Grant Takes Middle School Teacher 'Over The Moon'

By Cheryl Shuffler
Burke County

Andrea Gladden has dreamed of going to Space Camp since she was in the sixth grade. Some 30 years later, Gladden, who now teaches sixth graders, will have the opportunity to make that dream come true. The Burroughs Wellcome Fund has named Gladden a recipient of the 2023 Career Award for STEM Teachers (CAST). The East Burke Middle School technical education and Project Lead The Way teacher will receive $175,000 over the next five years for STEM education. In addition to a stint at Space Academy for Educators, Gladden plans to use the funding to immerse her school in STEM experiences to help students better understand what life could be like on Mars.

News that Gladden is a CAST recipient came as a surprise in her classroom last Wednesday as she was busy instructing students as they completed tasks with their VEX V5 Clawbots. Alfred Mays, Burroughs Wellcome Fund senior program officer, and a film crew delivered the news and a large replica of a check for $175,000.

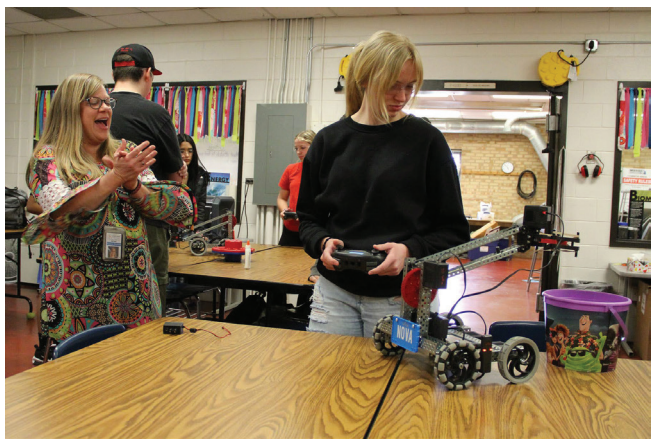
An enthusiastic Gladden said she could not wait to get started on the project. She said, "I am so excited. We are going to be able to grow this program. We are going to be able to build these robots and transform them into Mars Rovers. Imagine what we can do now that we have this opportunity. This is going to be huge for our school. All of our six, seventh and eighth graders are going to be able to come together for STEM activities here and in their classrooms. I cannot wait to get started."

Burke County Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Mike Swan and East Burke Middle School Principal D.J. Carswell were on hand for the surprise. Swan said, "I have had the pleasure to work with Mrs. Gladden in my role for the last two years as superintendent and to be part of some of the great things I see she does regularly. Burke County Public Schools could not be happier and more supportive of Mrs. Gladden and what she does. The way our community is evolving right now, what she is going to be doing for you guys this year and the upcoming years is only going to strengthen these activities."

Carswell said, "I get to see Mrs. Gladden daily coming in here. This is one of the classes students sign up for and one of our most wanted classes. You guys are very fortunate in that. I am thankful she brought this grant to us. It helps her as far as her teaching career but it is all about students and supporting students. "

CAST recognizes outstanding STEM teachers who have demonstrated exceptional leadership in their classrooms, schools, and communities. After a rigorous selection process, Gladden became one of four exceptional STEM teachers chosen for the CAST.

Gladden plans to use the funding for innovative and hands-on technology to provide an immersive experience to the sixth through eighth graders at East Burke Middle as students study what life could be like on Mars. Gladden said, "Using instructional technology such as the Oculus Quest 2 virtual reality headsets, 3-D printers, indoor hydroponics, aeroponics gardens, and robotics kits with sensors, every EBMS student will have the opportunity to learn about concepts being considered for life beyond Earth."



The sixth graders will be tasked with designing and 3-D printing dwelling places; the seventh graders will study sustainable energy and alternative ways to grow food; the eighth graders will refine and code Mars Rovers to autonomously deliver the food to the dwelling places in a classroom-sized Mars map.

Gladden says the project has been in the planning stage for about eight years, and over the summer she decided to go for the CAST grant to take the project to the next level. She said, "This will transform East Burke Middle School as we will be able to incorporate STEM into our homeroom classes."

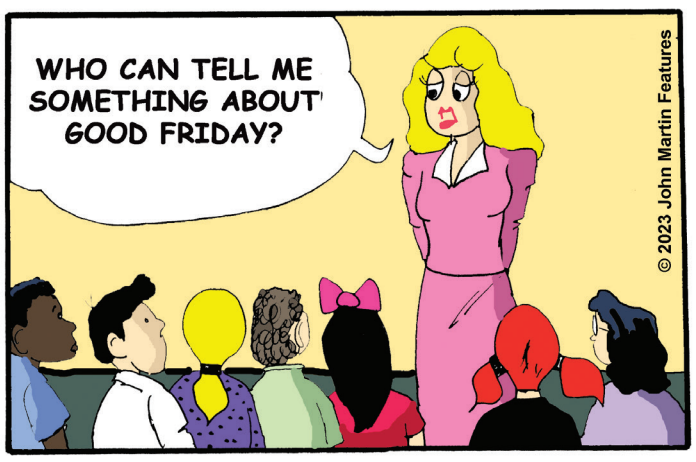
In addition to providing technology and resources for hands-on student learning, the grant will assist staff with professional development. Gladden said she will work one-on-one with teachers and provide resources to incorporate STEM into the daily curriculum. She said, "Students will build skills they will be able to take with them beyond the classroom and into the workforce. Who knows, we may have tons of engineers come out of this school. My hope is they will carry these lessons with them forever."

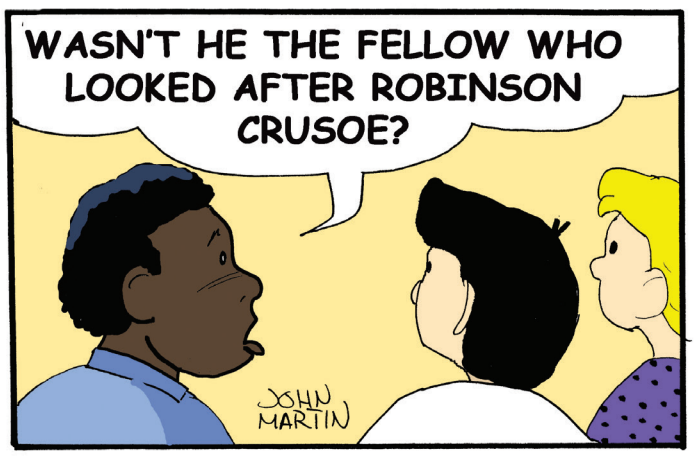
In addition to Gladden, other CAST winners across the state were Benjamin Davis, Robbinsville High School; Leslie Rhinehart, Polk County Middle School; and Thomas Savage, Henderson County Early College. Dr. Louis J. Muglia, president and CEO of the Burroughs Wellcome Fund, said, "We are thrilled to honor these exceptional STEM teachers for their dedication and leadership in STEM education. We hope that these awards will encourage more teachers to follow in their footsteps and become leaders in STEM education."

Mays, who also serves as the Fund's Chief Diversity Officer and Strategist in Diversity and Education, said, "STEM teacher leadership is critical for shaping the next generation of innovators, problem-solvers, and changemakers. Through their passion, guidance, and expertise, STEM teachers have the power to inspire and empower students to tackle some of the world's most pressing challenges and create a better future for all."

Gladden has plans to eventually share her work with the other middle schools in the district.

Cheryl Shuffler is the Public Relations Officer for the Burke County Public School System.





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