

**Teacher of the Year
Acceptance Speech
Bushnell Theater
Hartford, Connecticut
November 15, 2006**

The memory is clear. It was a bright, sunny morning as I approached the two-room schoolhouse constructed of cinder block walls, a corrugated metal roof and chain link fencing for windows. For the last several weeks I had been working with 6th graders at the *Escuela Gabriel Moya* in the village of *Guanaja-Talgua, Honduras* to construct a tree nursery that would provide trees to reforest the community's watershed. During this time the students and I had collected seeds from pods that had fallen from trees, dried them in the sun, filled small plastic bags with topsoil, and built a lean-to style covering to protect the seeds from too much sun once they were planted.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer in my first months of service I have to admit that I had little experience with preparing seeds and building tree nurseries. But of that group of 6th graders there was a young boy named Ronald who shared his expertise with me in order to make the project a success. He waited patiently and didn't laugh while it took me 5 minutes to awkwardly cut a post for the lean-to, but rather showed me how it could be done in 3 sharp precise swings of the machete. He humbly led and motivated his peers in the collection and preparation of the seeds and soil and gave me the credit when his teachers inspected our work. He had become my first Honduran friend and I was excited that on this spring morning he would lead his peers in the inauguration of the nursery by planting the first seed.

Upon my arrival, I noticed however that Ronald was not present. I looked around but he was not in the schoolyard. I tracked down his younger brother and asked where he might be. He told me that Ronald would not be in school that day... that he had to work with his father in the fields and that the crops that provided food and income for his family needed extra attention. I stared at Ronald's brother trying to understand the situation. I didn't think it was fair for Ronald to miss school, especially because he had worked so hard on the project. I understood the dilemma, but wondered how the boy would feel when he came back to school after the excitement of the inauguration and recognition for the project had passed.

I told the teachers and kids to wait as I left the school and ran down the dirt road to Ronald's house. I was greeted by his mother, Doña Carla, and immediately noticed that Ronald had not yet left for the fields. He peered out of his room with anticipation as I pleaded with his mother over the customary cup of coffee that Hondurans offer to their visitors. I recounted the events from the prior weeks and told Doña Carla about her son's integral role in the project. I explained that that day was the culmination of many days of hard work and that Ronald was deserving of recognition. While to this day I'm not sure if she understood my rationale that planting seeds for a school science project outweighed tending to the crops that sustained her family of 10, for some unknown reason she released her son to me so that he could lead his classmates in the inauguration of the school nursery.

That day as the Honduran students planted their seeds another special seed was sown. It was the symbolic seed in me that represented my desire to become a teacher. My desire to engage and inspire students... To provide them opportunities that they would not otherwise have... My desire to help children learn, feel successful and become excited about new concepts and points of view. My desire to transfer my experiences and knowledge to others and expose people to parts of the world much different than their own. And since that spring day that symbolic seed has taken root and grown into a tree with many branches. Branches that trace my career as an educator and represent my philosophy and beliefs about teaching. Among them are:

- The **Peace Corps** branch, which represents where I discovered my desire to become a teacher and my first experiences in education;
- The **Alternate Route to Certification** branch, which represents how people who love what they do and want to share it can become certified to teach;
- The **Joel Barlow High School** branch, which represents my second family, and where I learned to teach and understand how children learn through practice and by observing colleagues who inspire and engage students each day;
- The **Rassias Foundation** branch, which represents my belief that languages should be taught in a total immersion environment;
- The **Teachers College and UCONN** branches which represent how I have built upon and refined my teaching style to further meet the needs of my students;

- The **Community Service** branch, which represents the projects that my students have done in Bridgeport and Danbury helping Latinos to improve their lives; and which also represents that teaching Spanish is not just about learning a language, but understanding a culture.
- The **Student Council** branch which represents my belief that students should have a voice in the decisions that affect their education.
- The **Costa Rica** branch, which represents how I have been able to replicate the learning, immersion and excitement of my Peace Corps experience for students.
- The **Jennings and North Stratfield Elementary School** branches, which represent all I have learned about young learners and the energy and dedication that goes into teaching them.
- The **Fairfield University** branch, which, through my understanding of the content that is taught and how students learn at the university level, has guided me as I prepare my high school students for the academic challenges of college.
- And now the **Teacher of the Year** branch, which will grow over the next year as I embark upon many new experiences representing Connecticut teachers.

While this symbolic tree has grown over the last 7 years to represent who I have become as a teacher, I am certain that it will continue to sprout new branches as I learn more about our profession. I expect that some branches will grow stronger than others and that some may develop in unpredictable directions. Regardless of the end result, one defining characteristic of the “teaching tree” will always remain

constant. That it exists because of students... and that it has grown and will continue to flourish because of the students we teach.

And so my message to you is simple. We must always put students first. For if we don't a branch may break or the tree may fall.

And I am very confident, as I speak to you tonight, that we will not lose sight of what we must do.

As teachers we must reflect as to how students learn best, we must think about how we can improve our instructional strategies so that learning is meaningful and that all students are made to feel successful. For if we focus on our teaching and the learning needs of our students, no child will be left behind and those test scores will come regardless.

As parents we must be active in our children's education and trust that educators want what is best for them. We must help support and guide our children as they grow and learn; and involve ourselves in activities that support the cause for education.

As administrators, we must provide our students with the opportunity to express their needs and concerns, and to include them in the decision-making processes that affect their education and the culture of their schools.

As administrators, we must also recognize the diverse talents of teachers, giving them discretion to create unique learning experiences for our students while steering clear from standardized instructional practices in the classroom.

And finally, we all must recognize that the state of education in Connecticut is good and by working together to keep students first we will succeed even more as educators.

And now, before concluding I'd like to congratulate my fellow Teachers of the Year... any of you could be up here tonight. It is an special honor to represent you and all of the other dedicated teachers in Connecticut.

I'd also like to publicly recognize the people that have made this all happen.

First, I'd like to thank Greg Kane and ING, our corporate sponsor, for making the Teacher of the Year program possible. In the last 5 months I have learned so much about myself, my colleagues, and the teaching profession... things that might have otherwise taken me my entire career to realize. Thank you for that opportunity.

I'd like to thank my Joel Barlow family, for all their support throughout the years and their rallying during the recent selection process. We did this together and you need to know that I am the educator I am today because of the teachers, staff, parents, school administration and most importantly the students at Joel Barlow High School. You are what makes me enjoy my career so much and I am grateful to you for that.

I'd like to thank my family.

My late grandmother who used to say that I would never regret becoming a teacher... and I haven't.

My Aunt Dot, a former Teacher of the Year from Southington, who has given me a wealth of great advice about teaching since I entered the profession.

My older brothers Michael and Jimmy. For their example. For doing things first and exceptionally well, thus raising the bar for me when it became my turn.

My father. While I disagree with him when he claims that the bowtie was his trademark first, I thank him for teaching me that giving back to one's community is a privilege and obligation.

My mother, a second grade teacher, a mentor, and my biggest cheerleader.

And finally my wife, Helen. My best friend. The person who gives me unconditional love and support, and does not expect anything in return. I would not be here tonight if it weren't for her. She has made me the person that I am and I love her thank her for that.

And so I conclude with a challenge. A challenge to fellow educators, to parents, to board members and politicians. I challenge you to always put students first. To remember my story about Ronald and that the "teaching tree" only exists because of students. To keep in mind that schools wouldn't be here if there weren't students to fill them. To reflect and ask yourselves when you are faced with decisions: What is best for the kids? To support their dreams and provide the guidance necessary so that they can achieve them. And I assure you, that if we all work together to put students first, to take on this challenge that I am proposing, we will all look back someday and be at peace with the job we have done.

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to serve as the 2007 Connecticut Teacher of the Year. I promise that I will not let you down as your representative. May God bless you all.