

# L.A. educator honored as among the state's best

Lewis Chappelear is chosen as a Teacher of the Year for his work in starting an engineering program at Monroe High in North Hills.

By JOEL RUBIN  
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For someone who never thought of becoming a teacher, Lewis Chappelear hasn't done all that badly.

Not too badly at all.

Eight years ago, Chappelear was a burnt-out, unsatisfied restaurant owner in Toronto in search of a change.

On Monday, he will be named a California Teacher of the Year with four others and represent California in a national top-teacher competition.

He has taught math to youths in juvenile hall and worked at Compton High School. When he grew restless teaching algebra at Monroe High School in North Hills, he launched an engineering program. And when the school couldn't afford to pay for supplies to enter a robotics competition, he put up \$5,000 of his own money.

"It is all about the kids," he said, bringing real meaning to a favorite phrase of school board members, union officials and school bureaucrats.

Chappelear, a former engineer with two graduate degrees, said he had a vague idea that he wanted to get back to science, but no plan. On a frigid New Year's Eve in 1999, he resolved to move to Los Angeles.

By the end of the next month, he had made the move. Before leaving, Chappelear had scanned the Internet looking for a job to hold him over until he could enroll at UCLA to earn yet another degree. He had come across a posting to teach troubled students at a juvenile detention facility in L.A. County.

He called. They offered him the job over the phone.

Chappelear remembers his first day on the job, walking through security gates and into a drab classroom with no books, no paper, no pencils, no pens.



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

**DEDICATED:** "It is all about the kids," Lewis Chappelear, a former engineer with two graduate degrees, says of his career change to teaching.

"They were afraid the kids would use them as weapons," he said. "I thought to myself, 'Oh my gosh, what have I gotten myself into? I have no idea what I am doing. This is going to be terrible.' It turned out to be the best day of my life. The kids were amazing. That's when I knew what I was supposed to be doing with my life."

The teaching award by the state Department of Education, which Chappelear shares with four other California educators, credits his work at Monroe High, which, like so many other campuses in the Los Angeles Unified School District, faces the challenges of serving thousands of poor, minority students.

In the fall of 2001, after various teaching positions, he landed at a school closer to his San Fernando Valley home. At Monroe, he was assigned to teach algebra but still wanted to teach something closer to his own engineering background. He nagged and pleaded with school administrators, who relented the next year and added a single electronics class to his course load.

District officials had heard of Chappelear's electronics course and were searching for places to spend money earmarked for career- and technology-focused programs. One day they showed up at Monroe, pulled Chappelear

out of class and, unexpectedly, asked him if he wanted to start an engineering program at the school. "That was the first day of the rest of my career," he said. "They gave me the freedom to build my dream program."

The early going was rough. In the first year, Chappelear entered one of his classes into a robotics competition. The school's budget couldn't cover the \$20,000 needed for materials and travel expenses. He and his students combed the telephone book, writing letters to 250 companies asking for donations. They collected only \$200. NASA came through with a grant, but, in the end, Chappelear ponied up about \$5,000 of his own money.

Today, Monroe's School of Engineering and Design small learning community is on surer ground. About 350 students are enrolled in a specialized school within Monroe's walls. The students enter the intense three-year program as sophomores and are taught only by Chappelear and the dozen or so other teachers on his faculty.

In addition to required subjects, small groups of students spend about a month at each of 18 stations spread throughout Chappelear's classroom, focusing on various aspects of engineering.

Dozens of students also are enrolled in online classes at Cal State Northridge and have internships through a collaboration that Chappelear forged with local aerospace companies.

Get him talking about his students and Chappelear makes clear that his program doesn't have any admission requirements. He takes anyone who is interested.

"But that's the way I want it," he said. "I want a special program that is for all students, not one that is just for the elite few."

He is proud of one severely autistic student, who was barely withdrawn and didn't utter a word in class. But something clicked when the student discovered robots and a latent gift for designing the computer programs that make them run. Today a visitor to Chappelear's classroom doesn't leave without meeting the young programmer who

"Not everyone is good at everything," Chappelear said matter-of-factly. "And not everyone learns the same way. When a kid struggles, we don't give up on him. We just keep trying until we find the right way to get through."

And Chappelear talks with pride about taking his students, many of whom deal daily with the dysfunction and poverty surrounding Monroe, to engineering competitions, where they go head to head against better-off students from private schools and the district's specialty magnet programs.

"At first, they feel like they don't belong. But then they start to get that it doesn't matter what social class they are in or how much money their parents make," he said. "All that matters is who they are as people."