Hunter-Hamilton Award Citation: Randy Nelson

Unexpected approaches to teaching expected texts----and bold and interdisciplinary approaches to teaching unexpected texts----are the signature of this inspiring teacher's art and craft. His lectures are famous for their humor and conceptual brilliance, his courses famous for both their rigor and the extraordinarily high regard in which students hold this demanding teacher. More than one nominating student mentioned the massive reading assignments on daunting syllabi passed out by a man who on the first day of class seemed to be stern, no-nonsense, even intimidating taskmaster, but who was very soon after revealed to be compassionate teacher of warmth, wit, tact, and unswerving dedication to his students and to their learning and growth. As one former student remarked, “I could always sense his confidence in our whole class;” he “did not play favorites.” We all “felt strongly motivated to live up to his expectations.” Another student wrote, “He allowed us to make mistakes and then learn from what we had observed, yet never made us feel inadequate or doltish.” “He kept asking me questions,” wrote still another, “until I had answered my own original question” and in the process achieved not just answer but true learning.

This professor’s famously skillful, patient way of teaching challenges his students not only to achieve more than they imagined they could, and not just to acquire new information, but to view the world in new ways. “While engaging and provocative in the classroom, drawing the entire group into conversation, he didn’t let us get away with anything that wasn’t real and substantive,” an admiring former student wrote. This professor, as one student marveled, even knows how to cure that most threatening disease--- senioritis.
Whether rushing over from his house to his hall of freshman advisees to check on them right after a hurricane’s rampages or welcoming students to his home for exam-review classes, whether literally taking his seminar on a field trip to walk Thoreau’s woods at Walden Pond or taking them virtually to the Hawaiian islands with his notorious tropical shirts, this is a teacher who always goes the extra mile and then some. It isn’t just his knowledge and his passion for American literature he teaches, but, as one former student described it, “how to apply literature to life.” Indeed, in his own commitment to the craft of writing, this professor incarnates this truth, being not just an unforgettable teacher of stories but an award-winning writer of them. The old adage that those who can’t do, teach, does not apply to this remarkable man.

And this professor imparts bits of life wisdom while teaching those books and stories on that long syllabus; those other lessons for living are treasured in many student memories as well as mirrored in their daily actions. His wisdom comes from personal integrity, from acute intelligence, from a disarming lack of pretentiousness, from, most of all, his very deep caring. This is a man who knows how to celebrate life ---from nurturing bonsai trees to swatting fungoes in baseball--- and who embodies a love for students, a dedication to teaching, and a contagious fascination with both literature and life. This is a distinguished professor and writer of fiction who cherishes above all other achievements being husband and father. This is a man who teaches not only how to read and write about what human beings have thought and felt and hankered for, but what it is to be fully human. “I left his courses,” one student wrote, “a better student, a better writer, and a better person.”

Because of your lesson that it is possible to set the highest of standards and be as beloved as you are respected by your students, because of the equal measure of challenge and compassion you so generously bestow, because both your teaching and your life inspire your students to know and become their best, Professor Randy Nelson, you are named 2002 recipient of the annual Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching Award.