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## KIPP teacher earns honors *Nominated by her students*

By ROBERT FELTON



Timeka Cooley,  
First year teacher

Students rarely get the opportunity before they leave grade school to give back to a teacher who has had a positive impact on their lives. Usually that comes in the form of a tearful reunion after they have already finished school-when they reunite with that special teacher who encouraged them to sit up straight and never settle for a "B".

However, for the students of Timeka Cooley, the chance came earlier than expected as students of her sixth grade math class at KIPP Ascend Charter School, 718 S. Kildare, recommended her for acknowledgment at the upcoming North Lawndale Spirit of Youth Awards ceremony. The annual awards gala, which was held on March 28, recognizes individuals who have positively affected the well-being of youth in the Lawndale community.

In December, when the Lawndale Spirit of Youth Development paperwork was received by the teachers of the school, English Language Arts Department head Amy Poubia suggested turning the recommendation into a writing assignment where the children could write one-page essays recommending a teacher for the award.

"I was notified via my school voicemail and was very honored," said the 22-year-old Cooley. "I think the students were able to relate to my personality, which is largely cheerful and encouraging, but also demanding at times. They know I want them to succeed and expect the best from each one of them. I think my message resonated."

Cooley is the youngest teacher to receive the Spirit of Youth development award, which usually is awarded to veteran professors, making the honor all the more impressive.

Only months after graduating from Bradley University in Peoria with a degree in elementary education and middle school math, Cooley began working at Kipp in July of last year and her influence was immediately felt.

"We do songs to help us remember fractions and equations," said 11-year-old Tia Hughes who wrote one of the letters of recommendation. "She makes the class fun, but she also makes us work hard so we can get into a good high school. She wants us to treat each other like family and work together."

Hughes says she always enjoyed math; however, she'd gone through a stretch of difficulty, learning new theorems and equations. Nevertheless, through Cooley's lighthearted-though-challenging approach the concepts have become second nature.

"We practice and practice until we get it right," said Hughes. "She assures that everyone understands, and if there is something we don't understand, she will review it."

Cooley grew up on the South Side of Chicago, in the Englewood community. When she attended John Dare Elementary School, she became aware of her desire to work with those younger than herself.

"When I was in seventh and eighth grade, I tutored students who were in third and fourth grade," said Cooley. "My desire to reach out and work with youth is what led me to teach. I have an enormous amount of passion for it."

This passion allows her to work at Kipp, a school that operates nearly year-round, with classes beginning at 7 a.m. and ending at 5 p.m. Cooley's day begins promptly at 6 a.m. when she arrives at work.

"It can be very demanding for both the student and the teacher," said Cooley.

Cooley says she will graciously accept the plaque and \$1,000 check for her efforts in the company of her parents, grandparents and three students from the school. Her only regret is that her two younger brothers will be out of town at the time of the ceremony.