

Fort Gibson teacher earns award

By Keith Purtell

Phoenix Staff Writer

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— Fort Gibson High School humanities teacher Thrissa A. Johnson said she hopes her unique approach to teaching will give her students more self-assurance.

“If I can tell them the people who walked this Three Forks Area, who lived here, and went on to become these extraordinary people in our country, then I think it’s inspirational to them,” she said. “So perhaps they believe they are not limited in what they can do. It’s about knowing who you are and from whence you have come. I want my students to have that confidence.” Johnson has been named to receive the Indian Territory Award for Excellence in Teaching Oklahoma History from the Oklahoma Heritage Association.

The association in Oklahoma City bestows the annual awards on educators, individuals and organizations that are committed to preserving state and local history and sharing that heritage with others.

This year, Johnson will be one of seven individuals and organizations recognized at the association’s annual membership meeting and awards luncheon Tuesday in Oklahoma City.

Johnson, who has been teaching for 39 years, said she was very surprised when she was notified that she was receiving an award.

“I received a letter at the school,” she said. “I didn’t expect it. I was stunned and I was very honored. I opened it as the class was beginning, and my students said, ‘Mrs. Johnson? Is it OK?’ And I said, ‘Well, I’m just surprised by an honor that I’ve received.’ It was a lovely surprise.”

Johnson said she believes Oklahoma’s heritage is so rich that she has always incorporated it into her curriculum.

“When I taught English, I would have them read novels of Oklahoma’s history such as Cimarron or Savannah and have them read them and write reports on them,” she said. “Then when I had humanities, it opened the door to insert it into my curriculum when I reached that particular period in history. I compiled lists of famous people who had been in this area. Three presidents have been here, and the generals of the South have been here. I made this list so the kids would know their own heritage.”

Each year, her students get an in-depth tour of the area.

“We begin in the Fort Gibson Citizens Cemetery, which is the old Cherokee National Cemetery,” she said. “I show them the grave sites, for instance William Potter Ross, who graduated number one in his class and was the first Native American to graduate from Princeton, and became chief. I teach my history as we walk through these places.”

The tour winds its way from the cemetery to historic locations and more.

“I show them where Washington Irving pitched his tent when he was here as he was riding his tour of the prairies,” she said. “We go not only to the historical sites but also to the historical homes.”

Former student Susan Phares, 17, said Johnson’s class ended up being her favorite, and said the field trip gave her a new perspective.

“I never realized how interesting Fort Gibson was until she took us on that,” Phares said. “I had always thought that Fort Gibson is just a small town. It makes me want to come back here some day after college. It’s a really great town. I didn’t realize that until all the history I learned from her.”

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Thrissa Johnson teaches humanities at Fort Gibson High School. Johnson has been selected to receive the Indian Territory Award for Excellence in Teaching Oklahoma History.