

Science teacher by day, movie critic by night: McGinniss shows passion for student interests

By Esther Dacanay
Torii Editor

Studying living organisms and recording data from the findings can be a fascinating lifestyle, especially to someone who grew up knowing that her passion was science.

Terry McGinniss, a 20-year veteran science teacher at Zama American High School, sure knows formulas and DNA charts. But her love of science comes second when it comes to building chemistry with her students.

"I make it a point to attend all the student games, including all the away games, even when we don't win," McGinniss said. "It gives me a chance to talk to my students about something other than science."

Science has been a mainstay in McGinniss' life.

"Since I was a kid, I loved studying science," she said. "I had an uncle in the Air Force who was in air traffic control and he taught me about the clouds and how to study the sky. In elementary school, all the books I read were science fiction, so I learned all about astronomy that way."

By the time McGinniss went to college, she had to decide between studying English and studying science.

"I heard from someone that you make more money in science," she says, "of course, teachers make the same both ways, right?"

Eventually, McGinniss earned three degrees: mathematics/physics; biology/chemistry with hours of lab work in earth science; and computer education.

At the high school, McGinniss teaches chemistry, physics, earth science and general science classes.

"Biology is my favorite," says McGinniss, 64, a Wisconsin native. "I think kids relate to biology really well so it's an easy class to teach. Chemistry is very math-related, but everyone can get into critters and life forms."

McGinniss, the eldest of nine siblings, including five sisters and three brothers, chose to leave her home state more than 20 years ago to teach in Japan because, she says, "I think I was basically Asian in a former life. Japan is such an interesting place. The people here have a certain politeness and helpfulness about them."

As a veteran ZAHS teacher, McGinniss has earned respect among many of her colleagues.

"She's extremely hard-working and very committed to student success," said Brian Chance, an acquaintance of nine years and information specialist at the school. "Almost every year, students come back to say that not only did they learn things from her, but also to thank her."



Photo by Esther Dacanay

McGinniss, a science teacher of 20 years at Zama American High School, helps Akiko Sengsavang, 16, as she demonstrates a laboratory experiment in her classroom.

Another reason students relate to McGinniss is their common interest in movies, since she is a self-proclaimed movie critic.

"I'm a movie addict and before each class begins, we discuss the best and the worst films of the week," she says. "I drive to Atsugi two or three times a week to watch movies."

McGinniss' method of rating movies is seeing how long

the movie goes from the start before checking her watch.

"She's fun and interesting to have as a teacher," said Adam Michael-Carroll, 17, a senior who had McGinniss as a science teacher for the past two years. "She's good at making things clear."

When it comes to teaching, nothing makes McGinniss happier than getting paid to learn about the science of life cycles, especially those of her students.

Army Community Service sponsors autism workshop

By Christopher Bush
Torii Staff

Autism, a complex developmental disability, affects an estimated one in 166 births a year in the United States. As many as 1.5 million Americans have some form of autism and experts believe the number is on the rise.

In an effort to inform Army Families about autism and caring for autistic children, Camp Zama's Army Community Service hosted a seminar on Monday featuring experts in autism and child psychology.

As the third most common developmental disorder in America, autism knows no racial, ethnic, social, or economic boundaries, yet it is four times more prevalent in boys than girls.

Although autism and the group of disorders known as autism spectrum disorders are more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined, many people have numerous misconceptions about the affliction. In fact, common knowledge of autism, for most, may be limited to Dustin Hoffman's performance in the film "Rain Man."

Lt. Cmdr. Margaret Swank, a child clinical psychologist at the Educational and Developmental Intervention Service located at John O. Arnn Elementary School, introduced seminar participants to the basics of autism and how the medical world is learning to unlock the complicated puzzle of the disorder.

"Autism is usually detected in the first three years of life," Swank said. "Autism is defined by deficits in three key areas: social skills, communication, and certain repetitive behaviors."

Autism is one of five disorders that fall under the umbrella of Pervasive Developmental Disorders, a category of neurological disorders characterized by severe and pervasive impairment in several areas of development. There is no single treatment for all children with autism, but many kids respond best to highly-structured educational programs, Swank said.

"We want to get these kids actively engaged," Swank said. "If they are not school-aged, then getting their caregiver to get them engaged on a regular basis. Focusing on several key areas such as cognitive development and basic communication can be very helpful for autistic children."

Early assessment is the key to treating autism, Swank said.

"We want to empower the parents to meet their child's individual needs," she said. "Parents should not hesitate to call and make an appointment to see someone because that is what we are here for."

Dee Saari, a parent who spoke at the seminar about her personal journey with her autistic child, dispelled some of the myths about the disorder.

"As a parent, there are many stages that you go through when you discover you have a child with autism," Saari said. "In the initial stages, you may have some shock, some anger, some resentment, and some guilt. There is an enormous amount of literature and resources for parents to educate themselves concerning autism."

Parents will also find support in the community from other military families coping with autistic children. Several "play groups" for children with autism exist throughout the Camp Zama and Atsugi Naval Air Facility communities.

"We encourage parents to come out or contact us about these groups because it gets these children around normal social models," said Trish Overly, an EDIS speech pathologist. "EDIS is ready to do whatever it takes to ensure parents and families are getting the correct treatment and guidance they need to better deal with their autistic child. Parents can come to the school or we can go to their home and observe their child."

Continuous research may have greatly improved therapies and treatments for autism and related disorders. However, there is no effective means to prevent autism, no fully effective treatments and no cure. For more information about autism, contact EDIS at 263-6545 or visit www.autismspeaks.org.