

Perpetual

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PHOTOS BY
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WITH AN UNORTHODOX
AND ENERGETIC APPROACH
TO SCIENCE EDUCATION,
KEMPER AWARD-WINNING
TEACHER ROBIN
HURST-MARCH INSPIRES
HER STUDENTS TO
UNDERSTAND THE WORLD
AROUND THEM.

Ten minutes before Robin Hurst-March's 9 a.m. environmental studies class, she stands at the head of the lecture hall in 112 Lefevre with chocolate bars and bags of matchsticks. On the board, she has drawn a chart that students will later fill in. As bleary-eyed students gradually file in, one looks at the empty chart and sighs. "Robin, is this an interactive class?" "Come on, honey" is Hurst-March's



Motion



Robin Hurst-March is a dynamo of a teacher. She specializes in making science interesting to nonscience majors, such as Katrina Wiedemann (not pictured), a sophomore education major who had a class with Hurst-March last fall. "She's great! She's up, outgoing and fun. This is the most nonboring class ever."

encouraging reply.

"It's early," moans the student.

Hurst-March, BS Ed '86, M Ed '94, PhD '97, is a 5-foot-3-inch dynamo with a loud, clear voice. During class, she sometimes ends her sentences with "y'all" and calls her students "little darlings." She races from one end of the lecture hall to the other, her gray-tinged brown hair flying around her round face, her wide-open blue eyes searching out students. Hurst-

March smiles, and it's clear she is in on the fun of her performance. Her shtick, as she calls it, helps students focus on subjects such as today's lesson on world population.

She divides the class into groups representing parts of the world: Africa, Asia, North America, Latin America and Europe. The chocolate bars represent gross national product, and the matches represent energy use. Hurst-March gives



the North America group the most chocolate and matches. After reviewing birth, death and population statistics, she asks a student from each group to fill the chart with statistics about their region. When one female student is reluctant to come to the front, Hurst-March urges her on, saying, "Go up there, my little lovebug."

Once all the information goes up on the board, the class reviews the work and utters a collective gasp upon discovering that in North America life expectancy is 77 years, but in Africa it's only 54 years.

"Whoa, 54 years! I would be on the slide," Hurst-March quips.

She lays out some more information about population growth rates and elicits another gasp: At the current rate, North America's population would double in 140 years, but Africa's would double in just 29 years. She pauses for a moment to let that sink in. The ensuing lively discussion brings class to an end, and students empty out of the room.

"Don't throw your gross national product waste on the floor," she says as they pass her, "or I'm gonna hurt you."

Hurst-March's teaching style is uncommon, and it's uncommonly effective. For her efforts, she won a \$10,000 William T. Kemper Fellowship for Teaching Excellence in April 2004. The awards program began in 1991 with a gift from the William T. Kemper Foundation of Kansas City, Mo., to honor 10 outstanding MU teachers annually. Kemper, BA '25, was a well-known civic leader who died in 1989.

Making Room for Great Teaching

In 2004, Hurst-March became one of the first teachers in a non-tenure-track position to win a Kemper Fellowship. John David, director of the Division of Biological Sciences, nominated her for the award. When Hurst-March was a graduate student, she taught biology courses for David, who recognized her talent. He used a special position called resident instruction assistant to retain Hurst-

March, who was the only graduate assistant in the division's history to score a perfect 5.0 for overall teaching effectiveness. And she did it twice. Hurst-March grades all the papers in her classes and memorizes the names of all her students, even though her Biology 1 course often has hundreds of students. "I just think it's a basic kindness to know someone's name, and it's not too much to ask," she says.

David says it's not easy to make

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science appealing to nonscience majors, who must take nine hours of science. "Many of them are dragged kicking and screaming into a course on science," he says.

David has nominated six other teachers who have won Kemper. He says that although many instructors are well-liked, Hurst-March is one of the few who can build on that quality to teach students what they need to know.

"It's a special kind of challenge," he says, "and it takes a special kind of teacher."

In the nomination packet for Hurst-March's Kemper Fellowship, former student Peggy O'Connor writes: "When she is teaching, you not only love being her student, you cannot help but want to be like her — someone who so obviously loves what she does, and who makes students from all disciplines eagerly reach for *Scientific American* on the newsstands."

Teaching Methods for the Masses

Hurst-March often weaves mass media into her lessons to help make them relevant to her students. She uses programs on television and radio, articles in local and national newspapers and magazines, and even popular films. It's a time-consuming aspect of her work, but it's well worth the effort.

Once, for a class on teaching science to elementary school students, she showed the animated film *The Lion King* and explained to her class of aspiring educators how to use it to teach the stages of life, what animals eat and how they are socialized. "It was just a way for them to connect with their students," Hurst-March says. "I really enjoy it, and I think it's very effective."

Holland Newton, a student in Hurst-March's General Principles and Concepts of Biology class this past fall, says part of her gift is how well she understands her audience. "She has a doctorate, but she can still make references to what college students like. She gets on the same level as students and talks to you like a friend."

Hurst-March lives for seeing her students reach "Aha!" moments, such as the ones they experienced during the population lesson. "I love it when you see that in them," she says, beaming. "When you can be a part of them learning, and they go, 'Ooh, wow!' That's just too cool, and I get to do that every day."

What Really Matters

Growing up in a working-class family in Fulton, Mo., Hurst-March had good teachers, starting in kindergarten with Connie Sother. "She made me feel like I was smart," Hurst-March says. "She made me feel like I could do anything." From that point on, Hurst-March knew she was going to be a teacher. "Teachers can truly make your life," she says.

That was a message she took with her as she worked for seven years as an elementary school teacher in small

mid-Missouri towns similar to the one where she grew up. "I wanted to give back to my students what I felt like I got," she says. "I wanted to try to be the best at what I did, and I felt like they deserved that."

Hurst-March also gives of herself to animals. She lives on a 250-acre farm southwest of Columbia with her husband, Zac March, BS Ed '91, M Ed '96, and numerous animals, including 34 horses, 13 cats, six dogs, four rabbits and a guinea pig. She and Zac, director of information technology for the College of Veterinary Medicine, run a charity called Out 2 Pasture for lame or injured racehorses. It's a continuation of Hurst-March's lifelong habit of taking in stray animals. Together she and Zac saved some of the horses they now care for as the animals were on their way to slaughterhouses. "They come in, these horses in particular, physically and mentally damaged, most of them, from what they've been through on the race-tracks," Hurst-March says. "Earning their trust is just like getting up in front of a student that doesn't want to take science. You have to win that."

To earn that trust with students, Hurst-March finds out what appeals to each one. She says not everyone is intelligent in the same way. Whatever they are interested in — economics, literature, art, journalism, athletics — Hurst-March makes it her job to help them connect with her courses. All students may not be great at memorizing

the phases of cell division, she says, but that doesn't mean they aren't bright.

Those are lessons Hurst-March learned first from her kindergarten teacher, Sother, and later from two high school teachers in Fulton: Pat Simpson, who taught literature, and Bill Simpson, M Ed '75, who taught science.

"They made me feel so special. They did little things like asking me how I was, and they made me feel incredibly worthwhile as a person. They were fabulous in the classroom — very hands-on. They were very different from the norm of the lecture format. They were what I hoped I would be."

Judging by the kudos from her

Hurst-March and her husband, Zac March, operate a sort of animal orphanage called Out 2 Pasture. They take in lame or injured racehorses, some of which would otherwise be headed to a slaughterhouse.

students, colleagues and the Kemper awards committee, she has achieved her goal.

"It'd be great if students come to my class and learn something about science," she says. "But if they go out knowing that they are special and can make a difference, that's what really matters." ❁