

Scientist turned teacher tries to be role model for female students

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This unique, non-profit community organization runs the cafeteria at Centre Hastings Secondary School and students earn two hospitality credits. She has also been the organization's treasurer from the beginning.

The Palmerston, Ont. native said her accomplishments in education are extremely dear to her, considering she wanted to be a scientist, not a teacher.

She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in marine biology from the University of Guelph. Her first job was at Marineland and Gamefarm in Niagara Falls, while her husband was studying at teacher's college.

"I went from working with whales and dolphins to students. But unlike students, you just give them fish and they will do tricks for you," she said, laughing.

Her husband was hired by Centre Hastings in 1975 and Irene also started teaching "with a letter of permission" at Centennial in Belleville. A year later, she too went to teacher's college and started full-time at Centre Hastings in September 1977.

"I try to bring the realities of the world into the classroom and students appreciate that."

Cooke said she has also tried to be a role model for her female students.

"I believe girls have to be strong and stand up for themselves," said Cooke, the first female math and science teacher at Centre Hastings.

Her dealings with youth extend beyond the classroom as well.

Cooke and her husband are billet parents for Belleville Bulls hockey players. She is also involved with the Belleville Bulldogs Rugby Club and has coached Belleville Minor Soccer teams for many years.

Cooke's influence on students resonates through the nominations of support received by the Education Week Committee.

One student wrote, "Mrs. Cooke

• Irene Cooke and husband, Rob, were married in July 1975 and have lived in Belleville since 1981.

• They have two daughters, Jocelyn, who is teaching at Erin District High School, and Kendra, who is finishing her third year in the human kinetics program at the University of Waterloo. Both daughters are elite rugby players and played together for Ontario in the Canadian National Rugby Championships last summer in British Columbia.

• The Cookes took a year's absence in 1980 and taught together in Freeport, Grand Bahama.

is living proof that passion takes precedence over virtue."

Another added, "Mrs. Cooke deserves this award because she has been the voice among silence. She has come to work every day for 30 years and has been the student voice."

Judy Edgar, Hastings and Prince Edward school board chairwoman, congratulated Cooke for winning the Sir Mackenzie Bowell Award

"This is a very special honour that is held in high regard in the education community," she said. "Over the years, thousands of Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board students have had the good fortune to be taught by someone so caring and devoted to the teaching profession."