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When Teachers Get the Top Grade

By Melanie A. Farmer

Meet this year’s outstanding teachers at Columbia University, so honored as recipients of the Great Teachers Award by the Society of Columbia Graduates.

Christa Mercer, the Gustave M. Berne Professor of Philosophy, and Lorenzo Polvani, professor of applied mathematics and earth and environmental sciences at the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science, were awarded the honor, bestowed annually since 1949. Mercer and Polvani join a long list of distinguished Columbia educators including Jacques Barzun, Mark Van Doren and Lionel Trilling.

“This is an encouragement and a confirmation,” says Polvani, who has been teaching at Columbia for 18 years. “It tells me that I’m on the right track.”

Mercer, known as a tough grader, says she was surprised to have been chosen. “I think it’s easier to be liked across the board if you’re an easy grader,” she says. “I’ve known that students have enjoyed my courses, but I also knew that some are disappointed when they make lower grades than they’re used to.”

Currently on leave this semester, Mercer normally teaches in the Core Curriculum, history of philosophy and philosophy and feminism for first- and second-year students. When not working on her latest project, a series of books for Oxford University Press, Oxford Philosophical Concepts, she has been volunteering for the Obama-Biden presidential campaign. Mercer, who earned her Ph.D. at Princeton University, has taught here for 16 years.

Students have variously described her as a breath of fresh air and organized. Professor Mercer is “warm and inviting and really brought me into the heart of the Core Curriculum...Lit Hum [Literature Humanities] is such an intense course and very dense, but she made it relevant and fun,” says Wesley Flamer-Binion (CC ’03), now a first-year M.B.A. student at Columbia.

For Mercer, good, solid teaching is based on her love for the subject. You must truly enjoy what you teach, she says. “If I move students in any way, it’s because I really am passionate about what I teach,” says Mercer.

“Philosophy and parts of the Core that I teach have the potential to change their lives. I take the responsibility of changing their lives very seriously.”

Polvani’s expertise is in the mathematical aspects of climate change and earth science. His current research focuses on the climate impacts of the expected closing of the ozone hole in the second half of the century.

A longtime educator, Polvani defended his Ph.D. thesis at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, on a Friday afternoon in late August 1988, and started teaching the following Monday. He hasn’t looked back since. Good thing for his students who have described his style as approachable, understandable and engaging. For Polvani, it has always been important to keep it simple.

“I put myself in the mind of the student who knows nothing about the subject and I try to make it simpler and simpler until it is perfectly clear,” he says. “When the students say they get it, that’s the reward for me.”

That reward seems to go both ways.

“I’m an engineering student, and I love engineering, but math has always been a stumbling block for me,” says J.P. Hilton, mechanical engineering Ph.D. student, in his second year. “If every applied math class was taught by Professor Polvani I would consider switching majors. No joke,” he adds.

Mercer and Polvani were presented on Oct. 23 with the Great Teachers Award—a citation and miniature statue of the society’s symbol—the teaching lion.

Beginning with the late poet, editor and biographer Mark Van Doren and with Edwin H. Armstrong, inventor and engineer, one Columbia College and one engineering professor have been selected for recognition each year on the recommendation of students, faculty and deans. Their names will be engraved on a plaque displayed in the Robert M. Rosencrans Reading Room of the Philip L. Milstein Family College Library (first floor, Butler Library). That hits a sentimental note for Mercer in particular.

“In a hundred years when I’m long dead and gone, my name will be up there with all of these other great teachers, and that really does please me,” says Mercer. “I find that somehow really moving.”