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Professor Clauss

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Brother Stephen Balletta, S.M.

“To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.” While many attribute these words to William Blake, I most closely associate them with the first day of Junior English – a day that I will forever remember. I will never forget, not only those lines from Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence*, but also the man who made those words come alive: Brother Stephen Balletta. From the moment he ran, yes ran, into Room 231 and began feverishly reciting the poem, I instantly realized that English class would never be the same again. For that, and a number of other reasons, I believe Brother Stephen Balletta to be the best teacher I have ever had.

An evaluation of Brother Stephen simply cannot occur without mentioning a crucial component of his character: his Catholicism. Brother Stephen, a member of the religious order the Society of Mary, has undeniably made a huge impact on my own spiritual life, often offering prayers, guidance, and companionship. He looked at life through a religious prism – often instructing us to adhere to the axiom “What would Jesus do?” While most could not achieve this without seeming overly preachy or holier than thou, Brother Steve was the exception. For example, Brother Stephen adeptly handled our class’ discussion on a *Brave New World* when it turned toward the topic of premarital sex. Rather than blindly regurgitating Church teaching on the subject, Brother Steve instead was extremely tolerant and accommodating to the opinions of the class, whether or not they agreed with the Church. He realized that many in the class had girlfriends,

and that a strict approach on premarital sex would get him nowhere. Rather, he told us that he could understand why teenagers would have sex before marriage, but he hoped we would save ourselves for the right person, for the right time: marriage. It wasn't just while teaching *Brave New World* that Bro. Steve reiterated church teaching - whether he was teaching us *Lord of the Flies*, or Shakespeare, Bro. Stephen always weaved into his class a Catholic undertone. Through his dignified approach, Bro. Stephen brought many students back into agreement with the Church, including myself.

Though I was impressed with Bro. Stephen's steadfast piety, I was even more impressed by his expertise in Literature. His knowledge of English is unparalleled amongst the faculty at Chaminade High School. On the first day of class, he had each of us read a line from the old English version of "Beowulf." He, however, didn't have to read those lines - he had them memorized verbatim. This could be discounted as merely a result of teaching the material for so long, but I don't think so. He had every syllable down pat, every pause was appropriate when he was reciting the lines. It is not just the fact that he has memorized numerous lines from works of literature, it is that he knows when and how to work in this knowledge during class. It is as though he has a sixth sense for apt quotes from literature. For example, when I forgot to hand in a homework assignment early in the year, I begged and pleaded for him to allow me to hand it in late. He simply responded with a quote from "The Merchant of Venice," "The quality of mercy is not strained." That moment ensured that I would never forget Bro. Stephen's literature expertise.

Although already a literary expert, Bro. Stephen is always learning - his teaching methods are never stale or unchanging. Every summer, he takes a few English courses at the local community college. These courses are not only in English literature, his specialty, but also

American literature as well as World literature. As a result, he is constantly adapting to new breakthroughs in the realm of literature. For instance, Bro. Stephen is never opposed to the idea of changing his teaching methods. When he took an entire course on the English poet Thomas Gray, Bro. Stephen completely revamped the way he taught Gray's magnum opus "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Although in the past he had made students memorize an entire stanza of the poem, Bro. Stephen shifted the focus of his class onto the context and background of the poem, realizing that it was important for his students to know more about Thomas Gray and the time in which the poem was written. In sum, Bro. Stephen is a teacher who realizes that more education is never a bad thing, and neither is a reevaluation of his teaching methods.

Bro. Stephen's willingness to learn and adapt perhaps can only be matched by his dedication to his students. I can honestly say that I have never encountered a more dedicated teacher than Bro. Stephen Balletta. Who else arrives at school at 5 in the morning, and leaves at 7 at night? No one. He is unmatched in terms of enthusiasm and dedication to his students. For instance, while many teachers only moderate a single club, Bro. Stephen moderated several. From *Tarmac*, the school newspaper, to our Speech and Debate society, he selflessly gave himself to every club which he moderated. However, *Tarmac* was undeniably his most prized possession. I could see it in the way he slavishly labored in the club's offices, tirelessly editing a seemingly endless stream of articles. But for him, it was not laborious, but rather fulfilling. He was nurturing the talents of his students, prodding and pushing them towards greatness. And it showed. The fruits of his labors, his supreme dedication, could be seen every time an alumnus of the paper got published in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, or *The New York Post*. It was

achievements, not his, but those by his former students that kept him going, that kept him dedicated to teaching.

Bro. Stephen unselfishness, unlike his literature expertise, might not be overtly apparent; he is not overly generous or altruistic. However, he is one of the most unselfish people I have ever met. To illustrate, while Bro. Stephen absolutely loved teaching English to 11th graders, he loved the Society of Mary even more. Accordingly, when his superiors asked him to move up to the senior level and be a steadying presence to the Religion faculty, he agreed without question. Unfortunately, he would have to cease moderating *Tarmac* so as to fully devote himself to his new position of Assistant Provincial of the Marianist Order. He did all of this, without so much as even a word of protest. Bro. Stephen fully embraced his new roles and exceeded expectations. He threw himself into making lackadaisical seniors interested in their own faith, as well as devoting himself to ministering to the daily running of the Province of Meribah. It was a difficult move, but Bro. Stephen realized that his love for the Society of Mary was greater than his love for English. While he would've preferred to stay only teaching English, his unselfishness, one of his best talents, drove him to take on the challenge of teaching an entirely new subject. Like many of his other qualities, Bro. Stephen's selflessness is tremendously admirable.

Perfectionism, like unselfishness, is a word that is not foreign to Bro. Stephen. His perfectionism is just second nature to him, an indelible part of his personality. It is perhaps the first thing you notice about the man. Specifically, his crisply pressed black suit is perfectly tailored to his body, and is free of any stains or missing buttons. His tie is impeccably knotted, and of the perfect length. Even his hair is immaculately parted, a throwback to another era. But the most memorable example of Bro. Stephen's perfectionist attitude is evident whenever he grades a writing assignment. While most teachers haphazardly underline words, with little to no

care as to how straight the line is, Bro. Stephen meticulously uses a ruler to underline. He does not use the ruler sparingly, either. In fact, he sometimes underlines a single word three or four times to emphasize his point. The first time I saw it, I didn't notice it. But I soon noticed a pattern – every line was perfectly straight. In addition, his comments on the back, quite lengthy, were written in the same manner: straight as can be. While some of Bro. Stephen's lesson plans may fade in my memory, his perfectionism – his perfect lines, specifically - will not.

Creativity in a teacher is something that is almost always lacking, but not in the case of Bro. Stephen. It is most evident in his ability to make the work of long-dead authors relevant to the modern day classroom. He made a class full of 17 year olds passionate about the works of Shakespeare, Blake, Huxley, and Orwell, not an easy task in the least. For *Beowulf*, he brought in plastic swords and masks, so students could reenact the memorable fight scene in the epic poem. Not to outdo himself, he also blew a conch shell at the start of every class that we discussed *Beowulf*, signaling us to form a large chasm across the middle of the room, our very own “mead hall” so to speak. For *MacBeth*, he dressed himself like a stygian witch, and came running and shrieking into the classroom, enlisting two other student to join him as they reenacted the famous movie scene. While Bro. Stephen often used props, he also had the ability to reach us without them, but also being equally creative. For the poem, “*The Tyger*” Bro. Stephen got our entire class to chant the words and bang on our desks, unleashing the inner animal within us. In fact, Bro. Stephen got so into it, he leaped onto his desk in a tiger-like fashion. But his piece de résistance, a reenactment of a dance scene from *Pygmalion* with a student, was the stuff of legend. Every year, Bro. Stephen picks a student, not the class clown or the smartest student, but rather the quiet, reserved one, to dance with him. It is a sight to see – a Marianist brother, clad in a black suit, dancing with the shy pupil. Bro. Stephen as Henry Higgins, to the student's Eliza

Doolittle – it is an image I'll never forget. He did all of this to get us to enjoy English, so that we may better understand it. He knew how boring some of the material could be, and decided that some creativity was needed, yet another reason as to why Bro. Stephen is a phenomenal teacher.

Bro. Stephen Balletta is more than a teacher. He is a mentor, a spiritual guide, and also a friend; not only an English teacher, but also a teacher of life. For me, that is the mark of a great teacher, that he teaches his students both what they need to know inside and outside the classroom. Only one of Bro. Stephen's characteristics, such as his dedication, does not make him a great teacher. Rather, he is the sum of his parts: his English expertise, his Catholicism, his unselfishness, his perfectionism, and his creativity. And just because I left Chaminade, does not mean I cannot stay in contact with a man who has had such a huge impact on my life. As soon as I return home, I plan on visiting one of my dearest friends. I can honestly say Bro. Stephen Balletta was the best teacher I've ever had the privilege of studying under.

