Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching Award Citation: Julio Ramirez

From the moment of arrival, this professor set out to create a unique learning environment in a young and challenging field. Through effort, intellectual power, creativity and boundless enthusiasm, he realized this vision and gave all of us license to dream big.

And his students love him. One of them wrote, “Aside from being one of the most interesting, concerned, active, positive, quirky and erudite people I have ever met, my professor maintains an impressive working knowledge in one of the most intractable subjects known to man and continues to be one of the most enlightening teachers I’ve ever had.”

Our honoree earns such praise by combining innovative teaching methods with an undying commitment to education and an extraordinary investment in students. One protégée recalled, “Early on I doubted myself…yet he never questioned my potential. Through his unwavering faith in me I became not only a better student, but also a better person.”

He is always happy to meet with students and they leave his office with the same feeling: pure motivation. “What truly sets him apart is his unwavering confidence in the ability of each and every student to excel.” And “. . . as hard as he was making us work, he was working at least as hard, and likely even harder, for us.”

Colleagues and students love the energy and boundless curiosity this professor brings to his work: “To observe someone in his craft approach
a topic as if seeing it for the first time is truly inspiring. I held on to every word, never wanting to miss something important to remember for the future.”

“He engages the class through a combination of surprise questioning, poignant examples, as well as a few quirky mini-dramas depicting some major discoveries in science. The way he presents information from specific research as well as the scientific process in general, makes science seem like a much more personal and human endeavor.”

And he has a great sense of humor. Apparently he once asked on a test, “How, from a neuroscience perspective, did Rudolph’s bright red nose help Santa find his way?”

This is not a joke, one student notes, because “a complete answer to the question required about a dozen pages, typed from memory, complete with diagrams and illustrations, about how those light rays made it through Santa’s brain.”

Students also loved this professor’s breadth of interest and the ease he seems to feel in multiple conversations and contexts: He is “equally in his element leaning over an anesthetized rat in the lab, or kicked back in an armchair at Summit, discussing Descartes’ theories on the human soul.”

Santiago Ramon y Cajal says “The brain is a world consisting of a number of unexplored continents and great stretches of unknown
territory.” This scientist leads his students into this wild and sometimes frightening world, infecting them with his love for neuroscience, and utilizing a powerful tool he calls “terching” or teaching by researching. His work and the power of his example have led to amazing original work by generations of prized undergraduate researchers. “He gives students responsibility, respect, and a key role in important research, but at the same time gives them something else: friendship. I have had no other teacher who better fills the role of mentor in the classroom, the laboratory, and in life.”

This recipient of the 2012 Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching award has a resumé that is full of stunning accomplishments and accolades, but not even these capture the powerful impact that he has had on his students and on our Davidson community. For his unselfish dedication to his students and his singular mission not only to educate, but also to inspire us all to dream bigger dreams, we recognize Professor Julio Ramirez.