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My Belated Acceptance Speech

Karen H. Novotny

I won the Outstanding Teacher Award in 1993. Because of this, I was asked to write a short essay for this issue of the *Grand Valley Review* devoted to teaching. My instructions were simple, but vague: "The *Grand Valley Review* editorial staff would very much like it if [you] would write a short essay about your winning of the award. It could be no more than the comments you made in accepting that award; it could be more than a page—whatever you think appropriate." I wasn't given an opportunity to give an acceptance speech for the award, but to explain my feelings about winning the award, I would now like to make that acceptance speech.

Colleagues, members of the Board of Control, students, parents, and friends: John Steinbeck said, "I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are so few [of these] as there are any other great artists. It might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit." I agree with him. As a mathematician, my logical reasoning forces me to conclude that, since I cannot classify myself among the very few artists who are truly outstanding teachers, I am unworthy of this award. In addition, I can scarcely hope ever to become a truly great teacher, for there are so few of these. However, I continually strive to improve my teaching and to enhance my students' learning, not necessarily to become a great teacher, but to become the best mathematics teacher that I can be, for myself and for my students. But that doesn't make me special or deserving of this award. I know so many others on this campus and particularly in my department who are much more deserving of this honor. So why am I here accepting an award I clearly don't deserve? I do it for two reasons.

First, I accept this award because of my love of mathematics. This subject that I love, that is my passion, is widely-misunderstood and, frankly, largely despised. It is extremely frustrating to me that so many people have such misguided notions about the nature of mathematics. I cannot pass up this opportunity to explain briefly that mathematics is not simply the manipulation of numbers or symbols. Doing mathematics does not mean finding and using the right formula or algorithm. Mathematics involves understanding, reasoning, and thinking. My admission that I am a mathematics teacher, often offered quite timidly to someone I have just met, usually elicits one of two responses—dead silence or a comment along the lines of, "Oh I hate math!," the latter often spoken with great enthusiasm and pride. How many professionals, other than perhaps lawyers or used-car salespeople, have to put up with this type of constant insult to their chosen profession? So, in part, I accept this undeserved award because having a mathematics teacher chosen as the Outstanding Teacher is good PR for my favorite subject.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I accept this award because it allows me the opportunity to tell you that I know an outstanding teacher. This great teacher

isn't me, or one of my colleagues, or any of my students, or even one of my own teachers. But I've seen glimpses of this exceptional teacher in my colleagues, in my students, and even, rarely, in myself because this truly outstanding teacher I know is a *composite of all of us*. To explain this last statement, I'll examine several of the criteria upon which the Outstanding Teacher Award is based, and do what mathematics teachers love to do: illustrate my argument with numerous examples.

The great teacher serves as a role model for students. In my service on the Outstanding Teacher Award Committee, I have, through the reading of student testimonials to their favorite teachers, seen this in many nominees for the award. I have clearly seen this aspect of the outstanding teacher in one of my own professors, who served as a role model for me. This man encouraged me, an insecure nineteen-year-old, first-generation college student and single mother at the time, in my efforts to learn mathematics. In convincing me of my own abilities, this teacher literally changed the course of my life. I can only hope one day to have some small fraction of this effect upon one of my own students.

The truly outstanding teacher designs creative assignments. I see this in a great many of my colleagues. Our department is very innovative and progressive in the way we teach mathematics, and being in this creative environment has certainly energized my own teaching. Because thinking, talking, and writing are so closely related, and because we want our students to think, my peers and I have actively used cooperative group work and writing in the teaching of most of our courses. In addition, many in the department have utilized the technology available, in the form of graphing calculators and computer software, to allow students to discover mathematical relationships on their own. These changes in the teaching of mathematics that so many of my colleagues have adopted are recommended by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. As a specific example, one of my colleagues assigned a particularly innovative project when teaching multivariate calculus. Typically, in a course of this type, students look at three-dimensional surfaces in the two-dimensional world of a textbook or computer graphics drawing. This makes it difficult to see all the salient features of the 3-D object. Students in this class built actual three-dimensional models as part of a semester-long project. These 3-D models afforded students the opportunity actually to see and touch directional curves, tangent planes, etc.—all the concepts covered in the course. I have undoubtedly seen the creativity of the truly great teacher in my peers in the Mathematics and Statistics Department.

The outstanding teacher is accessible to students and spends time with students outside of class. I glimpse this attribute of the outstanding teacher in myself, but I see it even more clearly in others. I spend a great deal of time outside of class advising, encouraging, prodding, questioning, and (hopefully) helping students. Sometimes a crowd forms outside my office during my office hours, and several students have suggested that I get one of those "take-a-number" dispensers to help with the congestion. However, as the secretaries and student workers will attest, I do *not* hold the departmental title of "Teacher with the Most Students Visiting During Office Hours." In fact, an adjunct instructor held this unofficial title until she left GVSU last

year. She taught mathematics service courses exclusively. Many of her students were very anxious and some definitely did not want to take any math. But through her encouraging, caring demeanor, she provided an environment in which these students felt comfortable to come to her for help and advice. Another one of my colleagues also spends a great deal of time outside of class, albeit in a different way, with students. He, together with some interested students, started the Math/Stats Club, which has recently become a student chapter of the Mathematical Association of America. He also initiated the biweekly Math/Stats lunch table and the weekly "ultimate frisbee" or volleyball (depending on the weather) game, two activities that allow faculty and students in our department to interact on a social level. By establishing these activities, this colleague has encouraged many members of the department to spend more time outside of class with students.

Enthusiasm is a characteristic of the outstanding teacher. I love mathematics and I am enthusiastic, even passionate, about it *and* about teaching. So I fleetingly see this characteristic of the outstanding teacher in myself, but it is clearly in view in some of my students. In fact, my own enthusiasm is merely a product of their excitement. One student this semester was so excited about an assigned reading on Euclid, in her words a "very cool guy," and non-Euclidean geometry, that she actually thanked me for "forcing her to read it" and asked for supplemental reading material. Another student last semester was even more excited and animated when explaining, as part of a class presentation, the many occurrences of the Fibonacci sequence in nature. These students and so many others, with their delight in learning mathematical concepts and ideas that are new to them, and with their constant questions, "Why?" and "What if. . .?," keep mathematics ever fresh for me.

The exceptional teacher shows concern for students. Two of my peers in the Math and Stats department have demonstrated their concern for students in a special way. Being residents of Holland and believing that it is important that students in Holland, especially those with full-time jobs, have the opportunity to take courses there, they have made a commitment to teach mathematics courses there several nights a week for several years. They have sacrificed their evenings out of concern for their students, and so I again glimpse the elusive outstanding teacher in them.

Remaining current in his or her field is important to the outstanding teacher I know. In the words of Ralph W. Sockman, "The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder." I see this wonder clearly in one of my mathematics education colleagues when she enthusiastically relates some aspect of her research into students' conceptual understanding of functions. In a recent conversation with another colleague, who is on sabbatical doing research in "pure" mathematics this year, I also saw this wonder as he described to me his progress on a particularly interesting problem.

The great teacher demonstrates the relevancy of the course material. I have witnessed this aspect of the outstanding teacher in my statistics colleagues while visiting their classes. They present real-life examples that demonstrate clearly to students that statistics is important in today's information-intensive world. This

process of finding numerous "real-world" examples is time-consuming, but the outstanding teacher is willing to devote her or his time to this worthwhile endeavor. Several of the new statistics faculty, because they often work so late preparing to teach their courses, have jokingly formed the "Get a Life Club." I see the dedication of the outstanding teacher in these "club" members.

I could go on, but hopefully, like the truly outstanding teacher, I have communicated effectively. Through these examples, I hope you have glimpsed the outstanding teacher I know, that truly great teacher who isn't embodied in any one of us, but is part of so many of us. In conclusion, I am unworthy of this award. I *will* accept it though on behalf of my colleagues in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics, and on behalf of all the other faculty members on this campus who, through their thoughtful discussions about teaching and constant striving to increase student learning, have unknowingly allowed me to view that elusive outstanding teacher. I also accept it on behalf of my own teachers, those role models who instilled in me a deep love of mathematics and of learning, and on behalf of my students, who have taught as well as learned from me. I do not deserve this award, but I accept it for all of these people because collectively *WE do* deserve it. And, for all of us, I thank you very much.