

Hypatia's Legacy

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Interviewee: Catherine McCarthy

Catherine McCarthy is my 7th grade math teacher but she's so much more than that, especially to her students. She inspires me in so many ways and pushes me to better. She has an incredible gift of sparking an interest in mathematics and learning into her students. I had assumed that she just had a natural talent for mathematics and teaching but by interviewing her about her life, I found the story was not so simple.

Catherine was born in Scottsdale Arizona and while growing up was more interested in sports than academics. She would scrape by with B's, and with her family moving several times, it was hard for her to put down roots and attempt to accumulate more knowledge.

As a fourth grader, Catherine's teacher told her mom that she would never excel in school because she had so much trouble reading. Hearing this sent her on a path to prove them wrong. She knew then that she wanted to be a teacher and would commit herself to never making anyone feel like they would never be able to learn the material. These values are still instilled in her and she's a better teacher for it.

On the first day of her 7th grade year she would meet a teacher that would change everything for her. This teacher made her realize that she actually enjoyed doing math which then challenged her to be persistent and more intuitive. To this day Catherine instills these values into all her students, even with things not explicitly related to math. I remember one day before a break we stopped doing math and started doing logic puzzles and, instead of just doing whatever at her desk she got a packet and started working on the puzzles with everyone else.

Unlike many young people who are uncertain about what to focus on in college, when she left home for Nazareth College in Rochester, New York, she had no doubt that she wanted to pursue a teaching degree with a specialization in teaching math. One memorable event that ended up changing her view of the math world was when, on a whim, she took a math history class. She loved every part of it and had many "aha" moments as she calls them where she could begin to see how math had evolved. She has had an affiliation with different kinds of number systems ever since. Babaloyanian, Egyptian and Myan being some of her favorites. They left her thinking and wanting more, and when she graduated with undergraduate degrees in both inclusive education and mathematics going on to earn a Master's degree in Inclusive Education with an extension in Gifted and Talented Education, she knew she would love teaching.

Her favorite type of math is algebra because she thinks it is the basis to all higher math and was the level of math where she had to really start trying. She strongly believes in learning math you can apply to other areas of your life. This shows in the tests she makes as she commonly weaves the math skills we had been learning into a word problem. These problems were less about memorizing formulas but instead emphasized learning why they worked and suggesting where in the "real world" they might be used. Her goal is to lead us to having those "aha" moments as did the people who discovered the

formulas would of been thinking about and entrain why the formulas worked.

I asked Mrs. McCarthy about a quote that inspired her, and she pointed me towards a famous speech given by Jimmy Valvano upon accepting a “courage award” during his battle with cancer.

“When people say to me how do you get through life or each day, it’s the same thing. To me, there are three things we all should do every day. We should do this every day of our lives. Number one is laugh. You should laugh every day. Number two is think. You should spend some time in thought. Number three is you should have your emotions moved to tears, could be happiness or joy. But think about it. If you laugh, you think and you cry, that’s a full day. That’s a heck of a day. You do that seven days a week, you’re going to have something special.” -Jimmy V

In my opinion this quote exemplifies the life of Catherine McCarthy in the fullest sense. She knows how to have fun, think, and sometimes cry. We laugh in algebra class when we miss something obvious and she is a rare teacher that will put up with it, to a point. We think all the time in her class, trying to put what we are learning to practical use, or sometimes just to solve a logic puzzle on a Friday. Crying is not a common thing in Mrs.McCarthy’s classroom but the way she motivates us it might as well be. Just as that teacher had inspired her to be the best she could be, she constantly motivates everyone around her to be the best they can be and just as that little girl loved teaching and math she loves them now as a strong mathematician and an even stronger teacher. She spends every day trying to make sure that each and every student has the prime environment to succeed.

About the student (me):

I am a 7th grade student currently enrolled in Richmond Middle School. I am currently taking the honors algebra course. I enjoy practical and competition math as well as writing, coding, rock climbing, soccer, lacrosse and building my own computers.