittsburgh-area schools before moving to Huntington.

And after four years of teaching in Newport News, Cotmon has had many memorable students and experiences in the classroom, she said. But seeing a student get a perfect score on their Standards of Learning tests, or having old students come back to visit to say how well they're doing, rank at the top of the list.

Teaching is more than reciting from a textbook, she says. So Cotmon relies on hands-on activities to stimulate learning, rather than just the textbooks.

"I consider textbooks as resources, Cotmon said. "I didn't even hand them out at the beginning of the year. They stay in the classroom for when we need them. You can't rely solely on the textbook."

Cotmon hopes to instill a greater understanding of the value of money in her students, so they can set goals for themselves and grow into responsible adults.

"It's easy keeping the kids interested. I mean, who doesn't like money?" she said.

"Economics is pretty much common sense, if you take the time to stop and think, Cotmon said. "Students need to plan for their futures sooner, because when they do this, the better off they'll be when applying for loans for college or purchasing their first car."

Keeping the students active and moving in the classroom is another goal she has, since each class is 90 minutes long.

"At this age, in eighth grade, you can't expect them to sit for 90 minutes, said Cotmon. "I like to get them up and moving as much as possible, and one way I do this is by illustrating global trading."

This activity involves splitting the students up into four groups and getting them to stand in the corners of the room. Each student is given a bag with

different products in it. The students are then told to exchange products within their group, followed by trading outside their group and finally, having the whole class trade.

"What the students realize in this activity is that the more and more they trade, the happier they are with what they have," said Cotmon. "I then explain to them that this is why nations trade globally, because it increases their wealth and gets them the products they need."

One of the most rewarding things for Cotmon as a teacher is getting the opportunity to see her students succeed.

"When I realize they really understand what I'm teaching, and I see those light bulbs start to go off, that's the best part for me."

Jan Cotmon

--Cotmon, of Hampton, is an eighth-grade civics and economics teacher at Huntington Middle School in Newport News

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