



# P R E S E N T S T H E TEACHER OF THE MONTH



## Michael Dang From lab rat to class act

When Michael Dang graduated from the University of Texas at

Austin with a bachelor's degree in microbiology, he thought he had realized his life's dream: to work in a laboratory. But a surprise awaited him.

"I worked in a lab for about a year and found it boring," he says.

But his experiences in college provided him the opportunity to work as a teaching assistant – "my first taste of teaching," he says – and he loved it.

"Actually being able to impart the love of science to someone else: I loved that," Mr. Dang says. He wasn't aware of the path to teacher certification, but he happened to see an advertisement for the coursework, completed his certification and started teaching in 1995 in the Dallas ISD.

Mr. Dang's educational career path has gone in several directions: he taught for three years at an alternative school; served as a math, science and technology specialist for two years; taught in the science department for one year; and after earning his master's degree in school administration, worked as an assistant principal for seven years.

As part of the science team at North Garland High School, Mr. Dang specializes in working intensively with students who need extra preparation for the important TAKS tests.

"It's a big team effort," Mr. Dang says of the 17-member science department. "Any one of them could be Teacher of the Month. I'm just one part of the science team here," he says. "We try to provide as much support as possible, always being proactive, not reactive. Otherwise, you're always in crisis management."

Mr. Dang says he works with a group of about 150 students from grades 10, 11, and 12 on a regular basis.

"We work with the text and the existing

curriculum to reinforce lessons taught in the classroom," he says. "Sometimes just a different voice – a different face – makes the difference with kids. There's no magic bullet. We just do our best to reach them, working with different approaches to convey the lesson," Mr. Dang says.

"We use hands-on activities, things the students haven't seen before, to make them wonder, pique their curiosity. No science teacher would deny this: we see science lessons in everything – from walking down the grocery store aisle to other everyday tasks," Mr. Dang says. "It's all about things kids have seen before and relating them to science. For example, when we talk about heat transfer, we make hot cocoa to illustrate the lesson."

Mr. Dang's passion for teaching is echoed in one of his favorite books, *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer. This book "calls teaching an uncertainty: each year brings a different set of challenges. It's all about relationships and building those relationships. Basically, teaching is like having a blind date every year," Mr. Dang says. "You're only as good as the challenge you're dealing with right then."

Mr. Dang's personal philosophy about teaching could be the subject of a book as well.

"It's important to teach students to love learning. Teach them to learn forever, then they'll choose to take classes and further their education. We as teachers need to push students to understand that there are no limits.

"High expectations are my mantra: expect a lot and most students will try to deliver," Mr. Dang says.

His unique path to the classroom taught him some valuable lessons.

"I realized that you can be good at a job but not love it. I was good at what I did (as a microbiologist), but I found it really boring. I wouldn't change this job for anything," he says, sounding like a man who has truly found his calling.

North Garland High School and its students are the lucky beneficiaries of Mr. Dang's passion for learning.



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