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# Area chemists honor inspiring NKU prof

BY HOWARD MCEWEN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

Northern Kentucky University chemistry professor Vern Hicks was named the 2008 Cincinnati Chemist of the Year by the Cincinnati Section of the American Chemical Society.

Hicks has taught at NKU for 35 years. He will start a phased retirement after this term.

"Without question, he is the most dynamic, exciting and engaging chemistry teacher I have ever interacted with at any level," wrote assistant professor Keith Walters in the letter nominating Hicks for the award. He has taught with Hicks for six years.

**ADVERTISEMENT** The joy of teaching was something Hicks discovered later than most academics.

"My zeal for teaching was a great surprise to me," Hicks said. "I did not have to do any teaching to speak of in graduate school as I was on an (National Science Foundation) Fellowship. I taught at a community college while writing my thesis, and I was shocked to discover that I liked teaching even more than research."

"It is a great joy to see students begin to understand a difficult concept and it is a great feeling to share your love of chemistry with others. The fun part is getting others interested in your subject even though it may involve doing strange things. I like to do a lot of demonstrations in class."

Hicks takes his "zeal for teaching" off campus. Cindy Ashworth attends church with him at the Asbury United Methodist Church in Highland Heights.

"He takes a rotation where a member of the church does a children's sermon before they leave to go down to children's church," Ashworth said. "When Vern has the message people sit in the first row so they can see, the choir stands to be able to see and the kids all under the age of about 10 or so are mesmerized by Vern's experiment/message. He grabs the attention of toddlers! How amazing is that?"

During his phased retirement, Hicks wants to continue his focus on outreach activities. For 25 years he has taught summer camps and workshops to students from pre-school to 12th grade. He also helped establish Academic Alliances, a program that promotes education cooperation among all academic levels from elementary school to the university.

"Not a week goes by where Vern is not going to an area school or bringing students on to our campus to share the joys of chemistry," Walters said. "Indeed, whenever I go to local schools myself I am always asked about Vern. Clearly he has been involved in one way or another with almost every primary and secondary science teacher in Northern Kentucky."

Hicks' zeal for teaching has provided his most rewarding times.

"One of my proudest moments happened just a few years back, when two of my physical chemistry students, Pat Hogan and David Rothgeb, chose to do graduate work in quantum chemistry, my field," Hicks said.

"In fact, one of the truly great joys in teaching is to get students interested in learning more about chemistry and to see them do well after graduation."

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