

under the sun

County's 'Educator Of Year' Opens Each Class With A Hug

BY TERRY POPE

About 28 second-graders entered the Union Primary School gym, left their lunch boxes by the door, and lined up on the solid white line to begin their physical education class.

"What's the color of the day?" one boy asked as excitement began to show on the other students' faces.

"I'm glad you asked that," said Tom Simmons, their P.E. instructor, "because today's Friday and the color is blue."

A loud screech filled the gym as 28 pairs of raised arms raced toward Simmons in search of a hug. Dressed in blue shorts and a white striped shirt, Simmons returned the hugs before calling the class to order.

"I have this little game I play with them before each class," Simmons said. "Each day is a different color—Monday is green, Tuesday is pink, Wednesday is red, Thursday is yellow and Friday is blue. Anybody with those colors on has to hug each other."

Simmons, 42, begins each P.E. class with a hug, an opportunity for each child to feel needed and cared for. Even the students who have forgotten it is Friday and are wearing green, yellow or other colors join in the hugging before returning to the white line.

"I know it probably sounds corny, but I couldn't go through school each day without telling them I love them and without hugging them," Simmons said.

It seems appropriate that Simmons was chosen last Monday as the Shallotte Junior Woman's Club's "Educator of the Year" for Brunswick County. The award is presented each year by the club's educational department, which selects the winner from nominations submitted by people in the community, by students or by other educators.

"I think an award like this, coming from people totally outside the educational field, makes it even more of an honor," Simmons said. "It does for me."

Simmons' big day came last Monday when a banquet was held in his honor to mark the official announcement of the "Educator of the Year" award. His big day almost began in tragedy following a school bus accident in Shallotte that sent 17 Union Primary School students to the hospital for treatment, none with serious injuries.

Simmons was one of the first to arrive at the scene of the accident. His familiar face, his curly red hair and bright blue eyes, as they appeared in the doorway of the crumpled bus helped soothe some of the fears and worries that overcame the 42 students following the collision.

"By Monday afternoon, I was just physically and mentally tired," Simmons said. "Seeing my kids in a situation I've never seen them in before, and hope to never see them in again, just drained me. I had forgotten all about receiving the award."

After he had fallen asleep on the couch, his wife, Janis, a Union Primary third-grade teacher, woke Simmons around 6 p.m. at their Boiling Spring Lakes home. Simmons had to be in Shallotte by 7 p.m. for the awards presentation.

Although teaching P.E. keeps Simmons energetic, playing racketball keeps him in shape so he can race up and down the gym with his students. Simmons, a 13-year education veteran, compares teaching to playing golf, one sport the former semi-pro football player still enjoys.

"In golf, you have bad days and then you have good days," he began. "But no matter how many bad shots you hit, you always hit that one shot that makes you want to come back and play again. In teaching, you may have that one kid who comes up to you on a Friday afternoon and tells you something special that makes it all worth it."

One touching moment that occurred recently that Simmons enjoys recalling is the story of the girl who brought him a present, a pair of her father's used socks.

"She said to me, 'I want to give you a present,' and handed me the pair of socks," Simmons said. "I later called the girl's mother who said she was embarrassed that her girl would bring me a pair of her father's used socks, but it meant a lot to me."

Although he enjoys teaching and the classroom environment, Simmons is currently working toward his principal's certificate in the hope of one day becoming



STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

THIRD GRADERS reach for hugs from P.E. instructor Tom Simmons. The Shallotte Junior Woman's Club chose Simmons as Brunswick County's "Educator of the Year" last week.

"...I couldn't go through school each day without telling them I love them and without hugging them."

—TOM SIMMONS
EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR

head of an elementary school in Brunswick County.

"The biggest adjustment for me would be just getting out of the classroom and looking at the school from a managerial position," Simmons said. "The first year or so, I'd probably hang around the classrooms a lot. But I'm looking forward to that opportunity, when it arises."

Simmons' career in education didn't always look as bright and cheerful as it has turned out to be for him in Brunswick County. The former Lake Waccamaw Boys Home resident graduated from Hall'sboro High School and attended UNC-Chapel Hill and Wilmington College before traveling to Maryland to teach juvenile delinquents at the Victor Cullen School in Cullen, Md.

"When I got there, they didn't have a physical education program," Simmons said. Interscholastic sports were soon added to the curriculum for the students, most-

ly troubled juveniles from the Baltimore, Md., and Washington, D.C., areas.

Simmons moved to Maryland to seek a job in teaching, not to seek a position on a semi-pro football team. But he played as 207-pound offensive guard for the Waynesville Tigers. He was invited to try out for the team, whose roster included players from Canada, the south and other northern states.

"I was a walk-on. In fact, I played my first game without a contract," Simmons said. "It helped me understand the attitudes and feelings of people from different parts of the country."

Teaching juvenile delinquents also helped Simmons improve in his educational field.

"It was an experience that I would go through again if I had to," Simmons said. "It taught me how to understand problems that kids go through."

Simmons and his wife have two sons of their own, Byron, a senior at South Brunswick High School who will attend UNC-Wilmington next year, and Chris, a junior at SBHS.

Two knee operations ended Simmons' football career. When he came to Brunswick County to teach and coach in 1968, integration had just begun. Since then, he has taught and coached grades ranging from K-11, but said he enjoys teaching elementary grades the best.

"It's just amazing how these kids can turn a day around for you," he added. "I'm sure it's not just the way I feel, but for every teacher at this school."

Teaching elementary school children physical education involves more than just supervising a play period, Simmons said.

"P.E. teachers are educators, too," Simmons said. "I don't like trying to persuade parents that the gym is a classroom and that I am a teacher just as other teachers are professionals."

"Learning ought to be fun, whether you're teaching biology or physical education," he added. "We as teachers have a responsibility to make learning fun."

For Simmons, part of the fun comes in just keeping the children happy, providing them with attention and plenty of hugs.

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