

## **A FAME tribute to Teresa Rivera**

**By Eric Burnside of Lafayette High School**

“My favorite teacher is Mr./Mrs. Generic Educator because ...” How many essays like that have drifted onto the desks of the judges of the FAME Awards competition? Truly extraordinary teachers don’t require students to talk about how great they are at teaching. One should be able to say, “Hey, today in Mr./Mrs. Awesome Teacher’s class – ” and before they can finish their sentence, their fellow student replies, “Oh, yeah! I know that teacher! They are amazing!” Extraordinary Teachers’ reputations always precede them. Their reputation does not come from state-analyzed statistics or test results. Their reputation comes from their ability to connect with their students or at least be diligent in the attempt. Not every student wants to learn, but a great teacher should always want to teach. The only teacher I can think of who is worthy of such praise is my art teacher and very good friend, Mrs. Teresa Rivera. I have had the honor of being taught by her all four years of my high school career; not because of some scheduling fluke, but because I finagled and manipulated my schedule to include a class where I would be under her expert tutelage.

Over the years that I have known her, I have observed that she encourages you to answer your own questions. On numerous occasions I have sought advice on what I could do to an art work to make it better. Instead of telling me to make one area darker and another lighter, she would set your work aside and have you look at it from a different perspective and ask you what it needs. Too many teachers give their students the answers, and too few help them find the answers.

Another aspect of Mrs. Rivera's character that makes her an incredible teacher is her sense of blind justice. Mrs. Rivera shows no favoritism. She will just as soon write a disciplinary referral for a straight-A, well-behaved student as she would for a student whose attitude might be less than satisfactory. It is not that she rules her class with an iron fist; she shows more compassion and kindness than most teachers. But if a rule is broken, it is swiftly and fairly enforced. Mrs. Rivera possesses unparalleled integrity, and I greatly respect her for it, even though it may get me sent to the office one day.

Many teachers spend their 90 minutes of class behind a podium lecturing while students scribble down notes. In that setting there is very little opportunity for one-on-one help. I have noticed, though, that Mrs. Rivera almost mystically manages her classroom. Her ability to help a single student and manage the entire class as a whole is rather dumbfounding. Just imagine 36 or so pottery students all pounding wads of clay into the tables in a dissonant rhythm. Now imagine helping a student, perhaps a special-needs student, and dispelling an argument that is about to erupt on the opposite side of the room. Lastly, imagine waking up the next day and doing it all again. My advice to new art education majors? Switch your major now. Mrs. Rivera doesn't push slowly on, counting the days 'til retirement. She strides on, albeit some days more weathered than others, but she continues nonetheless. On several occasions she has told me that her friends have asked her, "You teach high school art? Why in the world would you do that?" but she answered them, "Are you kidding? You have no idea how rewarding it is." She will testify that in every single class she has, there is at least one student who can make her cry with laughter. Her computer and bulletin board are plastered with quips and inside jokes that are *years* old! On her planning periods she will spontaneously have laughing fits about something silly that

happened the day before. By no means is any class or student perfect, but I have noticed few teachers who find as much joy in what they do as Mrs. Rivera does. After all the crazy parents, unruly students and bureaucratic red tape that teachers deal with on a weekly basis, it's a wonder teaching isn't an extinct profession.

Truly fantastic teachers are one in a million, and I have to tell you, folks, I've been taught by one for the last four years. Mrs. Teresa Rivera is, and will be for a years to come, a great friend and mentor, and there is not enough gratitude in all of humanity to say thanks for what all my teachers, and Mrs. Rivera especially, have done to spur on my education. It saddens me to know that I won't have Mrs. Rivera as a teacher next year, but I can safely say that I will liberally use visitor passes to come back and ask her for advice on my work. For every new generation of students that enters the halls of Lafayette, there is the potential for them to learn so much from Mrs. Rivera. For every generation of students that leave Lafayette, many of them walk across the stage at graduation and look out at the sea of educators gathered in front of them, and nod to their favorite teacher. When I go to take my diploma I will turn and nod with the sincerest of thanks, respect and admiration for Mrs. Teresa Rivera, an educator of the finest quality.