

SPD COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY

May 21, 2009

Rick Gatteau

Thank you Dean Edelson. Thank you for this honor. It has been such a pleasure to work with you and the entire team in the School of Professional Development over the past five years. And, I am grateful to all of the incredible students I have had the privilege to teach and learn from – both in face-to-face and on-line classes.

Some people have asked me why I enjoy teaching so much. Well, when you come from a family where your parents were both elementary school teachers, it's easy to be influenced. And, so, when I spoke with my parents about this honor, my mother reminded me of an almost-forgotten childhood memory. She said, **“We knew those years playing school in the basement with the neighborhood kids would pay off someday!”** Yes, that was quite a flashback ... I was the teacher, my twin brother was the principal, and my next door neighbors were the unwilling students! They are still my best friends today – even after the torture of a daily report card! So, maybe that's where it all began.

Once I got older and out of the basement, I thought about being a high school principal, but my dad thought I would be a good fit for working at a college. So, again, parental influence prevailed. None of you know my father, but he's a pretty subdued guy. When we went to his retirement party several years ago, we never thought we would laugh so hard at his “farewell” speech. Of course, he spoke fondly of why he became an elementary school physical education teacher – for many of the same reasons several of you are teachers – the opportunity to see students grow and develop into mature and responsible citizens and make a difference in their lives. Then he talked about the day he made his decision to retire ... that pivotal moment ... and here's how it happened ...

One day, my dad gave one of his elementary school kids a pass to go to the bathroom. When the student didn't return to the gymnasium, my father became concerned and went to check on him. He went to the boys' bathroom and called out the student's name. The student emerged from the stall only to be covered from head to toe in – let's just say – “stuff”. It was one of those “OK, I think I've seen everything” moments. So, off to the nurse the student went, and in went the retirement papers!

Fortunately, I rarely have to deal with bathroom issues with graduate students. What I do have is the opportunity to engage in healthy debates, share ideas, and inspire students to reach their potential. When I think of all of the best teachers and mentors in my life, there is one who influenced me more than any other. Robert Nash, a professor during my graduate studies at the University of Vermont, was demanding, inquisitive, motivating, and brilliant. He's the type of teacher who would never be satisfied unless he made his students think deeply about an issue. And, his most repeated quote now guides my own life and teaching: **“Find the truth in what you oppose and the error in what you espouse.”** Apply that to just about any situation in any realm of your life, and you're in for a good debate. And to me, that's what makes teaching so meaningful and rewarding.

And, so, to our graduates today, I wish you three things: happy flashbacks of childhood memories; unexplored opportunities to be mentors to others; and most importantly, uneventful visits to the bathroom. Congratulations and best of luck to each of you.

Thank you!