

Boosting Science Education, One Step at a Time

Santiago Fund helps provide resources and inspiration at a Philippines high school.

MARIA ZELDA ILASIN-NICANOR, WHO teaches biology and chemistry at Nueva Ecija High School in the Philippines, has become the first Nestor V. Santiago–HHMI Teacher of Science. Voted the school’s outstanding science teacher of 2004, Ilasin-Nicanor has taught there since 1985.

The Santiago Fund was established in 2000 by Nestor V. Santiago and his siblings to improve science education at Nueva Ecija, the high school from which he graduated. Santiago, who served as HHMI’s vice president and chief financial officer, died in 2003. In his honor, Trustees, officers, and staff of the Institute as well as colleagues outside HHMI contributed \$107,060 to the fund to help endow the salary of a highly qualified science teacher at the school, which is located in Cabanatuan City, some 70 miles north of Manila.

A graduate of Nueva Ecija herself, Ilasin-Nicanor went on to earn two masters’ degrees, one in biology education and the other in science and mathematics education. She has been a demonstration teacher of biology and served as trainer/coach of a student science project that took first place in the 2002 regional Intel-Philippines Science Fair. In 2000 she received a certificate of recognition from her congressional district for outstanding improvisation of second-



ABOVE _ MARIA ZELDA ILASIN-NICANOR, AT RIGHT, ACCEPTS A CERTIFICATE NAMING HER THE FIRST NESTOR V. SANTIAGO-HHMI TEACHER OF SCIENCE, AT A CEREMONY AT NUEVA ECIA HIGH SCHOOL IN THE PHILIPPINES.

COURTESY NUEVA ECIA HIGH SCHOOL.

ary school science equipment and devices.

But Ilasin-Nicanor is most proud of her impact on students. “As a teacher, I feel that the greatest rewards are not certificates of merit recognizing my achievements,” she said at a ceremony in April 2005 when she was named the Nestor V. Santiago–HHMI Teacher of Science. “Rather, they are the moments when students thank me for being part of their lives and serving as an inspiration to them.”

Despite such successes, things could be a lot better at Nueva Ecija. Crowd-

ed conditions, shortages of resources, and a resulting decline in the quality of education at the school have increasingly prompted affluent students and well-qualified teachers to seek other institutions. One of the Santiago Fund’s major aims, then, is to help encourage good teachers to stay and provide educational opportunities for the school’s talented but needy students.

For example, the fund already has enabled Nueva Ecija to set up a chemistry laboratory, says Ilasin-Nicanor. And while this is merely one step in the right direction—biology, physics, and earth-science labs are still needed—it is making a difference.

Teodoro V. Santiago, Nestor’s brother, who is chief of the division of pulmonary and critical care medicine at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, visited Nueva Ecija High School last November. He found that “The boost in morale of the teachers and students was very palpable, just knowing that someone cares.” ■

-Jennifer Boeth Donovan-