

## **Kate McCann: Speech for 2017 Outstanding Teachers Day**

Welcome accomplished teachers and distinguished guests. I am the 2017 Vermont State Teacher of the Year, a 2015 recipient of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching, a National Board-Certified Teacher, a proud leader in my local association, and the director of the Vermont Council of Teachers of Mathematics K-12 Statewide Math Fair. And for the last 19 years I have been teaching students about the power of mathematics.

Recently, I find myself looking around, taking a deep breath, and wondering how I got here, in this room, speaking to all of you. I wonder what pearls of wisdom I can offer – when there are so many things about teaching that I still don't know.

Here's what I do know. As long as I'm a teacher I will never give up trying to inspire and motivate my students. I will never ever stop learning. I will continue to read new research and attempt new strategies in my classroom to get my students excited about some aspect of mathematics. Teaching is the hardest work I have ever done. – (next to parenting!) – But as most of you know it is absolutely and completely worth it.

Every one of us makes a difference every day. Let me say that again. Every one of us makes a difference every day. Powerful statement.

This is actually the main message of Jane Goodall's Roots and Shoots program. I'm sure you all know who Jane Goodall is, a primatologist most known for her long-term study of wild chimpanzees in Tanzania. I recently heard a story about her. She carries around a sacred bundle of hope. This practice originated with indigenous Native American tribes who would carry significant artifacts from the tribe's past in a pouch or bundle. When Jane Goodall is asked whether there is still hope for the chimpanzees, she opens the bundle and pulls out artifacts that tell a story, a story of hope.

First a feather: There's an area of land in Ontario that used to be a nickel mine. After the miners abandoned the mining the land was dead and gray. Environmentalists believed they could bring the land back. They worked and worked on the land and over time it became green again. The feather is from a peregrine falcon that lives on that land now. Then, she takes out some pebbles. When Nelson Mandela was breaking rocks in the yard of the prison where he was held, he saved some of the pebbles. He knew he would be liberated someday and wanted to take something from his experience there. After he was freed, he put some of those pebbles in little bags and gave them to friends as a remembrance of his time and purpose in prison.

The last item is a little plastic change purse. A little girl sent this to her after seeing a TV program about a baby chimp that was put into a glass box at birth and not allowed to see or interact with its parents. After a year the young chimp was banging its head on the glass. The little girl had sent a note saying 'Dear Dr. Goodall, here's money to buy a snoopy doll for that chimp so it will have something to hold onto.' When asked if she ever loses hope? Her

response is, "Sometimes I come close, but I take out these things and they remind me that there is always hope."

A little advice, if you don't already have your own sacred bundle of hope in which to treasure stories of the children whose lives you've touched and who've touched your lives forever, it's not too late. These reminders, these stories can help us get through even the darkest days when we may feel as though our lesson was a disaster, or we remain frustrated that we can't help a student turn the corner, or anything else that tears at our heart and soul as classroom teachers. Do this small favor for yourself to help save the stories from being lost and remind you why we do what we do every day.

Many of us have a teacher from our past who inspired us, who believed in us and encouraged us. Thank you, Mrs. Notari! They were able to see 'something' in each of us that we didn't recognize. They patiently encouraged us to walk our journey and look deeply enough to see that 'something' within ourselves.

I should provide a little background.

I arrived here at the University of Vermont in the fall of 1992 ready to embark on a degree in mathematics with no idea at all where that would lead, but convinced it would not lead back to the classroom. Somewhere on this part of the journey, I met Lia Cravedi. I'm not sure how it happened looking back, but I know there was this conversation where she encouraged me to take another look at a possible career in teaching, advised me to consider another education class or two, encouraged me to examine with both eyes open the possibility of sharing my passion toward mathematics with young minds.

In the meantime, I got involved with AmeriCorps. I spent time with young people in the classroom, hiking, swimming, playing games and on the ropes course. At some point, there was clarity...what I'd once been adamantly opposed to was pulling me toward at least exploring the possibility of making teaching my life's work.

Flash forward to the fall of 1996 when with Master's degree in hand I moved across the country and was offered my first teaching position at Santa Ana High School in Santa Ana California. I arrived to find 42 students in a class. There were not enough desks. Those first few days some sat at my desk and others sat on the floor until we could round up enough desks and chairs. 95% of students at that school spoke Spanish as their first language. I did not speak Spanish. I learned a lot in those first two years, a lot about myself, what I was passionate about, and what I could and couldn't do.

At one point, one of my basketball players shared with me that she was being hurt at home. While I had participated in the mandatory trainings and knew what to do...I remember just allowing the tears to fall as I held on to her. I told her that I needed to report it and she seemed to understand. It didn't take long for her to be whisked from her home and placed with social services. My heart was breaking. I wasn't prepared for this. I told my husband about

everything. I told him that I had to do more, be more, save her. After fast tracking all the paperwork and jumping through some hoops, we found ourselves as foster parents. Selena stayed with us for 9 wonderful months before reuniting with her family. I could fill a hole in the life of that child.

Later on, I met Ivan. He did everything he could to try my patience. I loved this kid, but I chose to stick him with sarcasm every chance I got. He just smiled and continued to think of ways to push my buttons. One day he suffered a seizure in the school pool. I had a chance to visit him in the hospital and while he laid there on the ventilator, I talked to him. I said that I was sorry for not expressing the care that I felt for him, for not being kinder. I promised myself that day that my students would always know how much I cared for them from that moment on. Days later he passed away at the hospital. I was so angry. Angry at the school. Angry at the physical education teacher. Angry at me. Ivan was everywhere that I looked. I could not remain at this school.

While trying to keep my head just above water level those first two years, I recognized the lasting impact that teachers have on the lives of their students and the obligation we have in doing so.

Our students are our mission. And our passion. And our legacy. We teach KIDS, not curriculum. And the influence we have on our students extends far beyond the walls of our classroom. Teaching is an opportunity. An opportunity to make long-lasting, close, personal connections with young people; to make a difference in the lives of others.

As you know, we wear many hats (Amy Hysick, 2017NYTOY)

We play the role as caregiver, providing them structure, boundaries, food, security, support, when these basic needs aren't met at home. We chip away at the armor they wear until they begin to realize that some adults can be trusted, and that we are looking out for them. We care about them.

We play the role as spiritual advisor. Helping our students learn right from wrong. Providing a safe haven, a judgement free zone, offering some guidance as they try and find their way, sometimes even taking confession.

We of course play the role of educator. Our students expect us to have all of the answers, all the time. It's an unreasonable expectation and exhausting. Sometimes we have to demonstrate courage and admit to our students that we don't have all of the answers. It's completely okay for them to see that we are human, make mistakes, and have to consult Google from time to time.

Which brings me to one of the most important hats: The Ship's Captain. Imagine being the captain of a mighty sailing vessel, whose ongoing mission is to go seek out new life and new civilizations but you were too afraid of the unknown to ever leave port? Think about how much

richer the experience is when you have the courage to sail away from shore and seek out something new. That's where the adventures are! That's difficult for us to do, as teachers. But what if...we had the courage to try anyway? To allow ourselves the uncertainty to attempt something new and different, to stretch ourselves and our students beyond what is safe and comfortable? What could we learn about ourselves? What could our students learn about themselves? We are the captains of our classroom. We are the one who chart the course for our students. We create and plan the lessons – so let's decide to leave port and seek adventure. Do one thing this year that scares you. Create a lesson from scratch and field-test it on your students. Then ask them what they think and revise it according to their suggestions. Ask a trusted colleague to observe your classroom and give you honest feedback about what they saw – and take that feedback and change how you teach. Engage in conversation with people in other buildings and other departments about successful strategies and then shamelessly alter them to fit your own needs. Use whatever resources you can find to reach the students sitting right in front of you – and realize the impact you have on their educational experience.

I would not encourage you all to do this if I wasn't up to the challenge myself. This year, after many years of "thinking" about it, I have flipped the geometry classroom. Simultaneously, I have embarked on some project-based learning with them. I crafted student friendly learning targets, committed to carving out team time each week for groups to work on their projects, and invited a marketing/advertising expert to come in and meet with groups providing feedback 2 weeks in advance of the final group presentations. In addition, I've invited all the parents in to witness the presentations coming up at the end of this month. I'm scared. There are so many what ifs. I wish I could share with you the outcome. I wish that I could share my successes and failures. I wish we had the opportunity to engage in the deep conversation that would ultimately lead to helping me revise the project and the process so that students learn MORE the next time around.

We all have this same choice: do we stay in port or sail out to sea? Are we willing to go off the map into the unknown to reach the students who need us? What if we inspire our students and our colleagues to be part of a pirate crew who explores and discovers new worlds and still learns content at the same time? If you want something different for your students or your school – go after it with everything you've got. Make waves. Even if you are outmanned and outgunned – or everyone else thinks you're crazy. Your kids will thank you for it, and you'll find treasure in the process.

With over three million teachers in the public school system, we, as educators are in a position to make positive changes in the profession. We need to find the power within us to be the policy makers rather than the recipients of decisions made on our behalf by those in positions of power. We are the educational experts. It is up to us to continue focusing on graduating all students ready for college and careers. It is up to us to close the achievement gaps. It is up to us to increase the graduation rates. It is up to us to design and provide an effective multi-tiered system of support for our struggling learners. It is up to us to inspire today's students to be tomorrow's leaders.

When we take a look at education there are so many seated at the table who profess authority over what teaching and education should be. It is the teacher's' voice that is all too often overshadowed, but not tonight and not as you continue to define our profession. I would argue that your voices and your practices are more important now than ever before in this the year of "alternative facts" and "fake news". Literacy in all disciplines is essential in the 21st century for everyone. Throughout his administration, President Obama highlighted the need for improved national math and science education, stating "All American citizens need high quality STEM education that inspires them to know more about the world around them, engages them in exploring challenging questions, and involves them in high quality intellectual work." I will add that it is equally important that we help young people develop an awareness of the world and the environment and become better citizens with an ability to effectively and respectfully communicate thoughts, opinions and facts (even on Twitter).

In the classroom, we need to hold every learner to high expectations and try to ensure that there is equity in opportunity for all. It is important to teach students to construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others. We strive to elicit value and celebrate multiple paths to solution by focusing on the strategy rather than the answer, asking questions where there is no wrong answer like "What do you see? What do you notice?" and asking for volunteers to restate someone's idea. We encourage and provide opportunity for our students to reflect on their own learning.

This past weekend I had the opportunity to chart my course and determine my next steps. With you here as my witnesses, I pledge:

- To elevate teacher voice by wedging the door open at the state level and finding a place at the table.
- To elevate the profession by continuing to support and celebrate teachers pursuing National Board Certification
- And to elevate student learning by persisting in taking sound educational risks in the classroom and working each day to make a difference in the lives of my students.

As you leave here later tonight:

- I hope that each and every one of you being honored tonight as UVM Outstanding Teachers will consider applying to become the 2019 Vermont State Teacher of the Year.
- I challenge you to continue your excellent work and to find opportunities – in the classroom or elsewhere –to actively cultivate the young people who will become the informed improvisers of the future.
- And, I invite you to take the next steps in defining our profession.

Thank you!