Illinois Teacher of the Year

Linda Smerge, a second grade teacher at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School in Cicero, was named Illinois Teacher of the Year in the fall of 2008. The Illinois State Board of Education chose Smerge from nine finalists at the 34th annual Those Who Excel/Illinois Teacher of the Year banquet. Smerge spent 2009 as an education ambassador speaking with educators about her experiences and representing Illinois in the National Teacher of the Year program.

Smerge decided to leave a lucrative law practice after 13 years because of a feeling something was missing in her life. After what she describes as an intensive self-evaluation, she realized that her true calling was in the classroom. Smerge said there were numerous bumps in the road during her transition from the law to the classroom, but her overwhelming desire to make a real difference in children’s lives kept Smerge focused on her goal. In August 2001, Smerge joined the faculty at Wilson School, accepting the challenge of a first and second grade special education classroom.

This classroom was a new concept, combining students with a wide array of disabilities. Although ordered materials did not arrive in time for the opening of school, Smerge’s energy and determination prevailed. She was able to ensure her students were engaged and on task by continuously changing activities to maintain their interest. Smerge has high expectations of her students and herself and does not accept failure. She helps her students any way she can, convincing parents to allow their children to remain after school with her to receive extra help, especially with reading. Her relationships with her students and their parents form the foundation of the teaching and learning that take place in her classroom everyday.

Smerge holds an elementary education degree, a master’s degree in early childhood education and a law degree from Northern Illinois University.

As Illinois Teacher of the Year, Smerge had the opportunity to share her knowledge and expertise outside the classroom. She spent the 2009 spring semester speaking at teacher workshops, educational conferences, and civic and community meetings. She received a lifetime tuition waiver to state universities and a one-semester paid leave to pursue coursework or develop an educational project that will benefit students statewide. In addition, she represented Illinois at the NASA Space Camp in Huntsville, Ala., and in the National Teacher of the Year program sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers and ING. Linda also received products from SMARTer Kids.