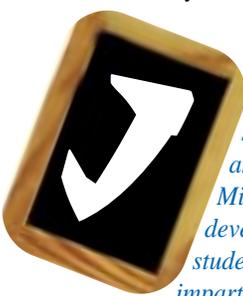


The Teacher of the Year

Lessons Learned

A Conversation with JASON KAMRAS
by MICHAEL BANDLER



Jason Kamras, named the 2005 National Teacher of the Year by President George W. Bush, has spent the past nine years teaching seventh, eighth and ninth grade students at John Philip Sousa Middle School in Washington, D.C., where he developed a digital photography program to make the students more aware of the world around them and to impart, in a practical way, lessons in mathematics.

“Teaching is very demanding work, very difficult,” he says, “but the opportunity to work with my children is one I cherish every day.”

Kamras chose teaching as a profession, and focused his attention, even while a college undergraduate, on the inner city. “I decided early on,” he explains, “that I wanted to be a part of the process of extending educational opportunity to all children, which I believe is their birthright.”

So he joined the faculty of an inner city school in the nation’s capital—one of the most daunting challenges on the American educational landscape. In April, he became the 55th National Teacher of the Year, the oldest and most prestigious award for elementary and secondary school educators in the United States.

Among Kamras’ innovations has been EXPOSE, a program in which students learn to use digital cameras, edit images and work with digital video software to fashion autobiographical photo essays about their lives and their communities. He uses the program to help them learn mathematics.

Kamras was born in New York City, grew up in Sacramento, California, and attended Princeton University in New Jersey, where he received his undergraduate degree. He began teaching at Sousa under the auspices of Teach for America, a national, nonprofit organization that recruits top university graduates and asks them to commit themselves to teaching two years at inner city or rural schools in mostly poor communities, where it often is difficult to fill teaching positions. When his two years ended, Kamras remained at Sousa, leaving only for the 1999-2000 academic year to earn a master’s degree in education at Harvard University in Massachusetts.

Recently, he discussed his career choice, and his perspectives on the evolution of his students.



National Teacher of the Year Program

What are the opportunities facing kids entering their teenage years today in the United States?

JASON KAMRAS: What is amazing about this country is that when children have the opportunity to have an excellent education, they can go on to do almost anything they would like to do. So I think it’s a very exciting time, that age, to know you have that future waiting for you.

When you first walked into the classroom how did you win the students’ confidence?

One of the things I suggest to new teachers as they enter the classroom is to demonstrate that they’re really serious about the business of learning, and about setting a high standard for the students and the classroom. That immediately sets a tone of, “We’re really going to achieve this year.” Children actually want that. They’re thirsting for that push, for that order, for that notion that someone is going to lead them in a very systematic way. But then there are also all sorts of other things you can do: spending time with children outside the classroom, going to chess tournaments and basketball games, making home visits, getting to know the families, so that you do develop a sense of rapport and trust that you can then draw upon in the classroom.

What are the challenges facing kids today in their daily lives and daily routines that are important for you, as a teacher, to keep in mind?

This is the age when they begin to develop a sense of their own identity. I think that’s an extremely turbulent time. If you ask any adult to look back, he or she can recall very difficult experiences while negotiating social changes and physical changes, and deciding which crowd to be part of. I’m still fairly young, but it does seem that the pace of our culture has accelerated a great deal, everything from news to the video games, everything along that spectrum. It’s a less reflective culture, and that may be something our children are missing as they grow up.

How do you try to get them to be more reflective?

You can contextualize mathematics and make it relevant to

their lives. It forces reflection [on] its application. It's true in non-academic areas, too—just talking with them, taking the time to listen, and slow down and have a conversation.

Talk for a moment about the role of parents, in terms of school and academics. How do you involve them in the lives of their kids?

It starts with phone calls and letters home, home visits, meeting family members, sitting down and spending some time, having parents come into class and participate, making myself available before and after school to discuss anything that's going on with their child, really making every possible effort to establish those lines of communication. It's crucial for parents or guardians to be involved. We need to make the schools more welcoming to them.

Tell me about the program you've initiated, EXPOSE.

EXPOSE is a digital photography program for the seventh- and eighth-grade students in my school. The genesis was, first, that I had always loved photography and wanted to share that with my students. At the same time, when I came to the school, I was struck by two phenomena: one, that most people living in the Washington region did not know very much about my children, other than what they would read in the newspaper; and two, my students, for a variety of reasons, didn't really have the

create autobiographical photo essays that they then shared with the larger public. So, through these two mechanisms, there was an exchange across the city.

It also was a great way to teach math. When you talk about angle of view, it's geometry. Shutter speeds are fractional comparisons. Pixels per inch are ratios. We started with black-and-white film, and now we're all digital. There also was a double math initiative. I came to the conclusion that to really push achievement, we needed to double the amount of instructional time for mathematics. So I proposed that to my principal, and we worked out a system whereby every student has two math classes a day. There are two separate courses being taught, but all students take both of those courses—the idea being that each teacher can slow down and focus on a smaller number of objectives and thereby really get much more in depth. And student retention goes up.

Let's go back, for a minute, to what influenced your choice of an inner-city school.

I'm still in the school in which I taught during Teach for America. I believe that education is the cornerstone of opportunity in this country, and there are too many children, particularly from low-income communities, who do not have access to an excellent education and are therefore being denied opportunity.

How do you spot a child in crisis when it isn't immediately or overtly discernible?

I think when you spend enough time with children, you develop a sense of what their normal operating equilibrium is. It's different for every child; what might be a signal for one is completely benign for somebody else.

Can you pinpoint an example?

I have a student I'm very close with who was in my first sixth-grade class in 1996. As a fresh teacher that year, I was really challenged by him. He was often, as they say in education, "off task." And I had great difficulty handling that. But I realized, after talking with him, that I wasn't challenging him enough. So I started working with him after school, to develop a rapport. We played chess, and he actually would routinely defeat me. By no means am I a great chess player, but he was 11 years old! I didn't teach him in seventh or eighth grade, but we continued to work after school, and I developed a good relationship with his mother as well. He ended up as valedictorian of the school, and I continued working with him throughout high school. He just finished his sophomore year at Morehouse College in Atlanta [Georgia]. He's an electrical engineering major, and he's thinking about doing a joint master's [degree] program with the Columbia University School of Engineering [in New York City]. □

About the Interviewer: *Michael Bandler writes for the State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs.*



President George W. Bush welcomes Jason Kamras, the 2005 National Teacher of the Year, to the Oval Office of the White House on April 20, 2005.

chance to take advantage of all the opportunities in the city. I wanted to create some way to bring these two worlds together. So I thought photography would be a good way to do that. We'd take the students on field trips so they got to see more of the city, and we also had the students—using digital photography—