

# Hoopa science teacher gets national award

The Times-Standard – by Thadeus Greenson  
Sunday, May 3, 2009

Coming out of the Humboldt State University teaching credential program, Brian Hopper barely found a job. Six years later, his work at Hoopa Valley High School has garnered him a national award for science teaching excellence.

Biotechnology giant Amgen recently announced that Hopper is one of six California teachers -- and only 34 throughout the United States, Puerto Rico and Canada -- to receive the company's annual Amgen Award for Science Teaching Excellence. The award comes with \$10,000 in grant money, which Hopper said he is busily trying to figure out exactly what to do with.

But this whole thing would have seemed preposterous to Hopper a few years ago.

After being dropped off in Humboldt County sight unseen to attend school, Hopper, an Indiana native, said he quickly fell in love with the area.

"From that day, I just knew I had found a place I wanted to be," Hopper said, adding that his heart sank when professors in the credential program warned it was almost impossible to find teaching jobs locally.

After getting his credential, Hopper said he quickly set about flooding the county's schools with applications. But he didn't stop there, as he also applied to dozens of schools in San Francisco and Sacramento.

Hopper said he was encouraged when Hoopa Valley High School called him in for an interview, but quickly had his hopes dashed again when the school opted to hire another candidate for its science teaching vacancy. But, in this case, opportunity came knocking twice, as the other candidate didn't work out and Hoopa eventually re-interviewed Hopper and hired him.

Since then, Hopper said he's been teaching biology, natural resources and a general ninth-grade science class at the high school, and loves it, saying he thrives on getting his students to think like scientists.

Hopper had a big hand in developing the school's natural resources program, which keeps a keen focus on fisheries and forestry, falling in line with some of the Hoopa Valley Tribe's heritage.

"Brian has really been spearheading the natural resources program," said fellow teacher Forest Stamper, who teaches engineering, calculus, physics and chemistry at the school. "It's been a lot of work, and he's put a lot of effort into that."

With schools receiving less and less funding, Hopper said he's also received a crash course in grant writing over the last few years, which has paid off.

Several years ago, Hopper said, he was able to secure a grant for the school that allowed him to take his class down to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, where they got behind-the-scenes tours. He was also able to secure a grant for the school to construct a natural plant garden on campus, and another that allowed the school to install solar panels on the school's roof.

"It's sad, but funding makes all the difference," Hopper said. "I knew we needed money, so I knew I needed to search for grants. You've just got to apply for them."

It was that search that led Hopper to Amgen.

"I was home sick one day thinking I needed money," he said. "So, I went online and started looking at science teacher grants."

When Hopper learned that Amgen was offering an award that came with a \$10,000 grant, he quickly set about applying for it, then didn't think much more about it.

Amgen spokeswoman Kristen Davis said Hopper's application was one of more than 300 the company received, then turned over to a judging panel at the University of Wisconsin Madison School of Education, which then judged them on innovative lesson planning, creativity, teaching effectiveness and plans for the grant money.

The judging panel selected Hopper as one of the 34 recipients, but the young science teacher wouldn't find that out for weeks.

Earlier this month, an unknowing Hopper was summoned to a school assembly, thinking that he'd been singled out for the invite because he'd skipped the school's last assembly to grade papers in his classroom. It wasn't until half way through the assembly that it dawned on Hopper what it was all about -- that the whole school had gathered to watch Amgen give him its science teaching excellence award.

"It was elation -- just amazement," Hopper said, adding that the excitement and pride evident on the faces of the school's students and teachers was one of the best parts.

Now, Hopper is busily trying to figure out what to do with the grant money. He's got plenty of ideas, but he wants to make sure whatever he does benefits Hoopa High students for years to come. He had thought of using the money to bring his class back down to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, as the grant that had previously allowed him to do so dried up this year. But, Hopper decided that wouldn't benefit enough students.

"I want something the kids can use -- something that can be used throughout the years," he said.