



PRESS-REGISTER

Gulf Guardian award given to Henson

Baldwin educator one of four Alabama winners of EPA environmental prize

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Local environmental education programs have netted a third Gulf Guardian award for Baldwin programs in three years.

Pamela Henson, director of the instructional support for the Baldwin County Public Schools system, received the first-place award for 2006 in the individual category. The award is presented by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Gulf of Mexico Program. Henson and other winners were recognized during the third National Conference on Coastal and Estuarine Habitat Restoration in New Orleans.

Henson said that while she received the award as an individual, judges based the presentation on school environmental programs around the county.

"I think they were impressed by the magnitude of the programs that we have from K-12, from a very young age up through high school with water testing and beach cleanup," she said. "They seemed very impressed with the aqua-science program at Fairhope High School and also with the sea grass program to replant the sea grasses destroyed by the hurricanes."

Henson said she was recognized as an individual for her work in getting grants to support the environmental education programs.

The award, presented Dec. 13, is the third for Baldwin programs in recent years, she said. The county school system won first place in the education category in 2003. The Weeks Bay National Estuary Preserve took a third-place award in education in 2005.

As part of the 2006 award, Gulf of Mexico Program representatives produced a 3-minute video showing Henson with some of the programs around the county.

She said the school system will also be able to use the video to promote environmental education with area community organizations and to seek additional grant money.

Henson began teaching environmental science at Fairhope Middle School in 1984. She moved to Foley High School in 1991 and continued there until 1997, when she left the classroom and became an administrator.

After 22 years of working for the school system, she said children need to be taught to look after the environmental.

"We have to teach them to be stewards of the environment," she said. "We haven't, people our age haven't done a very good job of taking care of the planet. It's going to be up to them."

David Yeager, director of the Mobile Bay Estuary Program and an Alabama representative in the Gulf of Mexico Program, said Henson is an outstanding example of someone working to promote environmental education in the region.

"She has been an outstanding educator first, but she has also been an outstanding environmental educator," he said. "She has raised a tremendous standard for environmental education in Baldwin County schools and done it from the bootstraps, raising money for these programs on her own initiative."

Henson was recognized for implementing programs such as Project SWEEP, Project STARS, Project

PLANET, Project SEAS and GLOBE, according to a statement from the Gulf of Mexico Program.

A diorama exhibit of the Weeks Bay Reserve that has been used as a teaching tool for Baldwin students was also listed in the statement as well as the aqua-science and sea grass programs. She has been recognized by the White House twice for her work in the field of science, including the Presidential Award for Science and Alabama's Teacher of the Year.

The EPA's Gulf of Mexico Program initiated the Gulf Guardian awards in 2000 as a way to recognize and honor the businesses, community groups, individuals and agencies working to protect the Gulf. The program began in 1988 to protect, restore and maintain the health and productivity of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem in economically sustainable ways, according to the statement from the EPA.

Award-winning entries were received from Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. First-, second-, and third-place awards are given each year in seven categories -- individual, business, youth and education, nonprofit organizations, government, partnership and bi-national efforts.

Yeager said Alabama nominees received four awards this year. In addition to Henson, Neil Johnson of the Hand Arendall law firm received a first-place award in the business category for the company's conservation awareness program.

The Mobile County schools' SEA ICE Environmental Studies Center received a third-place award in the youth/education category and the Mobile office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers received a third-place award in the government category for work in restoring eroded areas of Deer Island in Harrison County, Miss.

Yeager said this is also the second year in a row that Alabama groups have taken first place Gulf Guardian awards. In 2005, the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program received a top award in the partnership category for work in finding and cataloging invasive aquatic species along the Gulf Coast in Alabama and Mississippi.

In the Gulf of Mexico Program statement, Jimmy Palmer, EPA regional administrator in Atlanta, praised winners for their work in protecting the Gulf environment.

"I commend the Gulf Guardian winners for this outstanding achievement in helping to protect and preserve the Gulf through promoting the importance of maintaining biodiversity within our coastal habitats," said Palmer. "The Gulf of Mexico is a beautiful, expansive natural resource from which we all derive both economical and recreational benefits."

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