

## **Lifetime Achievement Award Speech**

It is an honor to introduce Kim Cummings this evening. In addition to being my professor (three times over), my academic advisor, and the supervisor for my senior thesis, Kim also has the rare distinction of having shown me how to live as a citizen of this world. I use the word “shown” rather than “taught” because Kim—more so than the average person—practices what he preaches. He embodies the citizen-activist virtues that he encourages in his students, making him an unusually effective professor.

Kim is a man who is sensitive enough to be moved by the problems of society and strong enough to confront them head on. He is wise enough to make sense of the world, and humble enough to connect with anyone. When Kim speaks, students listen, riveted by the man who combines the compassion of a grandfather and the fierceness of a lion. His inspiration to the student body is evident in the sheer quantity of t-shirts on campus bearing Kim’s face, his characteristic oversized spectacles—like Che Guevara’s beret—the insignia of legions of students who believe in Kim’s commitment to social justice.

What makes Kim a special professor is that his teachings transcend the classroom to unite students’ academic and personal lives. Once formed, this fusion of the mind and spirit is inextricable. Kim accomplishes this feat by engaging his students in a highly potent form of service-learning. Ask students, and they will tell you that Kim’s classes are hard, but they are a “different kind” of hard. The challenge in Kim’s classes, you see, is connecting with people across difference and understanding one’s own place in the world. This does not feel like learning; it feels like living.

My first-ever field assignment took place in Kim’s Introduction to Sociology class during the winter of my sophomore year at Kalamazoo College. The Ventures Project, as it was called,

entailed infiltrating an unfamiliar realm of society and meticulously recording, then analyzing, our observations. Assignments ranged from accompanying police officers on overnight duty to dining with the local homeless. My own task involved helping grade school students with their homework at a neighborhood after-school tutoring program while assessing their social and academic preparedness for school.

I began the project a college student with little attachment to the city surrounding my school, and hardly a notion of what it meant to belong to a community. Within weeks, I was referring to the children at the tutoring program as “my kids” and intensely interested in the fate of Kalamazoo Public Schools, which I had begun to think of as “our schools”. Without my knowledge, Kalamazoo had become my community, and I was invested in taking care of it. At the end of the project, I sought a job as a counselor at a summer camp for at-risk Kalamazoo children. After experiencing the exhilaration of community involvement, returning to my hometown to resume work waiting tables did not seem like an option anymore.

I was not the only one affected by the Ventures Project. That winter, my classmates and I were *all* stirred by the realities of life beyond the confines of **the** Kalamazoo College “bubble”. Many of us followed this passion to other service-learning classes, like Kim’s Neighborhood Organizing Practicum, or to jobs and internships dedicated to promoting social justice. Not one of us left the class unchanged.

In the two years since Kim Cummings introduced me to citizenship through service-learning, I’ve had the opportunity to take two additional classes with him, to canvass for Barack Obama beside him, and to discuss my future over tea on his front porch. Countless other students count on Kim to provide honest criticism, wise counsel, and an infusion of fervor when their own enthusiasm is waning.

Kim's passion and commitment to social justice will outlive him in the lives of the students he has inspired. The legions who wear his face on t-shirts in the Kalamazoo College cafeteria today will don his spirit in classrooms and office buildings and at neighborhood block parties for decades to come. Maybe Kim should receive an award for not just one, but hundreds of lifetimes of achievement, for each of the lives he has touched. Until then, this award tonight will have to suffice. Congratulations, Kim, and thank you for showing us the way.



