

2009 Connecticut Teacher of the Year Acceptance Speech

Wow! What an amazing night to be a teacher!

It's a truly wonderful sight to see so many distinguished teachers gathered together in one room, and I know our families, friends, and colleagues are all very proud of the recognition we are receiving.

I am much honored to be selected as the 2009 Connecticut State Teacher of the Year and would like to thank the Connecticut State Department of Education, the Teacher of the Year Committee, Commissioner McQuillan, Dr. Diane Ross Gary and Greg Kane. And a very special thanks to our corporate sponsor, ING.

We are here tonight to honor teachers because the greatest institution for social change is the school and the greatest instrument of change is the teacher. No other democracy created by man to promote the welfare of all people has ever existed. Schools and teachers have always been *the* catalyst for human progress because knowledge and learning have created the world in which we live.

It is not a coincidence that the Golden Age of every civilization occurred when knowledge and learning flourished; a time when great changes in cultural advancements and human creativity took place; a time when people searched for meaning and value in their lives; and a time when great learning in science, math, technology, philosophy, religion, medicine, and the arts and literature came together to advance our sense of humanity. Great societies have always valued education and understood the critical role schools and teachers play in the success or failure of its people.

The ancient Greeks established academies to advance learning and their Hellenistic model would later be emulated by the Roman Empire and much of the Western world. Ancient Israel developed the first known public education system and the benefits of this initiative would transform a relatively indistinct Semite tribe into a global nation. The medieval world watched their civilizations ascend with the rise of great universities and schools funded by charity to provide education for the poor. The great economist Adam Smith, author of the seminal and enduring book *The Wealth of Nations*, devotes many pages to the importance of developing an educated populace. His nation would forge the first true world empire. And the many great civilizations that developed in Africa, the Americas, and Asia thrived because each of these civilizations believed in the divine truth that only education could radically improve the welfare of the state.

Our modern world owes a great deal of thanks to schools and teachers because we are the recipients of their noble adventure.

Today the knowledge and learning teachers impart continues to shape our modern world and to profoundly affect our daily lives.

Let us take a moment to observe our present surroundings. Everything we see and feel in this beautiful auditorium is the direct result of teachers igniting a passion in students to think, to design, and to create. This building is a masterpiece of architecture, engineering, physics, chemistry, art, and the sum of countless skills and technologies taught in our schools and universities. Teachers made this auditorium possible because they believe that every child has value, from the young girl who enjoyed drawing and

became an architect, to the young boy who enjoyed working with his hands and became a carpenter. Teachers nurture the talents and dreams of their students in order for all of us to live better lives.

I was recently asked by a reporter what makes a good teacher.

It's not easy to define what makes a good teacher but I replied that a good teacher knows how to read a story, and that each and every student arrives at our classroom door with a unique and intriguing yet incomplete story. The really good teachers know how to read a child's story and recognize the remarkable opportunity to help author the story. The really good teachers want to script confidence and success onto the blank pages; they want to edit the mistakes; and they want to help write a happy ending. Really good teachers know that they have the ability to make a child happy or sad, to make a child feel confident or unsure, to make a child feel wanted or discarded. The really good teachers understand that we teach today to improve tomorrow.

And it's not difficult to recognize the really good teachers. They have a distinctive radiance in their eyes. Take a moment to look at the faces of the many teachers in this audience. You'll see that radiance.

I would not be standing here tonight if I did not teach and mentor a very special population of students: Young men and women who arrive at my school suffering from a variety of learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, or from the garrote of substance abuse. My students have slid down the path of a "continuum of educational services" and landed hard. They feel disconnected with school and with their own community. The effects of this disconnect are poor academic performance and self-destructive behavior. They suffer from depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder,

and a host of mental health afflictions. They feel alienated and have lost confidence in their ability to succeed.

And they are not alone.

My students can be found in any school district-they walk the halls like so many broken toys, most suffering quietly, and others clamoring for attention. They are the young people who comprise the over 1.2 million high school students who drop out annually. And the high school drop out class of 2008 will cost our nation more than 300 billion dollars in lost income, taxes, and productivity over their lifetimes. Compounding these alarming figures is the fact that over 50% of students diagnosed with a severe emotional disability will end up in jail within 3 years of graduating high school. These shocking statistics should be treated as a national crisis rather than a postscript to a failed education.

Tonight I speak for my students and the over 70,000 Connecticut students who have special needs. I want these students to know that they are valued and teachers will always be available to read your story and help write happy endings.

And I will do my best to advocate for your needs.

And I now would like to take a moment to thank the many people who should be sharing this stage tonight.

The many distinguished teachers in the audience. You are the teachers that are able to read a child's story and help write a happy ending. You are the special people Tolstoy spoke about when he observed that the sole meaning of life is to serve humanity. This is your night!

I am fortunate to work with a dynamic group of colleagues who bring passion, professionalism, and perseverance to their classroom each and every day: Jen, Mike, Sarah, Joyce, Ally, Luke, Christine, Clare, Sena, and Richelle. Thank you for being there.

Every great school is built upon a strong foundation, and that foundation is centered upon a keystone. The keystone of the ARCH School is our principle-Barbara Varanelli. She had a vision for an alternative high school that focused on the whole student. That vision is now a reality.

And I would like to thank my superintendent, Dr. Betty Sternberg, an accomplished educator who loves children and believed in leaving no child left behind long before the phrase was corrupted by the federal government.

I would like to thank the Greenwich Board of Education and its chairperson, Nancy Weissler. Nancy Weissler expects the best possible education for all students and always finds time to thank teachers.

And I would like to thank the two dynamic people who advocate for children with special needs: Mary Forde, our Pupil Personnel Services Director, and Sharon Turshen, a superb program administrator; these ladies never surrender their ideals and always fight for at-risk teenagers.

And I would like to thank Mr. Al Capasso-the headmaster of Greenwich High School. He does not treat the ARCH School as some forgotten off-premise alternative high school. He ensures that our students are treated with the same dignity and respect all high school students deserve. He makes sure that every ARCH student receives a Greenwich High School diploma.

And last, but not least in importance, I would like to thank my family: my wife, Susan, and children-John, Andrea, and Tommy. They are my refuge and make me so very proud. And my mother-in-law, Joan, and father-in-law, Joe, who have been my surrogate parents for almost 30 years. Family is such a beautiful and comforting word.

And a special thank you to my grandmother. Although she died over 30 years ago, her influence is still felt. She helped raise me as a child when my mother died and, despite failing health, was able to live until I was a teenager. She could not read or write or speak much English, but she taught me the importance of education. Only in this great country can the grandchild of an illiterate immigrant be named Connecticut State Teacher of the Year. Here's to you, Nana!

Thank you all and God bless the work that you do.