

## **Alumna named National Blind Educator of the Year**

by **Tim Holdsworth - Monday, October 18, 2010**

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/6525/alumna-named-national-blind-educator-of-the-year/>

“Middle-school isn’t always the easiest age group with which to work,” said Ginger Lee-Held, MS ’00, who teaches family and consumer education at Perry Tipler Middle School in Oshkosh. “But I’m used to it.”

According to Lee-Held, the key to working with this age group is respect. “When dealing with students, mutual respect is the best thing. If I respect them and treat them as individuals, they do the same for me.”

Over the course of her teaching career, Lee-Held, has earned the respect of not only her students, but also of her colleagues, as well. In fact, she was honored this summer as the National Blind Educator of the Year by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). The award acknowledges a blind educator whose exceptional classroom performance, notable community service and commitment to NFB merits national recognition.

“The award is probably the highest honor and one of the highest complements I could possibly receive during my teaching career,” Lee-Held said. “It comes from a group of my peers who say I’ve done a good job.”

“Ginger is a great teacher, very focused on the needs of her students,” said Ann Schultz, who was Lee-held’s principal at Tippler Middle School for 10 years. “She creates a caring and compassionate learning environment by connecting personally with her kids. She brings meaningful learning experiences to each child by making her lessons hands-on and relevant to middle level students.”

Jay Jones, current principal at the school, agrees. “Ginger really does a wonderful job of teaching students lifelong living skills. She has a positive rapport with students; a clear understanding of the content she teaches; and a positive, ‘can do’ attitude.”

### **Open dialogue with students**

“I’m really open about my disability at the beginning of the school year. I want the students to feel comfortable. They’ve probably not dealt with someone like me before,” Lee-Held said, adding that she is always open to questions from her students. “I tell my students, ‘Make sure you ask them.’ If it’s too personal, I’ll just say so.”

Lee-Held says her guide dog is a good icebreaker with students. “We talk about my dog and how she’s trained. We also talk about the parameters of how they need to interact with the dog.”

To provide some insight into her world, at the start of school Lee-Held’s new students learn to read and write Braille. “We then label the tote trays they use in the room with the Braille they create.”

Lee-Held says one of the best things about her students is that they accept her for who she is. As an example, she relayed a story from an open house a few years ago, where a parent commented to her child about how she didn't know that teachers were allowed to bring their dogs to school. The child told the parent, yes, the dog is allowed because it is a guide dog. The mother then said, "You never told me you had a blind teacher," to which the son replied, "I never really thought it was important."

"It was so cool that the student never thought much about how different I am," Lee-Held said.

### **Getting started**

Lee-Held's early years at Harry Tippler Middle School weren't easy. She knew parents, teachers and students questioned her ability to do her job.

"At the beginning of my teaching career, the biggest challenge was to convince other people to believe in me. Unfortunately, it's a thing that people with disabilities all face — you have to go the extra mile to prove that you're just as capable at doing a job," she said.

"So when you get the chance to prove yourself, it's very rewarding. At the same time, however, you're thinking, 'Why do I have to go the extra mile when others aren't questioned about their ability to do a particular job?'" Lee-Held said.

"However, it's become easier over the years because I'm now kind of a fixture at the school and people know me and my guide dog and now respect me."

### **Advice for future teachers**

To those looking to become teacher, Lee-Held advises to find a mentor and make a concerted effort to observe how they teach and what students are doing in the classroom.

"Get out in the subject area in which you want to teach and at multiple schools to prepare yourself for reality," she said.

"But don't just limit yourself to observation. Make sure to get one-on-one time with the teacher to understand the amount of paperwork required, grading, accountability, protocols for dealing with students and parents, and the day-to-day challenges teachers face."