

## **R.E.B. Awards for Teaching Excellence**

November 7, 2016

Richmond, VA

*As delivered.*

Thank you, Erin, for that generous welcome. I am so pleased to join you all this evening as we recognize public education and teaching excellence.

The affable television journalist Andy Rooney once said: “Most of us end up with no more than five or six people who remember us. Teachers have thousands of people who remember them for the rest of their lives.”

Today I’d like to talk about two such teachers.

As a child growing up in Cincinnati, public school education and the amazing teachers I was privileged to know shaped my moral and intellectual development. While Jim Crow laws and racial segregation lingered in the south, my hometown of Cincinnati was in contrast a place of educational opportunity.

My parents, Burdella Miller Crutcher and Andrew James Crutcher Jr., had saved and sacrificed to purchase a home in a predominantly Jewish community with excellent schools. At that particular time, the Cincinnati Public Schools system was experimenting with homogenous groupings, and I benefitted from having been placed in the top academic group.

Our cohort was formed in first grade, when I transferred into the school, and remained in place as a challenging yet nurturing cocoon of possibility until sixth grade.

Like most children, I was drawn to classmates who shared my interests—in learning, laughing, reading, and playing basketball and touch football outside until dark. As a young boy, I didn’t see the racial or religious differences that would have been used to separate me from my peers, had I lived in a different community at that time.

But in my school, I found inclusivity and opportunity and love. The boys and girls in my classes came from all different backgrounds (we had children from Japan, Hungary, Cuba, and Germany), and were encouraged to see our diversity as a reflection of our strong and welcoming community. In fact, one of my prized possessions is my first-grade class photo with me standing between my two closest friends—one black and one white. My black friend was Steve Reece, and he and his family lived on the street in back of us. In fact, our mothers were friends. My white friend, a Jewish boy named Leon Friedberg, transferred to a Hebrew school, Talmud Torah, in the second grade. Many years later in the ninth grade we would reconnect only to discover that we both had learned to play the cello!

At South Avondale Elementary School, we learned Italian and French, produced shows at WCET, the first licensed public television station in the United States; and we were provided many other special opportunities to discover, learn and excel. It wasn't until many years later that I realized how remarkable these opportunities were.

And our teachers loved to teach. They were excellent role models, reflecting what the father of public school education, Horace Mann, meant when he stated: "When you introduce into our schools a spirit of emulation, you have present the keenest spur admissible to the youthful intellect."

Mrs. Flora Nickels and Miss Ida Mae Rhodes—my teachers in the third and fourth grades, respectively—were the two I most desired to emulate.

Mrs. Nickels told me that because I was so good in math, I should consider becoming an engineer. Intrigued by this suggestion, and living in "LBG"—life before Google—I headed straight to the Avondale Public Library—where I normally spent many hours—and searched in a thick and dog-eared career book for more information about engineers.

Well, no offense to engineers, I didn't much like what I eventually found. So I kept searching until I came upon architect. And that sounded much more interesting to my third-grade self. I could use my proficiency in math, but also my burgeoning artistic side.

And you know, I wanted to become an architect until just before I entered college and realized that I could pursue an academic and professional career in music.

In fourth grade, Miss Rhodes recognized this fledgling artist and introduced me to acting. Our class produced a play that we wrote called, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." I played the lead role—the Mayor of Hamlin. I can still remember my opening lines: "We've got to do something about these rats; they're driving my wife and me crazy!"

Many years later, my father would bring Miss Rhodes to hear me perform with my quartet or trio, or at one of my solo recitals. She lived to be 99 years old. Sadly, the last time I saw her she failed to recognize me. I was honored to be the Father's Day speaker at my father's church in Cincinnati and even though Miss Rhodes was sitting in the first row—she was a resident of the church's nursing home next door—her memory was dimmed by dementia. She was not aware of who I was.

But my memories of Miss Rhodes and her positive influence on me are vividly clear to this day. As is my belief in transforming lives through education.

As the first person in my family to complete a college degree, I am well aware of how fortunate I was to have been nurtured in the Cincinnati Public School system. To have teachers and mentors who cared about me. And to have been set on a path early in my life that was not limited by my gender, race, or economic means. Rather, I was able to flourish as a result of the promise and potential the public school system saw in each child it taught.

Indeed, I have been blessed with remarkable mentors throughout my life. Perhaps the most influential, with the exception of my own parents, was Professor Elizabeth Potteiger at Miami University. Liz heard me perform two movements of a Bach Suite in a cello competition on her campus when I was 14. This chance encounter changed the course of my life. She offered to teach me for free if my parents would agree to transport me the 35 miles to and from Oxford, Ohio every Saturday.

Subsequently, I received one of the first alumni merit scholarships to attend Miami as an undergraduate. The liberal education foundation I received there made possible and enriched so many of the experiences I have had in my life as a doctoral student at Yale University, an educator, professional musician, leader, citizen, husband, father and friend.

As a result, my lifelong passion has been to ensure that colleges provide an engaging educational culture, with a liberal education core, in which all students can thrive. I also continue to support the critical importance of mentoring by serving as a mentor to 30 male University of Richmond students from all backgrounds, with whom I meet monthly. My wife, Dr. Betty Neal Crutcher, similarly mentors a group of Richmond women. It's one of the most gratifying parts of my job as president.

At the University of Richmond, we are in a position to help students develop a repertoire of strategies for living in an intercultural global world: inculcating honesty, empathy, integrity and ethical behavior; learning respect for other cultures and ideas; and promoting civic learning and engagement.

Since 2007, Richmond has become a much more diverse campus, drawing inspiration from the words of the 20th-century American theologian and Civil Rights leader Dr. Howard Thurman, "Community cannot for long feed on itself. It can only flourish with the coming of others from beyond – their unknown and undiscovered brothers." And, I hasten to add, sisters.

The perpetual embrace of new voices and perspectives nourishes and strengthens us all. Now, more than ever, our country—and indeed our world—needs thoughtful, well-educated citizens who can think critically and solve problems across boundaries. And to do so with knowledge that is linked to personal and social responsibility.

As President Barack Obama has said: There's nothing more essential to living up to the ideals of this nation than making sure every child is able to achieve their God-given potential."

Through your excellence in teaching, you have set your students on a path toward achieving their potential. Through your example, and your care, you provide hope for every child who enters your classroom—the architects and artists, educators and engineers.

Many years later, your students will remember the lessons you taught and how you made them feel. They will remember when you disciplined them and encouraged them to be better versions of themselves. They will remember that you opened their minds to new people, ideas and solutions.

In fact, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965—a sweeping, bipartisan bill that signaled a new commitment to equality and accountability in education—he did so with Miss Katie Deadrich at his side. Miss Deadrich had been his teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in Texas.

Perhaps one day, your students will propose national legislation or work toward furthering equality in our nation. Perhaps they will create the next iPhone or must-have tech tool, find a cure for chronic disease, or reverse climate change. Perhaps they will create quiet and meaningful change in their communities, through volunteering and civic engagement.

Or perhaps they will teach. And in doing so, will shape the lives of every politician, pioneer, scientist or citizen I just mentioned. But whatever path they choose, they will remember you.

It has been my great pleasure to be here tonight. I am grateful for your commitment to our nation's promising future and to the lives you change through education. Congratulations and continued success and fulfillment in your personal and professional lives.

Thank you.