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EAST VALLEY TEACHER HONORED AS AN “INNOVATION HERO” Engineering teacher focused on preparing students for college and career success

(Mesa, AZ) - Sylvia Grace, a pre-engineering teacher at Desert Ridge High School in Mesa challenges her classes to conceptualize, design, prototype and market devices that have real-life relevance, then brings in working engineers and college professors to give feedback to her students.

Her high expectations, individual student attention and methods of exposing her students to engineering and science experiences with everyday applications and inspiring them to higher achievement and to go to college, despite their gender or socio-economic status have earned Grace a Science Foundation Arizona Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Initiatives (SFaz STEM) prestigious “Innovation Heroes” award. Grace is the first recipient in the East Valley to win the honor.

Nominated by Desert Ridge High School’s principal, Daniel Coombs, Grace is credited with bringing the national engineering program “Project Lead the Way” to Gilbert Public Schools, which prepares graduates for college and STEM careers. As part of her innovative teaching methods, Grace’s students are assigned a project that requires them to design working systems that use actual situations that need solutions. As an example, students have had to take on the task of creating systems to utilize solar power to save the school district money, exposing them to hands-on engineering and science in sustainable energies, a viable and growing industry.

The “Innovation Heroes” program recognizes students and teachers who use innovative approaches toward STEM academic excellence. The awards are co-sponsored by Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold and the Rodel Charitable Foundations of Arizona. Winning teachers receive a \$500 gift card for supplies and students receive a \$1,000 savings bond for college.

Grace is a former engineer with the federal government, IBM and Dell, and has successfully groomed high school graduates for competitive engineering programs at Arizona State, the University of Arizona and Stanford University. Grace is also a 2007 Milken Foundation Teacher of the Year in Arizona, awarded for her achievements in making science accessible and relevant to high school students.

In her nomination essay, Grace cites her desire to prepare students for a challenging, yet interesting science and engineering curricula: “I don’t know any other direct impact that I could make on society than to create students who are prepared to take on the challenges of science and engineering after high school and beyond.”

“Teachers like Sylvia Grace are an asset to education across the state,” said William C. Harris, president and CEO of Science Foundation Arizona. “Her efforts to inspire students - from all walks of life - to learn science and math, and to use them to foster our future generation of scientists and engineers for the 21st century is exactly what we need to encourage in our education system.”

“The type of project-based, hands-on programs being used by science and math teachers statewide are vital to exposing students to STEM degrees and careers,” said Darcy Renfro, SFaz Vice President and Director of the SFaz STEM Initiative. “Arizona needs skilled engineers who can fill the workforce needs of all industries now and in the future, and creating a pipeline of qualified individuals starts with a rigorous STEM offering in our schools.”

“Modern and future professions in most industries will need candidates who can use STEM problem-solving skills,” said Richard Adkerson, president and CEO of Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold. “Whether in mining or any other sector, employers will seek workers who have mastered concepts in science and math.”

“We are pleased to support the recognition of individuals who are making such significant strides to bring more science and math into Arizona classrooms, and congratulate Mrs. Grace for her dedication to her students and the future of our state,” said Carol Peck of the Rodell Foundations.

The “Innovation Heroes” award program is ongoing and statewide; educators, students and/or members of the community may submit nominations online at www.sfaz.org.

-30-

About Science Foundation Arizona: Science Foundation Arizona (SFaz) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization initiated in 2006 by the Greater Phoenix Leadership Inc., Southern Arizona Leadership Council and the Flagstaff Forty in conjunction with the executive and legislative branches of state government. SFaz serves as a catalyst for high-wage, knowledge-based jobs and economic diversity through administration and strict oversight of research, development and education grants to public education and other non-profit research performing institutions. For more information, visit www.sfaz.org.

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