



Slidell teacher honored for dedication to student safety, physical fitness

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June 11, 2008

Cassandra Batiste opens up her laptop computer to begin a PowerPoint presentation, and a song from the movie "Madagascar" comes pouring out.

"I like to move it, move it! I like to move it, move it!"

The song is fitting, as Batiste, a fifth-grade teacher at Slidell's Bonne Ecole Elementary, created the slide show for a year-end presentation to the Parent Teacher Association. The group awarded her a \$500 grant earlier this year for physical fitness and sports equipment.

"Their mission this year was to promote physical fitness," said Batiste. "I put this together to show them what the money was used for."

Batiste is a third-generation teacher and has spent her entire 27-year career at Bonne Ecole, starting there just three weeks after receiving her education degree. She teaches special education students with mild or moderate disabilities, and she wrote the grant hoping to get some items that would help them enhance their classroom work, plus have a little fun.

Her students participate in what is known as community-based education. They travel around the city to go bowling, visit a karate class or take a swim in the pool at Cross Gates Athletic Club. This year's grant enabled her to purchase scooters, jump ropes and playground balls.

"You name it, we got it," she said. "We couldn't get things out of the box fast enough."

This is not the first time this year Batiste has been recognized. Most recently she was honored with another \$500 grant, this time from the Got2BSafe National Safety Contest.

Sponsored by Honeywell and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, the contest recognizes teachers who are committed to keeping children safe from abduction and sexual exploitation. Batiste was one of 100 teachers from 30 states to receive a \$500 Staples gift card for classroom supplies.

Applicants were required to submit a safety plan integrating the Got2BSafe program's four rules of safety:

Check First — always ask for permission from an adult in authority.

Go with a Friend — never go anywhere alone.

It's My Body — children have the right to say "NO" to any unwelcome touching.

Tell a Trusted Friend — children should be able to tell an adult (parent, teacher, etc.) if someone makes them uncomfortable.

In her grant application, Batiste illustrated how these rules are especially essential to the survival of special education students, who must have constant monitoring and re-teaching of expectations. Since

her students go out into the community so often, it is imperative to make sure they are aware of their surroundings, and know how to react in certain situations.

She places extra emphasis on appropriate means of interacting with new people and ways to get out of unacceptable situations.

"I have students who have never met a stranger and often reach out to them," said Batiste. "More often than not, the people we meet are accepting and really enjoy their interaction with these kids."

Unfortunately, she added, there is a slight risk the person they meet intends to do harm, and she takes every precaution to make sure her students are prepared.

Batiste also brought the Home Safety Council's Great Safety Adventure to the school, a traveling exhibit that teaches basic home safety skills in certain risk areas. Housed in a customized 18-wheeler, the exhibit unfolds into a 1,000-square-foot animated home that children can explore for hands-on safety lessons.

The extra efforts have paid off. Batiste said that, according to parents, her students have taken home what they've learned and are putting it into practice. The various community activities have also helped decrease negative behaviors, and Batiste said her students often participate in the planning process.

She's often had to get creative in funding some of the activities, often paying for many things out of pocket. The grants help take some of the edge off the expense. Two years ago she started an in-house catering company, in which her students actually prepare and deliver meals for faculty and staff, using a small kitchenette attached to her classroom.

The proceeds provide an additional source of income for their activities, and Batiste will attempt to expand the program next year.

"Some of the kids are non-verbal and have to use icon schedules, so I'd love to equip them with iPods or PDAs," she said. "Unfortunately, there's no fountain of money for special ed."