

Teacher loves what others hate: math

By KELLY WINTERS
News Herald Staff Writer

Odell Witherspoon knows a lot about a subject many of us find intimidating and difficult: math.

Witherspoon knows more than enough about his subject and teaching methods to have been honored for teaching by the Western Piedmont Foundation Inc.

The foundation gives the award each year to a teacher at Western Piedmont Community College who exemplifies excellence.

The second annual Teaching Excellence Award for the college was given to Witherspoon during a recent graduation ceremony.

"I was surprised to get it," Witherspoon said in his office, which is packed with math books of every kind. "It was natural for me to go into math as I really enjoy the subject."

Witherspoon competed with five other teachers for the award who were nominated by their peers. Ruby Pharr, last year's winner, was the chairwoman of a committee of faculty members which chose the winner.

Witherspoon graduated from Appalachian State Teacher's College in Boone before it became a university. A native of Maiden, he received his bachelor's and master's degrees from the college in math.

A Morganton resident, Witherspoon and his wife, Mary Ellen, have three children: Chris, Leslie and Jamie.



Odell Witherspoon

He said his favorite kind of math is topology, a combination of geometry, algebra and analysis.

"It's hard to explain," he said. "It's a kind of rubber sheet geometry. My least favorite is complex variables."

Witherspoon said contrary to most math students, he did not do well in all his math courses in college. He said this proves his theory that math needs to be practiced to be perfected.

"I try to get people to realize that math requires a slightly different way of thinking," he said. "You

★ Please turn to page 8

Witherspoon honored

★ From page one

don't have to be a genius to do it. You have to look at it as a combination art form and science. It is a creation of man, math is. I'm a firm believer in the fact that you pick math up on the third time around."

Witherspoon said he believes a lot of people grow up hating math because of bad experiences in elementary school.

"Back in the 1950's, when the Russians sent Sputnik up, this country decided that it wasn't doing enough with math and science,"

Witherspoon said. "They flooded the elementary schools with it but did not flood them with the knowledge to teach it.

"I guess people will have trouble with algebra until the end of time though, but a bad teacher can certainly have a psychological effect on someone, especially with math, for the rest of their lives."

Witherspoon is a firm believer in helping people get rid of that fear, urging people to sign up for a math course to audit, receiving no credit or grade but just the non-pressured experience of working with math.

"Now is the perfect time," he said.