



## She's made teaching science an art

Friday, January 02, 2003

**By Theresa Katalinas**  
**tkatalinas@sjnewsco.com**

PAULSBORO -- Her students often call her 'Mrs. Science' and she doesn't correct them.

Surprisingly, the title was one Linda Smith, a Paulsboro Elementary Science Resource Specialist of seven years, was not eager to accept at first.

"I went into (science) kicking and screaming," said Smith, who has a degree in English and American literature. She was pushed into the field while a Cumberland County teacher. "Science is not my first love, nor does it come naturally."

The challenge of teaching hands-on science in easy-to-digest form became a crusade for Smith. After some 10 years of perfecting a more out-of-this-world curriculum, the teacher of 20 years now easily transforms her students from molecules to astronauts with a dizzying spin of a chair and pop of a miniature marshmallow.

"All the time kids play that they're molecules," Smith said of the exercise that links students together hand-in-hand as they move around the classroom. "That makes sense."

Smith found her true calling in instructing the 897 pre-kindergarten through sixth-grade youths at Billingsport and Loudenslager schools how to think and problem-solve. Now, the Pittsgrove Township resident spends her free time building and launching paper rockets and exploring creative approaches to making science fun.

"I have little 4-year-olds that'll tell you, 'I'm a scientist,'" Smith said. "Up in the middle school and the high school, I'm changing attitudes. In the pre-school, I'm creating them."

Apparently, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration agreed in its selection of Smith as one of 14 new ambassadors from the U.S. for the NASA Educator Ambassadors program.

In five essays and an extensive telephone interview, Smith beat the odds and encouraged NASA officials to include her in the 23-member program, which was designed three years ago solely for high school and college instructors.

"I meet a lot of scientists and not one person has ever said their AP chemistry class (inspired them)," Smith said. "If you wait until high school to ignite that, we're throwing our best people away."

With a \$2,500 stipend and a drive to learn science teaching techniques, Smith will trek to Sonoma, Calif. for two weeks in July to work with NASA scientists on quasars and black holes. The mother and wife of 25 years will devise ways to break down the material to an elementary school level and distribute NASA information to New Jerseyans.

Smith, who was named Gloucester County Teacher of the Year in 2000, drew inspiration from her own teachers early on, and, by seventh grade, realized that teaching was her profession of choice.

"Nobody's going to live forever," Smith said. "But, you can live on in the hearts and minds of the people you touch. I think I've got a pretty long string."

Copyright 2004 NJ.com. All Rights Reserved.