

Remarks Honoring the 2009 National and State Teachers of the Year

April 28, 2009

Please, everybody, have a seat on this beautiful day. Welcome. This is our first official Rose Garden ceremony—a place where so many—yes, that's worth applause, sure, why not—*[laughter]*—this is place where so many Presidents have honored so many citizens who've made extraordinary contributions to the life of our Nation.

Before I get to the main event, I want to make sure that we acknowledge, first of all, somebody who I think will end up being written up as one of the greatest Secretaries of Education we've ever had, please give a round of applause to Arne Duncan; an outstanding educator in her own right, Dr. Jill Biden. And I want to give credit to Representative Jim Himes, who's here, and he represents the Fourth District of Connecticut, which includes Mr. Mullen's school district. So, Jim—*[applause]*.

You know, we've got a lot of teachers here today, and I'm a big fan of teachers because every single day in classrooms all across America, you are making a difference. You don't always get the recognition that you deserve. We don't always value the teaching profession like we should. But every once in a while, I think people start to understand, not just in their own lives but in the lives of the Nation, how important the teaching profession is and how we've got to do a better job of lifting it up. In a global economy where the greatest job qualification isn't what you can do but what you know, our teachers are the key to our Nation's success; to whether America will lead the world in the discoveries and the innovations and economic prosperity of this new century.

And that's why as President I'm committed to doing everything I can to support the work of teachers. That's why we're working to create better standards and assessments that teachers can use in their classroom. That's why we're promoting innovation in teaching and learning, making critical investments in early childhood education, and helping more Americans walk through the door of higher education.

And it's why we're taking groundbreaking steps to recruit, prepare, support, and reward outstanding teachers, to encourage our best and brightest young people to follow in the footsteps of folks just like you. This is especially critical right now, as so many teachers from the baby boom generation are preparing to retire—although, they all look pretty young back here—*[laughter]*—we're not worried about that. And recent evaluations of student performance show that while we're making progress, we still have a long way to go.

I know, personally, Michelle knows that what teachers do is not easy. My sister, Maya, is a teacher; Jill Biden, a teacher. We know how hard teachers work. And I know what all of you do by staying past that last bell, staying up late grading those papers, putting together lesson plans, spending your own money on books and supplies, and going beyond the call of duty. You do it because you know that's what will make a difference, because you believe that there's no such thing as a child that can't learn; that every child has their own gifts, and it's up to us to discover them, and it's up to us to see in our children what they can't yet see in themselves.

And for you, those teachers who are in attendance today and for so many of your colleagues across this country, teaching is not just about a paycheck, it's a passion and it's a calling.

Now, nobody, I think, exhibits that more than our honoree today, our Teacher of the Year, Tony Mullen. You know, Tony knew early on in life that he wanted to be a teacher. But his parents passed away when he was young, and he had to find work, first at a factory, then at the New York Police Department, where he rose from police officer all the way to captain.

But Tony never lost sight of his dream, attending college while he worked, becoming the first in his family to get a degree, and going on to get a master's degree in education.

And during his time on the force, Tony saw a lot of young people who'd gotten themselves in trouble, and he knew he wanted to give kids like that a second chance. So when he left the NYPD, Tony actively searched for a job description that included phrases like "working with students with severe behavioral and emotional problems," kids whom others might see as difficult or impossible or lost causes. Tony didn't see them as lost causes. As his superintendent put it, Tony "considers working with these students an honor and a privilege."

In his application for this award, Tony emphasized the importance of passion which, as he puts it, "ignites a flame too bright to be ignored by students." That is the passion Tony brings to his classroom every day, striving to engage every student, connecting with those no one else can reach, spending hours counseling students individually, listening compassionately, giving them his fullest attention.

And that's just the beginning. In his spare time, Tony mentors fellow teachers, he leads a program to provide academic support to students who've been expelled, and he's the volunteer commissioner for a youth baseball league that grew from 200 to 1,000 children under his leadership, giving so many young people the self-confidence and teamwork skills they need to succeed.

Tony doesn't ask for anything in return. As he put it, "A teacher can receive no greater reward than the knowledge that he or she helped recover a lost student."

Each of us carries with us in life the love and wisdom of people like Tony, the special few who were there for us when we needed it most: who pushed us when we were afraid; who pulled us back when we were headed in the wrong direction; who refused to give up on us, no matter how difficult we were. I know that's certainly true for me. I was telling Tony and his family in the office, Michelle and I don't come from a fancy background. The only reason that we're here is because at some point there were people like Tony who helped steer us in the right direction.

In recognizing Tony and all of you today, we're also recognizing countless others who make the lives of our young people a little bit better. And for that, we honor you, we thank you, today and every single day.

So Tony Mullen, God bless you and God bless the United States of America. Give Tony a big round of applause.

[At this point, Mr. Mullen made brief remarks.]

Well, thank you everybody. And with that, enjoy the day. I'm going to shake a few hands, and I'm sure the First Lady will as well.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:25 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden; and his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Tony Mullen, 2009 Teacher of the Year.

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