

## 2010 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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Good afternoon. I would first like to thank President John Pritchett and Provost Diane Alperin, members of the administration, Dean Rosalyn Carter, Chair Gordon Bazemore, secretary Audrey Depass, fellow faculty members, members of the student advisory committee who nominated me, to my past and present students, and to all distinguished guests – thank you so much. I was so surprised to receive this honor, and I am so tremendously grateful for it.

I am a criminologist, which means that I am a social scientist, which means that my work largely involves studying people and picking up on their intrinsic and extrinsic needs and trying to understand why they do what they do. It feels natural, and I imagine I was always drawn toward this profession because I have always liked people-watching. I remember being in social situations while growing up, and how I really enjoyed just listening and observing and thinking and reflecting. So it seems that what I do for a living fits me perfectly, and my years of experience – both in the classroom and in life – have shown me one really important thing that I believe has helped me as a professor and as a human being. And so I'd like to talk about it.

Across all of the students that I have ever taught, I see a major need for...inspiration. And I know that sounds cliché, but I can't think of a better way to put it or to conceptualize it. One of my favorite movies growing up was "Jerry Maguire," and it had this poignant scene that is indelibly etched in my mind. Jerry Maguire, played by Tom Cruise, and Dorothy Boyd, played by Renee Zellweger, are in her living room just hanging out one evening, and she says to him:

"Truth?"

And Jerry's like, "Sure."

And she says, "I care about the job, of course. But mostly, I *just* want to be...inspired."

And Jerry's like, "Meeeeeee too."

And Dorothy says, "What you wrote inspired me. I'm *working* with you because of that memo. I *loved* that memo."

And Jerry's like, "It was a mission statement."

The point is, we all want to be inspired. I want to be inspired by the books I read, by the music I listen to, by the movies I watch, by my loved ones, by my friends, by the athletes I follow, by the colleagues and peers and mentors in my life. And I'd like to believe everyone is the same in that they have this inherent need that *must* be filled. Our students care about getting their degree, but mostly, they just want to be inspired.

Our students need inspiration on a MICRO- and MACRO-level. First off, they need inspiration that yes, that they can make it through their classes, and they can make it through their degree program. But more importantly, our students need inspiration that somehow this is going to contribute to a better, easier life in the future. That it is somehow going to lead to growth, to less struggles, to more blessings, to less pain, to more pleasure, to less crappiness and to more awesomeness. That it will lead to a good job. That it will lead to a promotion or a raise. That it will lead to getting into a solid graduate school, or law school, or medical school. That it will lead to accomplishing something that no one in their family has ever done before.

Getting a university degree is a pretty major thing designed to enhance your current state of living, and it's not easy to do. It's not like buying a new dress shirt. It's not like getting a facial...from what I hear. You give up a good amount of your time and money and life in order to accomplish it...and we've been told by generations past and society today that it's something we really should do to categorically better our lives. And we just hope that somehow it will matter. Somehow it will make a real, tangible difference.

It's interesting because when we start college - at least on the traditional pathway - we've done well in high school and we have all these dreams written on our heart - about who we're going to be, and how we're going to make an impact, and why we *of all people* are going to make it and work to have a pretty perfect life (which typically includes a life partner, two-and-a-half kids, a golden retriever and a Prius). And it's *really* great, because we are wide-eyed and incredibly optimistic and super inspired for the future, for *our* future.

But somewhere along the road, it seems that we just get into a rut...and maybe we make mistakes because we struggle with waiting for things to happen in their perfect timing, or maybe we miss out on some things or at least *feel* we've missed out on some things...and maybe a really bad thing happens here or there...and slowly - like erosion

on a beach - that wide-eyed optimism and inspiration and even those dreams...they start to lose their luster, they start to fade. Just a tiny, tiny bit. But then the days fly by, and the months fly by, and the years fly by, and we find ourselves caught in this routine of just enduring, just persevering, just trying to make it through...and things don't really seem to be changing – or at least not as quickly as we'd like them to or in the ways we envisioned they would. And so we start to whisper to ourselves certain things...certain rationalizations, certain justifications. To help us along. To make ourselves feel better. About why things haven't *perfectly* come together. Yet. And we realize that back in middle school and even high school, we had a ton more inspiration because it felt like the whole world was in front of us...our whole lives were in front of us...but now it seems like we need more. And that *more* isn't really happening right now.

So...we start to struggle. And it steadily starts to wear on us. And wear us *down*. It starts to take its toll. And we become a little less of an optimist and a little more of a realist. And this leads to more resignation...more "this is just the way it is..." and "this is life and I should just make the best of it..." And then slowly but surely all of this leads to...this massive collective shrugging of the shoulders, this massive collective sigh. This leads to a student body which is trying to do the right thing, trying to work hard, and trying to believe that things will come together for them – but a student body which just needs something more.

And this is who I find myself in front of at the beginning of the semester. And it is an absolute privilege, and a challenge I set before me. And so it starts in small ways. "Hi, I'm Sameer and I'm your professor for this semester. It's good seeing you all!" And I say it with a smile and I'm cheerful, always, no matter what else is going on in my life. And I begin to tell them about myself, and how I got to where I am now. And I share with them certain struggles that they can relate to. About growing up. About being right where *they* are, trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. About learning to balance academics and a social life and a need to sleep. About how I realized at some point that putting in the effort to learn and grow as a person is one of the absolute best things in the entire world.

And then I tell them that I believe the material we are going to learn this semester is important, and that I am here to help do all I can to make sure they get as much as possible out of this class and this small part of their university experience. And I set expectations that are challenging and somewhat high, because I believe that if they are low or mediocre, entropy takes over and we all sink to them. And I try to convey that we're in this together, you learning and me learning and us having a great class together. And I do so with enthusiasm. With the personal conviction that what I am doing is important because I am trying to make a difference in the lives of others, and

that what they are doing is important because they are trying to make a difference in their lives and in the lives of those around them.

And then I get to see them every few days for class. And I look forward to it. And I learn their names, and what they professionally aspire to. And I get to hear some of their stories, as victims, as offenders, as bystanders, as television and movie watchers, as Facebook and YouTube users. And they start emailing, or calling, or stopping by the office. And I answer their questions. And I listen to what they are saying – about what they are dealing with, about how they are struggling in certain ways, about how they are persevering.

And I get feedback on what classes we should offer, and talk to them about internships and independent studies, and about what it will take to get a great job in this field, and countless other things. And I talk to them about the importance of building certain skills, like being able to read well, and write well, and speak well, and I share with them success stories from my life or from the lives of others. And I remain available to help them. And I talk about how everyone can either pay now or pay later, but at some point, they are going to have to pay. And I talk about character and integrity and doing the right thing, no matter what, because it's the right thing. And I work with them through problems and issues with the course material. And I get feedback on how I'm teaching the class. And we make adjustments. And I trust that what they have to say has value, and that I haven't figured out the best possible way to be a professor. And I throw out test questions that we collectively deem as confusing, but stand my ground on difficult questions that I totally went over in class. And I listen some more, and really care about what they are saying – both their words and the feelings behind the words. And over time, I try to help them out in more material ways – whether it's through letters of recommendation, or making a call on their behalf, or pointing them to someone at our University who can help them secure an internship or an interview, or nominating them for an award.

And over the course of the semester, we all make progress, and improve, and grow as individuals, and as a collective. And it's a very fluid, organic experience. And all the way through it, I'm thinking, I just want my students to be inspired. I want them to see that this stuff matters, and that things can meaningfully improve in their life if they put in the effort now, if they sacrifice, if they take the narrow road, if they do all the things that we are told we are supposed to do. Learning the habit of doing well with the small things – such as in my class – is extremely important because it demonstrates that you can do well with the big things. Show the world that you can be entrusted to make the most of the opportunity to get your degree, and do it well, and the world will entrust you with so many more opportunities. Show yourself that you can complete every

aspect of your schooling with excellence, no matter what, and you'll believe that you can handle and even excel at anything else life throws your way.

I want them to get this. I don't want their future to be bad. I want it to be amazing, and bright, and suffused with hope and promise and expectation. I want them to recapture their childhood notions again that life can be, regardless of what we're going through, pretty wonderful, with good things just around the corner. *Really* good things.

This is my charge as a professor, and this is what I do. I actually can't help but do it. I am just compelled to be this way because I really believe this stuff, deep down. And I want my students to believe it too, deep down. I want them to be inspired that what they are trying to do really matters, and that it really will make a difference. Because being inspired by what really matters, rather than criminology and criminal justice, is what will carry them through life.

Thank you so much for your time, for your kind attention, and for this award.