



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Contact: Jana Rausch, (310) 570-4774 (o), (310) 435-9259 (m), [jrausch@mff.org](mailto:jrausch@mff.org)

## **Pine Bluff Art Teacher Shalisha Thomas Receives \$25,000 Milken Educator Award for Arkansas**

*Thomas infuses core curriculum skills into her lessons at Pine Bluff High School*

For photos and video, visit

<https://www.milkeneducatorawards.org/educators/view/shalisha-thomas>

**Santa Monica, Calif.**, (February 6, 2020) — At Pine Bluff High School, art teacher Shalisha Thomas is known for broadening her students' horizons, but not in her wildest imagination would she have expected to receive Arkansas' 2019-20 Milken Educator Award, and leave school today \$25,000 richer.

But that's exactly what happened when Thomas and her colleagues gathered for an all-school assembly this morning helmed by Arkansas Department of Education Secretary Johnny Key. Halfway in, Milken Family Foundation Senior Program Director Greg Gallagher was introduced to reveal that there was a surprise in store – then joined with Key to present Thomas with the prestigious national honor.

Thomas is the only Arkansas recipient of the Award for the 2019-20 school year and among up to 40 educators nationwide to receive the recognition this season.

"Through art, Shalisha Thomas helps her students activate their senses, expand their imaginations, think critically and assert their voices," said Gallagher. "These skills are critical to preparing young people for success in school and life. I commend Shalisha on the richness she brings to her students' lives, and look forward to her contributions to the national Milken Educator Network."

Hailed by *Teacher* magazine as the "Oscars of Teaching," the Milken Educator Awards celebrate, elevate and activate the American teaching profession and inspire young, capable people to join it. The Milken Educator Award is not designated for lifetime achievement. Recipients are heralded while early to mid-career for what they have achieved — and for the promise of what they will accomplish given the resources and opportunities inherent in the Award.

"I want to congratulate Ms. Thomas on being named a Milken Educator," Key said. "Not only are her contributions to her students and fellow educators outstanding, her efforts to promote art awareness and education extend beyond school walls and into the community. Ms. Thomas demonstrates the essential need for students to embrace art education in an effort to be well-

rounded and prepared for life beyond high school. I congratulate Ms. Thomas on achieving this honor — one of the highest available to teachers — and look forward to seeing her future accomplishments.”

### **More About Shalisha Thomas**

**Innovation:** Young artists are learning more than painting, drawing and sculpting in Thomas’ class. Last year Thomas partnered with the Arts and Science Center for Southeast Arkansas to display a collection of student work that rivaled exhibits in big cities like New York, Chicago or Los Angeles. Thomas worked tirelessly with her pupils to make sure the works on display were of the highest quality. Students discussed their work and shared their inspirations in a gallery walk and presentation based on what those professional artists do at their exhibits. Thomas’ students will always remember the pride and positive self-esteem they felt as peers, families and community viewed their art.

**Impact in the Classroom:** Thomas, who teaches grades 10-12, sees art not as just an elective class, but as an opportunity for self-expression and exploration. Her project-based, interactive and highly visual instruction captures students’ imagination, enabling them to achieve more than they ever thought possible. Thomas works with her colleagues in math, ELA and other core subjects to align her lesson plans to academic standards and objectives. Angles and lines are incorporated into drawing to reinforce math concepts. Students enhance their “descriptive voice” through presenting and detailing their work and techniques, which furthers their application of English and Writing standards. Thomas holds high expectations for all her students in both art and academics and regularly assesses performance. A fixture of positive energy and optimism, Thomas works with students in small groups during lunch and loves engaging teens in the hallway between classes.

**Leadership:** Thomas is seen as a positive role model who articulates career path possibilities, especially for Pine Bluff’s young women of color. In addition to sponsoring the Art Club, she participates on building leadership teams and coordinates the homecoming and prom committees. A skilled relationship-builder, Thomas goes above and beyond for her students, their families and the Pine Bluff community.

**Education:** Thomas earned a Bachelor of Science in art education in 2012 from the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.

More information about Thomas, plus links to photos and video from today’s assembly, can be found on the Milken Educator Awards website at <https://www.milkeneducatorawards.org/educators/view/shalisha-thomas>.

**More About the Milken Educator Awards:** *“The future belongs to the educated.”*

The very first Milken Educator Awards were presented by the Milken Family Foundation in 1987. The Awards, created by Lowell Milken, provide public recognition and individual financial rewards of \$25,000 to elementary and secondary school teachers, principals and specialists from around the country who are furthering excellence in education.

Along with the \$25,000 financial prize, recipients join the national Milken Educator Network, a group of more than 2,800 top teachers, principals and specialists. The network serves as a rich resource for fellow educators, legislators, school boards and others dedicated to excellence in education.

The 2019-20 honorees will also attend an all-expenses-paid Milken Educator Forum in Indianapolis March 26-28, 2020, where they will network with their new colleagues and exchange ideas with state and federal leaders on the future of education. In addition, the Milken Educator Awards' "Why Not Us" program will pair each 2019-2020 recipient with a veteran Milken Educator mentor to explore and prepare for expanded leadership roles that strengthen education practice and policy.

- Over the years, more than \$140 million in funding, including \$70 million for the individual cash awards, has been devoted to the overall Milken Awards initiative, which includes powerful professional development opportunities throughout recipients' careers.
- The Awards alternate yearly between elementary and secondary educators; this season honors secondary school teachers.
- Veteran Milken Educators frequently go on to leadership roles at state, national and international levels.
- Unlike most teacher recognition programs, the Milken Educator Awards has no formal nomination or application process. Candidates are sourced through a confidential selection process and then reviewed by blue ribbon panels in each state. Those most exceptional are recommended for the Award, with final selection made by the Milken Family Foundation.
- The cash award is unrestricted. Recipients have used the money in diverse ways; for instance, on their children's or their own continuing education, financing dream field trips, establishing scholarships, and even on the adoption of children.

To get regular updates on the surprise Milken Educator Award events, follow and use the #MilkenAward hashtag on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Everyone is encouraged to watch the tour at [www.facebook.com/milkeneducatorawards](http://www.facebook.com/milkeneducatorawards), [www.twitter.com/milken](http://www.twitter.com/milken), [www.youtube.com/milkenaward](http://www.youtube.com/milkenaward) and [www.instagram.com/milkenfamilyfdn](http://www.instagram.com/milkenfamilyfdn).

For more information, visit [www.MilkenEducatorAwards.org](http://www.MilkenEducatorAwards.org) or call MFF at (310) 570-4772.

###