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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Renowned rural Idaho science teachers earn INDEEDS awards

BOISE, Idaho (Oct. 18, 2018) — The Idaho STEM Action Center has honored two teachers who champion science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and connect students with industry leaders to mentor projects and provide invaluable career guidance. A panel of industry experts selected Marsing teacher John Barenberg and Plummer teacher Laura Wommack to receive the 2018 Industry’s Excellent Educators Dedicated to STEM awards, or INDEEDS for short, which the Idaho Technology Council (ITC) presented at its Hall of Fame and Idaho Innovation Awards Gala last night.

“Idaho is fortunate to have talented and passionate teachers such as John and Laura,” Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter said. “They care deeply about their students, find creative ways to engage them in STEM education, and work tirelessly to ensure their classes have the tools and opportunities to explore subjects that are essential to building the workforce Idaho needs.”

Barenberg, who grew up in Marsing and has taught at its elementary school his entire 32-year career, excels at blended learning and getting his students in the rural district interested in science. He has pioneered the use of technology including virtual reality, Chromebooks, coding and robotics in the classroom; worked with Marsing Elementary’s after-school program since it began more than a quarter century ago; and secured grants to get technology into the hands of students. In addition, Barenberg has worked with the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation to show STEM teachers throughout the state how to jumpstart technology implementation.

“Kids are so curious and like to tinker and click and try things to see what happens,” Barenberg said. “Making observations is the fundamental step of the scientific method, and virtual reality, augmented reality, robotics, coding, and devices like tablets and Chromebooks bring learning to life and allow kids to play with things and build things and see how it all works and interacts. I get the snowball rolling down the hill and the kids run with it and are soon teaching me and others in our community.”

Meanwhile, Wommack, who teaches math and science at Lakeside Junior-Senior High School in Plummer and is celebrating 16 years in her second career as an educator, believes STEM education can help disrupt cycles of poverty in rural communities. “Teaching STEM subjects at the secondary level in rural districts can inspire kids to go on to better-paying and highly valued STEM careers,” she said. “Rural schools don’t have much money and the perception can be that the education isn’t as good, so I work hard to ensure my students and their parents have as many opportunities as kids in other places have.”

Wommack has earned numerous accolades, including a NASA Endeavor STEM Fellowship, an NEA Foundation Global Learning Fellowship, and a National Geographic Grosvenor Fellowship that allowed her to visit the Arctic, plus she has three times been named a Shell Science Lab Regional Challenge Competition winner. In addition, she was a member of the Siemens STEM Educator Academy, serves as a Space Foundation Teacher Liaison, is an advisor for Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA), interned with NASA, and attended Space Camp as part of Honeywell Educators Space Academy. Wommack has raised more than \$80,000 in grant funds for her school, encourages and helps her fellow teachers apply for financial aid, and leverages her expertise and connections to bring virtual field trips into her classrooms — including live-in-the-field talks with scientists in Antarctica and NASA astronauts.

Both teachers will receive checks for \$2,000 and up to \$2,000 more to attend any STEM-related national conference, plus their schools will receive \$2,000 each to fund science, technology, engineering, and math initiatives. The STEM Action Center, Micron Foundation, Idaho National Laboratory, Idaho Power, Discovery Center of Idaho, Vynyl, Blocksmith, Trailhead, and Idaho Technology Council are providing the prize package.

Dr. Angela Hemingway, executive director of the STEM Action Center, said the commitment of both teachers is unparalleled. “John and Laura make huge impacts on students and colleagues every day,” she said. “They not only push themselves to grow as professionals, but help ensure their fellow teachers reach their full potential, too, both having worked extensively mentoring and training numerous educators over the years. We are so proud to present them with Idaho’s top award for excellence in STEM education.”

Former Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne created the INDEEDS awards in 2000. The Micron Foundation, Idaho National Laboratory, HP, LCF Enterprises, Idaho Power, and AECOM — formerly URS/Washington Group — sponsored the effort, initially called the Governor’s Industry Award for Notable Teaching in Science (GIANTS). In 2013, Gov. Otter incorporated the award presentation into ITC’s Idaho Innovation Awards, and in 2015 he assigned the program to the STEM Action Center, which renamed it INDEEDS to emphasize the important role industry plays in fostering a well-educated workforce.

Dr. Hemingway said STEM knowledge and skills are important to the future of Idaho, because they’re needed for critical and creative thinking, problem solving, innovation, and collaboration.

“Idaho is the fastest growing state in the nation and we have the third-fastest job growth,” she said. “Meanwhile, Idaho’s unfilled STEM jobs leaped from 3,800 in 2016 to 6,000 in 2017, which represents nearly \$355 million in lost personal wages and more than \$20 million in lost state tax receipts. The Idaho Department of Labor predicts as many as 36,000 STEM jobs could be unfilled by 2024 if the trend continues, which would represent more than \$120 million in lost state tax revenue annually.”

The Idaho Department of Labor anticipates robust job growth in STEM careers by 2024: 14 percent in computing, 9 percent in engineering, and 23 percent in advanced manufacturing, including 3D printing and design.

About the Idaho STEM Action Center

The Idaho STEM Action Center was created in 2015 because Idaho citizens are not entering the STEM pipeline fast enough to meet current and future Idaho workforce needs. Its goals are to coordinate and facilitate implementation of STEM programs, align education and workforce needs, and increase awareness of STEM throughout Idaho. The organization is working with industry, government, educators, and students to develop new resources and support high-quality teacher professional-development opportunities to foster a STEM-educated workforce that ensures Idaho's continued economic prosperity. Visit STEM.Idaho.gov for more information.

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