



*Pictured at the 2005 Cappies Awards ceremony, where the Arts Teacher of the Award was announced, are (from left) Broward County Schools Superintendent Dr. Frank Till, Randi Kleiner (J.P. Taravella Drama Club president), Elizabeth Hude, Lori Sessions, Taravella High School Principal Shawn Cerra and Steven Glassman from the Broward Cultural Division.*

## *You CAN Go Home Again!*

### Lori Sessions honored as Arts Teacher of the Year at her Alma Mater

BY SUSAN F. DAVIS

**M**onologues. Elaborate costumes. Stage fright – and how to overcome it.

There's no question that a student's experience in a high school drama class is quite a bit different from the rest of the daily schedule. What's more, the most ambitious young actors and actresses frequently take drama more than once a day – and enroll year after year.

"Theater is addictive," observes Lori Sessions, the drama teacher at J.P. Taravella High School in Coral Springs for the past 11 years. Playing multiple roles as teacher, counselor, mentor and friend, Sessions displays unabashed enthusiasm for her work and appreciation for her students. You can hear it in her voice. "It's so

rare to be in a teaching situation where you have your students more than once a day, and more than one year out of their high school life," she notes.

Watching these young people grow, mature and simply shine is her greatest reward. When the seniors graduate, Sessions compares it to "losing just a little piece of yourself." Of course she wishes them well, but their absence is deeply felt.

This year, Sessions can supplement the satisfaction she derives from teaching with another, more tangible, reward. She has been named 2005 Arts Teacher of the Year by the Broward County Commission's Cultural Division. As someone who

is so dedicated to her craft, Sessions was thrilled with this announcement – particularly since it fell in the 20th anniversary year of the Arts Teacher of the Year Program.

When she began teaching theater at J.P. Taravella a dozen years ago, it was a homecoming for Sessions. The Coral Springs school – where she had once been a member of the dance team, president of the Drama Club and an active student of the arts – welcomed her. For the students, her fellow teachers and the arts community at large, her return to her alma mater proved to be both beneficial and momentous. The work proves it.

*J.P. Taravella High School's ambitious theatrical productions have included Beauty and the Beast (2004, top) and Singin' in the Rain (2003).*

When she began her teaching career, the school presented two plays each season. She and her students now mount four productions each year, one of which is a large-scale musical. This year, Sessions and her young actors are preparing for *Oklahoma*, the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic.

She is not afraid to be ambitious. "We don't do 'high school theater.' We aim for a more professional level, one that prepares the kids for more real-world experiences," she explains. Last year's production of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* is just one case in point. The magic spun by this show has stayed with her and certainly with her students. "We were thrilled," Sessions adds, "to be able to take this show to the state Thespian competition in 2005, where it was enthusiastically received. It was such a special time for the kids – a definite work of love."

Over the years, Sessions has been a two-time nominee for Arts Teacher of the Year. She is included in *Who's Who Among America's Teachers* and she was nominated for the Disney American Teacher Awards in 2002. Of all her awards and honors, though, she is the most proud of her work in establishing the Cappie Awards Program here in South Florida.

In 1999, she stumbled across an article in a professional journal about the Cappie Program. When she found out what it entailed, she knew it would be perfect for South Florida's educational theater community. This program, which began in Washington, D.C., is a sort of Tony Awards program for high school students. Students are selected to critique other schools' productions in a positive way. Mentors read the reviews and pass them on to local newspapers, magazines or appropriate media. At the end of the season, a gala is held at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, where awards

such as Best Actor and Actress; Best Lighting and others honoring both performance and technical achievements are handed out in grand fashion.

In the beginning, there were only five active schools in this program. But, today, thanks to her tireless efforts, there are 27 active schools in only the fourth year since its inception. "The benefits of this program are fabulous," Sessions points out. "It shows the community what is going on in high school that is positive! Attendance at these schools' shows is definitely on the increase."

As a student, Sessions was a dancer. From this aspect of her training, she is able to bring a vast amount of experience and expertise to her own students. In her early days of teaching, she worked in local regional theater as well as summer stock in North Carolina. She even performed in a tour that traveled to Japan. While there, she found that her educational background gave her an entirely different perspective on performing. She was anxious to learn all of the "how-to's" that she could.

When she began to teach, she was delighted to return to Taravella. "It was such a good school and it had a strong basis for a theater program," she says. Sessions, who lives in Coral Springs, holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in theater from Florida State University and a Master's degree in Social Studies Education. When asked whether she will ever teach social studies, she replies, "Not now, but maybe someday."

We hope that day is a long way off – for social studies' gain would definitely be educational theater's loss! Those of us who wait and watch for the curtain to go up on her next production can only say "brava!" ★

*Susan F. Davis is a writer in Boca Raton.*



### *Save the Date: October 26, 2005*

Each year, one outstanding arts educator from Broward County is honored at a gala Arts Teacher of the Year awards ceremony and performance at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts. The program is sponsored in part by the William A. Krueger Charitable Trust, the School Board of Broward County, Florida, the Broward Center, the Cultural Foundation of Broward, the *Sun-Sentinel* and the Florida Marlins.

This year's event will take place October 26 at 6 p.m. in the Broward Center's Amaturio Theater. RSVP online at [www.broward.org/arts/workshops.htm](http://www.broward.org/arts/workshops.htm). For information, contact Terresa Ford at (954) 357-8007 ([teford@broward.org](mailto:teford@broward.org)) or Monique Shaw at (954) 357-8010 ([mshaw@broward.org](mailto:mshaw@broward.org)).