The valuable experiences that have come my way this year as the 2010 ACTFL National Language Teacher of the Year (TOY) have been both enriching and humbling. But the real value of the Teacher of the Year program does not come from the designation of just one national ambassador. Rather, it is in each state putting forth its own candidate as a spokesperson to promote our profession and gain visibility for language learning, thus furthering the original intent of the program.

ACTFL’s National Language Teacher of the Year recognition, sponsored by publisher Holt McDougal, was born out of recommendations of the New Visions in Action Task Force on Teacher Recruitment and Retention. A statement issued by the task force listed the goals of the award:

First and foremost, this proposal is designed to involve all of our state, regional, and national organizations in promoting our profession. Second, it is intended to create as many media opportunities as possible to increase the visibility of the importance of learning languages and cultures to the general public.

So how can we “wind up” our TOYs, especially at the state level, to maximize the award’s potential as a way to promote our profession and the value of language learning?

Benefits to Sponsoring Organizations

The TOY program can bring numerous benefits to state organizations—of which the naming of a spokesperson is only the beginning. The award gives state and regional Teacher of the Year finalists a platform to bring attention to issues affecting the profession such as the need for a state world languages supervisor where the position is threatened with elimination or simply does not exist. It can spotlight exemplary programs that show languages to be an essential component of a core curriculum—which is especially important in the present climate of cutbacks. The attention garnered through the announcement of a TOY finalist can be used to gain access to politicians and other decision makers. Politicians are generally willing to be photographed with Teacher of the Year finalists. Although a photo-op may be very brief, it provides an opportunity to communicate the value of language learning. It is also a chance to invite lawmakers to visit the classroom to see for themselves the many good things going on in language instruction.

TOY finalists can be counted on as popular presenters at state and regional conferences. Session descriptions that highlight the fact that the presenter is a past finalist help to assure a good draw and promote best practices.

The upcoming ACTFL Annual Convention and

Top: 2007 ACTFL TOY Christine Lanphere (center) with California Assemblyman Roger Niello and California Language Teachers Association Executive Director Lorraine D’Ambruoso at a Discover Languages Month rally in Sacramento, CA.
Middle: 2006 ACTFL TOY Ken Stewart with North Carolina Congressman David Price.
Bottom: ACTFL Executive Director Bret Lovejoy, 2009 ACTFL TOY Toni Theisen, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and 2009 ACTFL President Janine Erickson.
World Languages Expo in Boston will feature a session led by past National Teacher of the Year winners who will share ideas gleaned through their experiences as national spokespersons. This is evidence that the program has a shelf life far beyond the year in which the award is given.

Benefits to Participants

Being honored by one’s peers is an obvious benefit of participation in the TOY program; one is made to feel special at all levels of competition. But a lasting personal benefit can be derived from the reflection on one’s teaching that is inherent in the process. Vickie Mike, 2009 Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NECTFL) TOY and 2010 National Finalist, views reflection upon one’s practice as an opportunity for professional growth:

When I was asked to put together a portfolio of my 30+ years of teaching, I did not quite know how to do this or where to begin. I quickly realized that any portfolio I put together had to include the many pieces of a teaching career puzzle. This puzzle, in the form of a portfolio, included stories of how I had grown professionally, stories of how I had connected with students and colleagues, and finally, stories of some of the contributions I have been able to make as an advocate for the study of world languages. It is through story that we empower ourselves and others to make a difference.

Collaborations with other language teachers can result in a wider network of contacts. Leadership opportunities unforeseen at the beginning of the process have abounded for finalists. Juan Carlos Morales, 2007 Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT) TOY, and Samantha Godden-Chmielowicz, 2008 Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (CSCTFL) TOY, have since been elected to the boards of the regional conferences they once represented. Desa Dawson, 2006 National Finalist from the Southwest Conference on Language Teaching (SWCOLT), is currently serving on the ACTFL Board of Directors and is also director of world languages for the Oklahoma Department of Education. Christine Lanphere, 2007 ACTFL TOY, received a four-year appointment to the California Curriculum Commission, a body that recommends curriculum materials for adoption by the State Board of Education.

Shoulder Tapping

The benefits to the organizations and individuals make the TOY title a worthwhile pursuit. But state organizations receive nominations sometimes only after repeated appeals. Perhaps that is because teachers tend to be humble and reluctant to seek out recognition from their colleagues. Virtually every candidate who has thrown his or her hat into the ring did so only after some vigorous “shoulder tapping” by a colleague. Mentors, whether self-appointed or selected as an awards chair for their organization, serve an important role in looking around their state and perhaps down the road a few years to identify and develop prospective candidates. Mentors can champion potential candidates by helping them find opportunities to strengthen their leadership and advocacy efforts. They can direct a prospective candidate to apply for grants through the state organization to attend seminars and broaden their knowledge of issues facing the profession. They may also encourage prospects to engage in special projects such as outreach workshops in order to polish their presentational skills. This shepherding pays dividends in developing leaders who will make ongoing contributions to the organization that has supported them. And mentors most likely will be called upon to give a pep talk or two so that applicants see themselves as worthy of all the fuss.

Each state and regional organization requires candidates to submit a portfolio that mirrors the one required for the ACTFL National Language Teacher of the Year. Mentors can be invaluable in helping the candidate break the work into manageable chunks and proofreading their essays. They are at the ready to celebrate the candidate’s accomplishments regardless of the outcome of the competition.
Getting the Word Out

In addition to the benefits cited above, recognition of excellent educators helps to elevate teaching in the community and may encourage students to think about it as a career field. To that end, state and regional organizations must be poised to help their finalists gain publicity through every possible avenue including press releases to lawmakers, universities attended by the finalist, their present school district as well as former ones, civic and other professional organizations in which they participate, and so on.

TOYs can also be utilized to seek out new areas in which to tout the benefits of language learning such as participation in a community speakers’ bureau or an online blog. States might consider tapping either a current or past Teacher of the Year to lead Discover Languages Month initiatives in February. And present and past TOYs can perform a valuable duty for our profession by sharing model lessons via wikis or other websites, as well as opening their classrooms for observations by novice teachers and those who wish to learn techniques from honored educators.

Winding up our TOYs means that the awarding of a plaque or trophy is not where it all ends—but rather where things really begin. With so many benefits available, you may want to consider participating in the program yourself or championing a deserving colleague.

Of course, it should be emphasized that one doesn’t need a title in order to speak up for languages. Every educator has someone who considers them to be their own personal teacher of the year. Take advantage of such an honor and reflect upon ways that you can further promote our profession. Be proud of the work that you do and encourage others to join our ranks. Accolades are wonderful but there are few better rewards in teaching than that of opening the doors of the world to our students through languages.

Lisa Lilley is the 2010 ACTFL National Language Teacher of the Year. She teaches Spanish at Central High School in Springfield, MO.

Congratulations to the following individuals who have been chosen by their regional organizations as finalists for the 2011 ACTFL National Language Teacher of the Year competition. The winner will be announced in November 2010 at the ACTFL Convention and World Languages Expo in Boston, MA.

Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (CSCFL)
Martha Pero, Spanish
Hudson City Schools
Hudson, OH

Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NECTFL)
Maryann Woods-Murphy, Spanish
Northern Highlands Regional High School
Allendale, NJ

Pacific Northwest Council for Languages (PNWCL)
Amy Velasquez, Spanish
Evanston Middle School
Evanston, WY

Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT)
Clarissa Adams Fletcher, Spanish
Dunwoody High School
Dunwoody, GA

Southwest Conference on Language Teaching (SWCOLT)
Stephen Van Orden, German
Timpview High School
Provo, UT

Top: ACTFL TOY Lisa Lilley presents a session at the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages in Minneapolis, MN.
Middle: 2009 ACTFL TOY Toni Theisen with French Ambassador Pierre Vimont.