

Donna M. Graham
Torrington Teacher of the Year
August 27, 2007

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your kindness.

Before I begin, I would like to introduce my very special family members present today.

My Dad, Tony Mannetti. He's a three-time cancer survivor. We affectionately call him "9 Lives Tony." He keeps on keeping on and is an inspiration to everyone.

My sister, Lisa Riggi. She's a physical education teacher and was this year's runner up for Teacher of the Year in the Wolcott Public Schools.

My husband, Bob Graham ~ my best friend of 33 years.

Thank you for all your support.

Dr. O'Brien, Dr. Campbell, Mayor Bingham, Attorney General Blumenthal, Mr. Cavagnero, administrators, my very special family members here and my Mom above, colleagues, and of course, my Southwest Family:

I am so very honored and humbled to be standing up here today. I have come to many of these convocations and marveled at the skill and ease at which so many before me have presented their words. It is an awesome feeling to be standing here, but the responsibility of saying just the right thing to so many worthy and hard-working teachers is stressful. Yet, this is quite a joyful moment in the life of this teacher.

So, even though I've never had great comic timing, I will begin with a joke I heard early in the summer. There was a teacher who wanted her students to learn about self-esteem. So she said to her class, "If you think you are dumb, please stand up." She thought no one would stand up and she could begin her lesson on just how much self-esteem everyone had. But one boy, little Johnny, stood up. She looked at him and said very tenderly, "Now Johnny, you don't really think you're dumb, do you?" "No mame," Johnny answered. "I just felt bad for you standing up there all alone."

We laugh, but there are so many times when we do feel alone. Some of us might even feel invisible. Who sees the work that we strive so hard to do every day? Does anyone appreciate the extra hours we stay each day to manage paperwork, lesson preparation, phone calls, meetings? Does anyone care that we come in an hour earlier each day to be sure everything is in order, not a minute is wasted and the day can go smoothly? What about all those hours we spend at home completing tasks that escaped us during the school day?

Look around you. These are the people who notice what you do and have done throughout the years. Take a moment right now and give each other a pat on the back.

That is something teachers never do for themselves. Most teachers never blow their own horns. We are warriors fighting every day. We have a mission. We do not take the time to sit back and say, "Yes, I did a good job." So we need to be cheerleaders for each other!

I have been concerned about the morale of teachers for a long time. Society has diminished the importance of teachers and education in general within the last decade. But we all know that teaching is one of the most important and difficult jobs of all. We invest in the future. We mold lives; we turn lessons into adventures and make children thirst for more. The world is much changed from when each of us grew up. There are many more traps into which children may fall. Our job is overwhelming, but we persist because we care about the children entrusted to us.

Teachers are extraordinary people. If you read the newspapers or watch the nightly news on television, you would believe that the world is filled with negativity and blackness. Of course, there are those events that must be brought to public attention and prayed upon. My own daughter left a voice mail message to tell me that she was in lockdown at one of the Virginia Tech buildings during that horrific morning on April 16. A shooter was on the campus. But, even in that single moment of darkness, a hero emerged. That day, one of our own, a 76 year old teacher named Liviu Librescu, made a difference – a difference between life and death- which would be forever etched in the world's memory. He made the ultimate sacrifice that no teacher or human being should ever have to make. He barricaded the doorway of his Virginia Tech classroom with his own body, giving his life to save the lives of his students, who leaped from the windows to escape the gunman. Every single one of his students lived. Liviu Librescu had survived the holocaust and life in communist Russia to become an engineering and math lecturer at Virginia Tech. He deserved better. It is said that heroes are usually unaware that they are changing the course of the lives of others. But, on that day, Librescu didn't take the time to think about his behavior. To him, it was the just the right thing to do. He was a man of great character; there was no other choice. Such is the stuff that teachers are made of. As you can well imagine, that day made a significant impact on my life. My daughter was spared. I was more grateful than I have ever been in my life, but the parents of the children in Librescu's class would be forever indebted, not only to God, but to a selfless teacher. If Librescu doesn't make one proud to be a teacher, what does? Please keep him and all the Virginia Tech victims in your prayers today.

There are heroes in every classroom. I believe that every teacher is a hero just by the nature of the job. Who here has wiped a tear from a child's eye after a pet has died, has listened to a child talk about being bullied and done something about it, has excused a late homework instead of giving a zero or has taken a little more time to give a quiz so that maybe- just once- this child might get a passing grade? Just acts of kindness – perhaps trivial to others but monumental in the eyes of a child. I have known teachers who have taken students into their own homes, have lent money to children for needed essentials, have baked birthday cupcakes to make a child feel like he mattered, and have gone to homes to bring the child of a troubled parent to school one more time. These are our everyday heroes...our teachers.

Our world is not a negative place. But we need speakers for those events, however small, that show we are progressing to a higher ground. We, as teachers, should be the forerunners in shouting the good news. We are a large part of it! Think of all you do and see happening in your classrooms every day! Call the newspaper reporters. For a change, let's read about the good news instead of the sensationalism that comes across our desks and televisions every day. Take the time to send home those newsletters and share the joy with parents! Place those accolades on your Character Counts or Good News bulletin boards!

I want to salute Principal John Metallo. I have great respect for him. I know that some of us would rather see him temper those countless e-mails about the wonderful happenings at Torrington High School. But, truly, he is spreading the joy, trumpeting the good news! We can learn from his example.

This year, remember to stop and take the time to acknowledge all those small but most significant accomplishments in your classroom. Give more pats on the back to the children. Shout out those joyful moments. One moment I remember from last year was when my student Sammy read his own story in front of the class for the first time. Actually, Sammy was MY hero today. Remembering HIS courage helped me to get up on this stage this morning.

There is a saying that teachers change the world...one child at a time. Be proud of what we do. Be proud of what we are. We are teachers! Celebrate each other! We are all wonderful human beings, who start each new school year knowing that we will again continue to do our best for the children of Torrington. No matter how many mandates come down, we will embrace the challenge and press on. It is the right thing to do as we work to give meaning to the motto "Restoring the pride."

God bless, Godspeed and thank you!

Donna Graham
Torrington Teacher-of-the-Year
August, 2007