

Learning languages

Harrison teacher's fluent skills net honor



ANN HEALY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER

Knowledge of foreign languages is the key to survival in the global economy.

That's the opinion of Pierette Simpson, a foreign language teacher at Harrison High School. Simpson, who has taught in Farmington schools for 24 years, was recently honored by the Michigan Foreign Language Association as 1994 Secondary Education Teacher of the Year at an awards luncheon in Dearborn Oct. 28.

Simpson and Harvey Goldstein, a Highmesadown Common Campus art teacher, were honored by the Farmington Board of Education last week.

"I have been extremely impressed by her professional enthusiasm, ability to take risks, the quality of her teaching, and her commitment to the improvement of foreign language instruction in Michigan and her advocacy of the profession both locally and at the state level," wrote colleague Maria Schneider, a Harrison language teacher.

Simpson is described as innovative and bold. She pioneered the quick-draw Russian method in the United States, creating mini-courses and developing materials according to the latest technology.

"Pierette has done much pioneer work building bridges between the students and the community, between the classroom and the world," Schneider said. "She sends advanced students to teach elementary-age children in classrooms or in their homes. She has also founded a community partnership called Foreign Language Awareness Group (FLAG) to promote foreign languages among teachers, parents, and community persons."

Pierette is the French feminine form of the name Peter. "I am actually of Italian descent born in northern Italy near the French border," Simpson said. "My very first language was a dialect of Italian and French. I came to this country when I was nine. It's a typical immigrant story."

Her family were farmers at the foot of the Alps. "I came over with my grandparents on the Andrea Doria, the ship that sank in 1956, when it had the collision with the speedy ship, the Stockholm."

Simpson calls herself a survivor.

"I was a petite Pierette," Simpson said. "We were completely immobilized and sent an SOS at 3 a.m. Ships were sent to our area, and we were lowered by ropes into their lifeboats. We were taken by boats to New York — boats who

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responded to our SOS. We lost everything. All our possessions. Everything's down at the bottom of the Atlantic right now."

She particularly misses her First Communion dress. "In Italy, First Communions are like getting married," she said.

Ironically, a scuba diver friend of her husband, was hired by the Italian government to try to rescue some of the artwork from the Andrea Doria.

Simpson came over with zero English at the end of July and started school in Detroit in September.

Because children learn languages so easily, she became fluent in English in six months. Simpson received her bachelor's degree from Wayne State University and did graduate work at Michigan State University and

also in France at the University of Angers.

She began teaching in 1970 at Farmington Junior High, which is now the Farmington Training Center.

"All kids can learn a foreign language, the younger the better," Simpson said. "Kids are auditory sponges when they are young."

She advocates learning languages and having the global experience of living abroad.

A Detroit school completely immerses students in a foreign language until third grade, she said.

"Research has shown that if you are very fluent in a foreign language, you enhance your mother language skills," Simpson said. "These kids do above average on their MEAP scores."

Language leader: Harrison High French teacher Pierette Simpson believes fluency in a foreign language enhances other academic skills.

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