

## Alumnus inducted into National Teachers Hall of Fame

*By Steve Wieberg, contributing writer (Updated June 17, 2013)*



Northwest alumnus Darryl Johnson is one of five inductees into the National Teachers Hall of Fame and will be formally inducted during a ceremony June 14 in Emporia, Kan. (Photo by Darren Whitley/University Relations)

Darryl Johnson's first step toward a hall of fame teaching career was tentative, to say the least.

A month shy of finishing high school in the Chicago area, his sights were set on following two older brothers into the military. His mother, Lois, had other ideas, urging her youngest to become the first in the family to go on to college, to "break the streak" as she put it, but it seemed in vain.

"I said, 'Mom, I hate high school. I just can't wait to get out,'" Johnson recalls.

He relented enough to investigate. Visiting his high school guidance counselor one day, Johnson spied a flyer for Northwest Missouri State, scanned it and was struck by the school's affordability. With a six-hour drive and visit to the newly electronic campus, the deal was sealed.

In the quarter-century, since then, the 44-year-old Johnson has earned two Northwest degrees, honed his teaching skills at three northwest Missouri high schools and earned local, state and

national acclaim. Six years ago, he was named the state's Teacher of the Year and found himself shaking hands with then-President George W. Bush. He was announced in April as one of five new inductees into the National Teachers Hall of Fame and, on a return trip to Washington, visited Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and talked policy for an hour with his staff.

Johnson's formal entry into the Hall of Fame in Emporia, Kan., came June 14.

"A lot of people are working hard," he says. "I've just been very lucky. And blessed."

Back in high school, Johnson says, he was painfully introverted. That's still essentially the way he's wired. But his success in the classroom at Smithville (Mo.) High School, where Johnson has taught English and communications arts for the past 18 years, has pushed him onto a multitude of other stages.

He was a frequent choice when Smithville's seniors were allowed to vote on a commencement speaker, and is regularly courted by other districts to address their teachers before the start of a new school year. His writings have been published regionally and nationally. His lesson plans were featured by a Missouri nonprofit, SuccessLink, that disseminates and promotes best educational practices.

He's currently working with Triumph Learning, a New York City publisher of education resources that will put him on the road as an expert on the new, national Common Core standards. Johnson, married and the father of two, is weighing a move from the classroom to a full-time role with the company.

"I want to teach teachers. That's next," he says.

An introvert? During that May 3 sit-down in Washington with Duncan's cabinet staff, Johnson and his four fellow Hall of Fame inductees were invited to weigh in on education issues. What, they were asked, was keeping them awake at night?

"We all kind of looked at each other, but I was not afraid (to speak up)," says Johnson, who questioned the advisability of merit pay and elimination of tenure for teachers. He also registered concern about student safety.

"They need to address salaries and try to recruit teachers," he says. "Not just recruit but retain, which is a problem because half of our teachers are leaving within five years.

"It was great to have an audience that actually listened. His (Duncan's) sleeves are rolled up, and he was very receptive."

The same passion that he invests in those issues, Johnson has put into his classes at Smithville – which ranged the past year from 10thgrade English to British Literature to Literature of Social Change, the latter a senior-level course dissecting books on such weighty issues as the death penalty and child slavery.

He's both demanding and disarming, livening his lessons with jokes, puns and other funniness. He makes a point of getting to know students, connecting with them, and in turn he insists that they be active participants in his classes.

"He's one of my favorites to go watch," says Smithville Superintendent George Curry. "... The kids know it's going to be 90 minutes of teaching and learning and being engaged."

Curry is unsure of the exact number. But he estimates that a quarter of his district's staff came by way of Northwest, which earned higher education's Christa McAuliffe Award for Excellence in Teacher Education in 2006. "It has played a major role in Smithville education for a long time, and hopefully for a long time to come," he says.

Johnson, the once-reluctant student, earned a bachelor's degree in English education from Northwest in 1992 and his master's degree six years later. He then made teaching stops at Plattsburg and Northeast Nodaway R-V high schools before settling in at Smithville in 1995.

He's also an adjunct English instructor at William Jewell College in nearby Liberty.

"What I liked about Northwest and its English program was that expectations were so high," he says. "Half the time, I didn't think I could meet them. But I had professors like William Trowbridge (now Missouri's poet laureate) ... and Dr. (Michael) Graham.

"It was hard. It was very hard. That's where I get my rigor from. That's where I get my expectations from. People can do stuff if you set the bar high. They just have to work and believe in themselves."

He is proof, he says.

Johnson entered the National Teachers Hall of Fame along with a second inductee from Missouri, eighth-grade science teacher Berth Vernon of Blue Springs. The state produced just one in the previous 21 years: St. Louis Lindbergh High's Debra Peppers in 1999.

The Hall annually honors five exceptional pre-kindergarten through high school teachers from around the country "who have demonstrated commitment and dedication to teaching our nation's children." This year's induction ceremonies coincided with groundbreaking for a new Memorial to Fallen Educators, inspired by the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., last December and honoring all who've died on the job.

"It's not about me. It's something greater than myself, and I kept that really close to me in D.C.," Johnson says. "I'm representing 3-point-whatever million teachers."

Smithville, too.

And Northwest.