

YOUR STUDENTS AND MY STUDENTS

I want to congratulate all my fellow Teachers of the Year and thank all our family members and friends for coming here this evening. My special thanks go to those who made this event possible, especially Greg Kane and our corporate sponsor ING.

I am not a mind reader, but perhaps some of my fellow teachers in the audience are thinking something like this, “That guy on the stage has spent his whole career in two city high schools. What has teaching been like for him? Are his students like my students?” Let me take just a few minutes to tell you.

My students are very much like your students – especially if your students happen to be teenagers. Teenagers have never ceased to fascinate, baffle, and occasionally frustrate me. They are neither adults nor children. One minute they show great maturity and the next minute you think you are dealing with little kids. They love music – usually music that adults do not really appreciate nor understand. Lately the music has been called hip hop. I usually can’t understand the lyrics. But then again my mother could never understand Elvis Presley screaming, “You ain’t nothing but a hound dog.”

Teenagers also like food, especially unhealthy food. They like fried food, junk food packed with chemicals, and caffeine-filled sodas. When my students heard I had been named the Teacher of the Year, the questions I was asked were, “Are we having a party? What kind of food will be served? Will we get both chicken wings and pizza?”

Many of my students and your students like sports. They like to do well and they like to win; although, sometimes I think the coaches are more concerned with winning than the players are. My students know that sports are fun. Having fun is important for teenagers. It should be more important for us adults.

My students and your students tolerate school. They see school as a place to meet their friends and they want to look good when they come to school. They would never be caught dead in the bland sweaters I wear to school each day.

My students see school as a means of transportation. They would like to be transported into the educated middle class. They know that is the best place to be in America. But the great majority of my students were not born into the educated middle class. They are apprehensive about their chances of ever getting there, largely because they believe a college education is too expensive for them and their families.

Many of my students have doubts about their own abilities. Your students most likely have doubts as well, but my students’ doubts have been exacerbated by psychological and historical factors. The ultimate goal of oppression is to convince the oppressed that they are not as good as

the oppressor. Fortunately, our society is becoming far more tolerant than it used to be and my students are realizing they can do whatever they want as long as they apply maximum effort. My students are 95 percent African-American and 5 percent Latino. I did not teach any white students this year. I did have one last year. He enjoyed our school – especially his girl friend. That reminds me. Teenagers are very concerned about who is talking to whom. We teachers do not need to know the details of these relationships, since the match-ups change quite frequently. I always tell my students, “Your idea of a long-term relationship is one that starts in home room and is still going by the end of the third lunch wave. Teenagers seem to like this sort of humor. They always shake their heads after I say something goofy – which is as often as possible.

So my students are indeed quite like your students. Not only that, I am very much like you. I teach classes, grade papers, follow politics, watch a lot of movies, attend as many plays as I can afford, and spend a lot of time with my family. In other words, my life is not all that exciting. Most teachers live unexciting lives. That is all right. For teachers, unexciting does not have to mean boring. Unexciting can also mean satisfying.

There is a reason why you are here and there is a reason why I am here. We represent the other teachers at our schools and we are here because we believe in our students. I know you do and I do too. And why shouldn't I believe in my students?

My students are descendants of a long line of freedom fighters. Their ancestors include Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth and Harriett Tubman. Their family trees include Dr. King and Cesar Chavez and Marcus Garvey – and Thomas Jefferson too.

My students are related to great humanitarians like Roberto Clemente and Dikembe Mutumbo, world-class athletes like many others of my students' kin.

My students are related to America's Bach and America's Mozart. Their relatives' names are Louis Armstrong and Edward Kennedy Ellington. Years from now, one or more of today's rappers will be musical and poetic immortals like Satchmo and the Duke.

I think America's three greatest playwrights are Lorraine Hansberry, Arthur Miller, and August Wilson. Two are related to my students, and the third is related to me. Even better, all three are all related to all of us.

Fifty years from now, there may not be any debate about the name of America's greatest novelist. Her name is Toni Morrison. Because I teach at Hillhouse High School, I had a chance to spend a whole morning with her one day at the Dixwell Community House – just Ms. Morrison, the six members of our African-American literature seminar, and me. What a thrill that was. It was like having an audience with the Pope.

So don't tell me "You must be dedicated to teach in the inner city." Teaching here has been the greatest opportunity of my life – far greater than even the opportunity of teaching part time at Yale University.

Emma Ruff, New Haven's first African-American teacher and Connecticut's first female high school principal, gave me the opportunity to teach the so-called talented tenth of New Haven's African-American community. Emma Ruff entrusted me the same way a personnel director named Ernie Cassella had entrusted her. That is New Haven at its best. That is Connecticut at its best. That is America at its best.

Emma Ruff gave me the chance to teach the descendants of not only freedom fighters and creative geniuses. She gave me a chance to teach the descendants of those who worked the fields, built the factories, took care of the children and the sick and the aged, and toiled for low pay. Their children and grandchildren deserved better and I, like all my colleagues at Hillhouse High School, have tried to help them acquire the skills to take advantage of their increasing opportunities in America.

I never expected to be recognized in public for being a teacher. My students have recognized and respected me and that is all I need. Administrators, fellow teachers, and our valued paraprofessionals – everyone at Hillhouse has been great to me for a quarter century and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

My wonderful wife, Myra, has supported me completely. So have my children, my grandchildren, my brother Allen, my colleagues and friends. I feel very fortunate, proud, and honored to accept the designation of Connecticut Teacher of the Year for 2004-2005. My goal is to represent you well. Thank you very much.