

## Just Enough Nerds

I was sitting in the third row from the front facing the stage as the class valedictorian gave his speech. It was graduation day for the class of 2001. Students were all around me in their caps and gowns with tassels waiting patiently to be moved right to left to signal the end of high school. The top students in the class were on the stage. Most students in the rows around me were strangers, since all year I had been teaching the top-level courses with small class sizes.

I had been chosen by the students to participate as a reader in the ceremony. Seniors selected a few teachers each year to participate, and this year there were just enough nerds, for the first time, to elect me to read a block of graduates' names as they received their diplomas.

The class of 2001 had many very high achieving students. Twenty three students were graduating with GPAs over 4.0 and each of them I knew well. Fully one third of the graduating class had GPAs over 3.5, and at our school that's quite an accomplishment. I am lucky enough to teach several top-level courses in mathematics and computer science, so particularly those on the stage had been my students and become my friends.

Before I and the other readers went up to announce the graduates' names assigned to us, the names of the teachers chosen were announced. A teacher's name was read – not mine – and the seniors cheered. Then another teacher's name was read and answered with more cheers. Then my name was read. The silent pause hanging in the air until the next teacher's name was announced seemed to last forever. Then I realized that I was probably there because of the students on the stage, and by their nature they weren't a rowdy bunch. They had not cheered, nor had the strangers sitting with me.

As I sat there, listening to other teacher's names and other students' cheers, I remembered the night before, at the Honors Convocation. There, awards were given by subject to outstanding students. Each year I choose a student to receive the Computer Science award. During the Honors ceremony I had waited behind curtain as other subject-area awards were given. The student master of ceremonies would read a teacher's name and a subject area and that teacher would advance to the podium. The teacher then called up the student receiving the award from the small group of top students assembled. A short speech was given and an award presented. Parents beamed proudly.

When my name was announced to present my award, there was an unexpected twist. As I started advancing through the back-stage curtain I heard her say "Now our resident genius, Mr. Roger Frank, will present the Computer Science award." I was flabbergasted. What could I say? I was nervous about giving my speech and had no time to think of something to say following that introduction. Later, when I expressed my surprise at how she had announced me, a teacher told me: "That's what they think of you, don't you know?"

As I gave my Computer Science award speech that night, another thought was in my mind. I always knew students don't care what you know until they know that you care. I did care for those students. For many of them, I could recall where perhaps I did make a difference. A student once handed me a note as she left the last day of class that said "Keep changing the world, one student at a time." It had nothing to do with being smart, it was more wanting

to be there for them and being committed to their growth and success. Understanding the subject matter, if that's being smart, is a lesser part of being a good teacher.

There were just enough nerds in the senior class of 2001 to elect me as a reader for graduation. But when my name was read at the crowded graduation was not when they would show their appreciation. It was the night before, when I least expected it, but when it meant the most – when it meant that they knew I cared.