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## Liverpool High School teacher Jeff Peneston honored by President Obama at White House

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By



President Barack Obama greets Liverpool High School earth science teacher Jeff Peneston in the Oval Office on Tuesday, May 3, 2011. Peneston, the New York State Teacher of the Year, was honored at the White House with top teachers from other states in a ceremony with President Obama in the Rose Garden. (Official White House Photo by Samantha Appleton)

Washington -- After he sipped lemonade by the pool at Vice President Joe Biden's residence and chatted with President Barack Obama at the White House, Jeff Peneston had his moment in the national spotlight today.

The Liverpool High School science teacher was introduced as the New York State Teacher of the Year at an event in the White House Rose Garden that was televised nationally on cable TV.

Peneston, 52, of Pennellville, gave a big smile and wave to the applauding crowd of more than 150 people gathered for the ceremony at which Obama announced the

winner of the national Teacher of the Year Award.

Peneston, a ninth-grade earth science teacher in his 25th year at Liverpool High School, lost out on the national honor to **Michelle Shearer** from Maryland.

But it didn't seem to make a difference to Peneston and the winners from the other U.S. states and territories who were awarded a trip to the White House and a meeting with the president.

"Every teacher in that line was just as child-like enthralled to meet the president," Peneston said afterward. "We all genuinely felt, 'Is this real?' Are we genuinely worthy of the honor?"

Peneston said the event was about something bigger than each individual teacher. He emphasized that he

represented all teachers from across New York state.

His winning philosophy: "Teaching is what you do when you like working with kids to help them grow up."

Before the ceremony, Peneston and the other teachers met privately with Obama in the Oval Office. When Peneston was called to meet Obama, the president asked where he taught in the Empire State. "I said I live in the part of New York state that doesn't have leaves yet," said Peneston, who is from Pennellville in Oswego County.

After the president smiled, Peneston saw a chance to give a plug to his other passion – teaching youths about nature and the outdoors as program director at Camp Talooli in Oswego County. The 170-acre, non-profit camping program serves 1,300 students each year. Peneston's wife, Jan, also works at the camp. She was in the audience in the Rose Garden.

After meeting Obama, each teacher was introduced to a crowd of educators, friends and family in the Rose Garden.

"They are the best of the best," the president said, with the teachers gathered behind him. "And even though we can never really thank teachers enough, today is a chance to offer them a small token of our appreciation for the difference they make in the lives of our children and the future of our country."

The president talked about the importance of teachers to him personally when he was growing up in Hawaii, saying he still remembers "the special teachers that touched my life."

"We remember the way they challenged us, the way they made us feel, how they pushed us, the encouragement that they gave us, the values that they taught us, the way they helped us to understand the world and analyze it and ask questions," Obama said. "They helped us become the people that we are today."

He cited the example of his fifth-grade teacher, Mabel Hefty.

"When I walked into Ms. Hefty's classroom for the first time, I was a new kid who had been living overseas for a few years, had a funny name nobody could pronounce," Obama said. "But she didn't let me withdraw into myself.

"She helped me believe that I had something special to say," he said. "She made me feel special. She reinforced the sense of empathy and thoughtfulness that my mother and my grandparents had tried hard to instill in me — and that's a lesson that I still carry with me as president."

Liverpool School District Superintendent Richard Johns said that students and teachers at Liverpool High

School appreciate Peneston's hard work.

"Jeff is a very good teacher and kind of a rare commodity," Johns said Tuesday. "We have a lot of great teachers in Liverpool. But some of the things Jeff does put him in a unique category."

For example, Peneston co-developed a program that takes students out of the classroom for hands-on scientific field work across the region.

"He is truly one of our crowning jewels," Johns said.

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