

# Celebrating teachers, the unsung heroes



Celebrating Teachers honors K-12 educators who made a difference in the lives of their students. These educators seldom hear how influential they were to their students, so the College of Education developed a platform for seniors universitywide to express these sentiments. In total, the college has recognized 20 teachers, and hearing from these student-teacher pairs has been nothing short of inspirational to the College of Education community.

## Galvanized by words

Aisha Ismail (CSH '15) struggled to find her footing at Amos Alonzo Stagg High School in Palos Hills, Ill. Outside stressors made it hard for her to thrive academically, and she often felt disheartened. "My confidence as a student was pretty low," she admits. But one English teacher, Mary Ogarek (EDU '03, LAS MA '09), took a keen interest in Ismail's success, and that made all the difference. "She saw my potential, and she really worked with me," Ismail says. "I remember always being so excited to get my graded essays and short stories back. In addition to comments and grammar corrections, on the back, she always wrote a little paragraph of encouragement and guidance. Her belief in me made me want to be better and to make her proud."

Sadly, Ogarek passed away on April 9, 2014, at the age of 33, but after a chance meeting with her brother, Dr. Joseph Ogarek (CSH MS '00), at a prehealth event at DePaul, Ismail decided to nominate Ogarek posthumously for Celebrating Teachers. "She changed my life, and she continues to impact my journey," Ismail asserts. "If there is anything I learned from my time with her, it is that being compassionate and loving can have tremendous effects on those around us. She was the first person to make me believe that I could achieve anything that I

put my mind to. Every day, her memory continues to inspire me."

## Encouraged by numbers

John Porrazzo (BUS '15) refused to let anything interfere with his academic success, but sometimes he needed extra guidance. That's where Karen Rodrigues, math teacher at Trumbull (Conn.) High School, came in. "As I was a student with an individualized education plan and in advanced math class, she was always there to help," Porrazzo says. "When I was doing poorly in her class, I would communicate with her to get extra help. She was always there to give a helping hand, but wanted the student to put in the effort before she did." Together, they would pore over lessons, trying to pinpoint exactly where Porrazzo became lost. "I got a C in the class, but I learned more in her class than any other," he says.

Over the years, Porrazzo stayed in contact with Rodrigues. "I visited her on break to give her the good news that I was getting an A in calculus," he says. "She was so proud and gave me a hug." Other achievements followed. Porrazzo received a prestigious internship with a Big 4 accounting firm, and he made the dean's list. "I knew she was proud, and she always reminded me, 'You did the work, you deserve it,'" he says. "But I always told her I could not have done it without her. She is one of the best educators I have ever had, and she should be honored for her teaching." And so she was at Honors Convocation on June 11. "I have a renewed spirit and drive for bigger and better things for my students in the future," Rodrigues enthuses. "I am eternally grateful for the Celebrating Teachers award."

Watch more stories like these at [youtube.com/user/depaulcollegeofed/celebratingteachers](https://youtube.com/user/depaulcollegeofed/celebratingteachers).