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Rekindling and Renewal for Outstanding Teachers

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By Mark Szymanski <marks@pacificu.edu>

Who was your favorite teacher? Why was this person your favorite teacher? These are the first two questions I ask my students on the first day of my Psychology and Human Development class for future teachers. After I pose the questions, most students, smile and nod. Their minds are clearly filled with powerful images. I then dedicate the first hour of class to having the students share the teacher's name and the reasons why they were a favorite. The reasons my students give aren't the simple or obvious ones like "Mr. Rodriguez liked me" or "Mrs. Clark helped me develop a deeper understanding of the distributive property". Their reasons are personal, deep, and powerful and maybe awakened after years of hibernation. My students say things like "Mr. Rodriguez believed in me when no other adult did." or "Mrs. Clark pushed me harder than anyone else ever had. She helped me realize that I could do things I never thought I could do." I've started all my classes with these two questions for the past six years, and I have never regretted the decision.

Teachers that have this kind of positive influence over children use an enormous amount of emotional and intellectual energy over the course of a school year. As a result, some run the risk of burning out and leaving the profession. I believe that the most important teachers we have would be less inclined to leave if they could engage in some regular rekindling and replenishing activities. But, because of declining revenue from a depleted tax base, funding for these activities is sparse. Sadly, in this instance, a small amount of money would have some profoundly powerful long-lasting effects; difficult to measure, but undeniably present.

Luckily, The Fund for Teachers foundation (1) was created to allow these teachers to take part in personal and powerful summer activities designed to replenish and renew their emotional and intellectual energy. The foundation is dedicated to promoting respect, recognition, and renewal for outstanding teachers. Raymond Plank, chairman of the Apache Corporation initially offered what he called Plank Challenge Grants as a way to support teachers in his hometown of Minneapolis Minnesota. He set up the foundation because he was motivated by one of his
teachers, Mr. Noah Foss who Mr. Plank said, inspired, challenged, and motivated him.

Any prek-12 teacher in one of seven U.S. cities (Denver, Colorado; Houston, Texas; Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota; New York City, New York and Tulsa, Oklahoma) is eligible to apply for grants of up to $5,000. Currently, the foundation is beginning to expand its effort to include other cities around the nation.

In their words: “The goal of the Foundation is to challenge teachers to consider fresh, unexplored areas of thinking, and give them new hope and pride in their profession. Grants will be made solely to fund participation by grant recipients in summer activities that provide opportunities in professional and personal development designed to improve or enhance the grant recipients’ teaching skills and capacity.” (2). Former grantees have undertaken a wide range of activities designed for their renewal. All of the grantees described how their work would enrich their classroom climate and curriculum. Most teachers used their grants to travel to other nations and immerse themselves in other cultures. For example, Barbara Stube, an elementary teacher from Denver Colorado used her Grant to tour Siberia, live with a nomadic Mongolian tribe, and stay with a Korean family. At the high school level, Joseph Paatalo, a high school English/Environmental Education Teacher in Arlington Minnesota traveled to Prince William Sound Alaska to explore how the local people have recovered from the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989. He documented his interviews with locals and photographs on a web page he created for his students (3).

The foundation certainly fills a niche for those important teachers who have made profound impacts on their students. Because these teachers spend the majority of their time cultivating relationships with their students, at the end of the year, the one thing they desire most is an opportunity to have a life experience that will help them renew and rekindle their spirits. The Fund for Teachers foundation might be something that could help them out.

To close, I want to reflect back on the two questions I ask my students. After the last student tells us about his or her favorite teacher, I ask them all one final question: “Have you told this teacher what you have just told us? If not, I want you to go home tonight and call or send an email to Mr. Rodriguez or Mrs. Clark; tell them how important they were to you. And more significantly, tell them you have decided to become a teacher, just like them. It may replenish and rekindle, their teaching. I received one of those phone calls this month, and it served me well.

Resources:

(1) http://www.fundforteachers.org/index.html
(2) http://www.fundforteachers.org/about.html
(3) http://www.fundforteachers.org/grantees/grantees_2002.html

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2 THOUGHTS ON "REKINDLING AND RENEWAL FOR OUTSTANDING TEACHERS"

Daniella Bahar  
on January 30, 2014 at 6:12 PM said:

I was recommended this blog by way of my cousin. I’m no longer sure whether this submit is written by means of him as nobody else understand such specific about my difficulty. You’re amazing! Thanks!

tech.camargus.us  
on February 6, 2014 at 8:35 AM said:

I couldn’t refrain from commenting. Perfectly written!