



ILLINOIS CLASSICAL CONFERENCE

Citation for Farrand Baker Teacher of the Year

Christopher Mural

I get to start off this citation with a story of violence. This is from a colleague:

"I once saw Chris almost spin the head off of a pheasant as he was "humanely" putting it out of its misery. He had a bloodthirsty, savage look on his face as he was doing this. He oftentimes has that same look when he talks about the importance of Latin and the value it brings to our students and community. I am very fortunate to be able to work alongside him, as his voice of dissent brings me pause and reflection on my work."

And isn't that what we want from our high school Latin teachers? A bloodthirsty, savage passion for our discipline? In all of the anecdotes, recollections, and tidbits that I've gathered, it's this passion, coupled with a "never nervous" attitude that has made him an exceptional teacher.

Christopher Mural graduated from Knox College in 2000 with a double-major in History and Educational Studies and studied Latin as well—a true purveyor of the liberal arts. Our former professor, Brenda Fineberg remembers that "from the get go, he wanted to do the Ed Studies route and become a high school Latin teacher and was always cheerful and steady in his demeanor. One thing I remember well is that he was the very first Knox Latin major who had to take the (then) newly implemented subject area test in Latin to complete his Illinois teacher certification. I was really nervous, worried about whether he would pass. I had participated in the state panel that crafted the questions for the test; when we were called back to Springfield to review what the "professional test writers" had come up with, we were all horrified to find that they had changed things to the point that the final test bore little resemblance to what we had sent them. Some of the questions seemed unreasonably difficult, some simply didn't make sense. And yet, Chris passed, and has now become one of the distinguished Latin teachers in Illinois. I'm really proud of him."

Danielle Freeman, a former student of Chris remembers the connections he makes with his students. "Whenever a student did poorly, or felt discouraged, Chris never focused on the student's poor performance; rather he worried that something was wrong. Danielle said that once she was in a slump, not working hard, not getting her homework done, etc. Chris called her aside, and asked her what was going on. He told her that she needed to work harder, she needed to hold herself to a higher standard, not focusing on Latin, but on the bigger picture:

'You need to work harder because you want to be the kind of person who works hard and lives up to high goals.'

His colleagues echo this sentiment. That is, when they're not watching him euthanize our fine-feathered friends. "Chris is always striving to make connections across subjects and among students," says his colleague Jen. "Chris and I completed our ELL endorsements about 15 years ago so we often discussed best practices and our passion for teaching. Moreover, Chris has always made efforts to connect with students outside the classroom. For years, he organized a soccer match that included various students such as the Latin and ELL students. He made great efforts to welcome our multicultural and multilingual students. This was a special way to include various students in our SHS community." She continues: "Chris makes connections among subject areas. Chris knew I taught the Heroic Monomyth in Senior Accelerated English & archetypes in AP English. He sought to extend his knowledge and make interdisciplinary connections because he teaches a similar unit in Latin. We had a lot of fun sharing ideas. His enthusiasm and passion for teaching shines."

Jen Zizzo, another colleague, tried to slide in some comments about Chris teaching a "dead" language, but I'm not going to mention that fact. To her, Chris is not just great at his job. She states: "We talk about life, our families, our homes, our cars. Chris is one of my oldest and dearest friends at Stevenson. When I learned that I was expecting my first child, Chris was the very first person I told at work. He was already a father, and I needed his reassurance that everything would be ok. We've been there for each other when times were challenging at work. We bicker like siblings, we make fun of each other, we cherish our sarcasm, and we laugh a lot."

Chris has been an active member of the ICC for many years now, gradually taking on more and more responsibilities. He has served as local chair for this current meeting, never batting an eye when it was suggested that he serves as the local host, and has dutifully taken on the Book and Materials Exhibit for at least four years now. His commitment to this organization continues to grow, and we continue to be impressed.

Chris's department chair Justin Fisk summed it up the best: "Chris is that rare type of teacher who is at once committed to his students, to his content, and to his relationships with his colleagues. When he challenges convention or injects a bit of much-needed dissonance into a conversation, he does so with students' learning as his loadstone. He's also a really great guy who makes connections with anyone lucky enough to know him-- teachers and students alike. We're very fortunate to call him a colleague and friend and aren't at all surprised that he's being recognized outside of our building."

Ironically, being recognized outside of his building is taking place *inside* his building. It is my great honor to award the 2016 Farrand Baker Teacher of the Year to Stevenson's own Christopher Mural.