

CHS Woodshop Instructor Named High School, District Teacher of the Year

Gene Dufault was recognized by the CHS community and teachers throughout the district for his outstanding ability to inspire students.

Posted by [Lauren Costa](#) (Editor) October 02, 2013



As a member of both the Coventry School District Service Learning Team and Educator Evaluation Committee, Gene Dufault is known for his ability to successfully relate to and collaborate with fellow educators and students alike.

While he's considered a caring friend and mentor by his colleagues, Dufault's shining accomplishment is the way he inspires and "gets through" to the students in the woodworking classes that he teaches at Coventry High School. These traits combined with his ever-

present desire to improve and contribute to the school community have earned Dufault the distinction of 2012-2013 Teacher of the Year, not only for Coventry High School, but for the entire district as well.

Each year, a teacher from the district and a teacher from the high school are recognized for their outstanding performance and achievements, and this year, Gene was the top contender for both honors. Dufault, described by his peers as a gentle soul with a quiet manner, was taken by surprise at the start of this school year when he was recognized for the achievements during a staff welcoming assembly.

Dufault began his woodworking career with set-building for theatrical performances while in college and moved on to work for Trinity Rep before beginning a 22-year stint as a professional carpenter. In 1998, he became certified to teach woodworking and furniture making to inmates at the Connecticut State Prison, which eventually led him to his current position at Coventry High School in 2003.

Among the many endeavors that helped him get where he is today, Dufault also spent a year working as the Providence Free School's reading and drama teacher. His colleagues within the Coventry School department believe that these experiences have enabled him to be successful working with many types of students, and Dufault agrees that they have allowed him to adopt a unique and genuine approach to connecting with his students. Many of his pupils considered "at-risk" or unsuccessful in traditional classes have flourished under his instruction, not only academically, but behaviorally and socially as well.

"During a visit to this teacher's classroom last year it was amazing to see how engaged and productive certain students were," CHS Principal Mike Hobin told faculty members before announcing Dufault as the ToY honoree. "Many of these students had been unsuccessful in traditional classes and often did not attend school. I've been told that these same students now frequently request to spend extra time with this teacher, offering to help with both after-school and out-of-school projects."

Dufault points out a common disconnect in education in regards to melding hands-on instruction with traditional methods, pointing out the importance of being able to determine which students learn one way versus another.

"There are those learners who have a hard time listening to the process and just want to do it first," he continued. "They want to experience it, they want to smell it, they want to touch it first and then read about it later - and that's a huge argument in education today - what is essential to students?"

Dufault said he marries textbook and hands-on learning in his instruction, in a manner that aims to grab the attention of his students and allows them to realize the importance of creating something.

"You have to grab their interest first. I don't want to talk to a wall, I don't want to read a paper that they don't care about," he said. "I get my kids to do an incredible amount for the school so that they see the value of 'there was nothing there the other day and now there's a trophy case, or now there's a deck and a beautiful mural in our school courtyard'. I like to ask them, 'how can we as woodworkers, make a difference?'"

Instead of the typical birdhouse projects that often comes to mind when one thinks of high school wood shop, Dufault believes that his students are capable of creating things that are more meaningful and sees it as a way to give back to the community. Through [Service Learning](#), he and his students have contributed largely to many community projects, including a [gazebo](#) raffled for charity, outdoor classrooms at Western Coventry School and in the [CHS courtyard](#), various handicap ramps and a wheelchair storage shed for a disabled Coventry student, vandalism campaigns, Drama Department set design and Capstone presentation podiums, among many more. Dufault is also known for frequently applying for and receiving "Arts Talk" grants and other outside donations for the community.

"I know many of these kids have sat in class and thought 'how the hell does this relate to my life?', " he said. "I want to bring it back to reality for them and show them how what they're doing in here can help them in their life, and that's done through respect, caring, being able to relate to these kids and just allowing them to be them. I know that their story is just as important to them as my story is to me, so I'm here to find out what that story is and how to support them. It works, because then they want to be successful."

During a time where standardized teaching and testing methods reign supreme, Dufault recognizes the significance of being named Teacher of the Year, not once, but twice in 2013, and admits it's a huge honor.



"It's not the norm for a wood shop teacher to receive Teacher of the Year, especially in a teach-to-the-test setting like we're in right now," he said. "This is an incredible honor for me. How many jobs have in their description, 'the opportunity to change people's lives'? Not many. So I really take that seriously."