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Fla.'s teacher of the year started on 'Miami Vice'

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To see Florida's top teacher, turn on the TV and find an old episode of "Miami Vice."

Joe Underwood appeared a number of times on the show, sometimes as a narcotics officer, other times as a dancing bar patron.

But when the series went off the air, Underwood took on a new role: He became an educator.

Twenty-five years later, Underwood is an institution at Miami High. He runs the school's TV and film production academy - a program he created.

Over the years, Underwood has been named to the National Teachers Hall of Fame, edited a book, traveled around the world with teachers, and overcome cancer.

Now, Underwood has reached another milestone: He has won the prestigious Award for Teaching Excellence from the Florida Education Association. He will represent the Sunshine State in the National Education Association's competition in February.

"When they said my name, I couldn't believe it," Underwood said. "I was up against some very talented teachers. I didn't think I had a chance."

Underwood's students and colleagues, however, never doubted him.

"I know kids who have stayed in school because of him," said David Neira, 18. "He's one of those teachers who changes your life."

Added United Teachers of Dade President Karen Aronowitz: "To me, he represents what great teaching is all about."

Underwood, 56, followed an unconventional path toward becoming a teacher.

In the 1980s, he was cast as a special extra on Miami Vice, appearing in five episodes. He also filmed some commercials and did some work in TV production.

But finding an acting gig wasn't always easy. So his wife Nancy gently suggested he apply for a job at Miami High, where her father, Peter Nelson, was an assistant principal.

Underwood was hired as an athletic trainer in 1984.

Miami High principal Benny Valdes was then a student at the school.

"He was our doctor, our dad," Valdes recalled. "He cared about each of us."

Underwood soon discovered he had a passion for teaching. He began teaching drama and helping students who were learning English.

"There was something really incredible about seeing my students graduate and do well," Underwood said.

In 1988, school administrators asked Underwood to teach TV production classes. He got right to work, creating "The Stingtown News," the school's live student newscast.

Underwood later developed a number of courses for students interested in the television and film industries. The classes became the foundation for the Entertainment Technologies Academy at Miami High.

Underwood has raised more than \$400,000 in grant money to support his programs.

He also transformed the school television studio into a state-of-the-art facility, with a control room, editing bay and sound booth.

His teaching philosophy is simple:

"I try very hard to have my students reach beyond what they think they can do," he said. "They know there are really high expectations for them."

Underwood has high expectations for himself, too.

When he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma in 2004, he pledged to beat the cancer and return to the classroom.

His students were a great source of inspiration during the most difficult times, he said.

"They hung in there with me," he said. "They would do the show every day and know that they had to do it for Undy. They really came through."

True to form, Underwood is now in full remission and back at school.

He arrives each morning at 6 a.m. to work with the students who come to school early.

The Stingtown News goes on the air every day. The students are always pumped about the show - in part because of their teacher.

Said Amber Couzo, 16: "He's a role model. He's so passionate about what he does. Every day, he has a good attitude."

While Miami High keeps him busy, Underwood hasn't lost sight of his acting dreams. He's even made it onto the big screen.

In 1999, he appeared as referee No. 4 in the feature film "Any Given Sunday" - He's the ref in the rain game.

"I still get checks from that," he said, laughing. "My students think it's pretty cool."

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