

Honoured teacher brings literature to life in classroom

BY HANNELORE VOLPE
Staff Writer

Whitchurch-Stouffville resident Peter Polley is the only Canadian to be awarded the Singer Prize for Excellence in Secondary School Teaching from Harvard University.

The other three teachers who received the honour are from the United States.

Mr. Polley received the award after one of his former English students, Pamela Chan, wrote an essay about him as the teacher who most influenced her life. Ms. Chan is graduating from Harvard this year.

Prize winners receive \$3,000 and their school receives \$2,500 for teacher development.

Mr. Polley said he was speechless when his principal, Clara Williams from York Mills Collegiate Institute in North York, announced he had won the award.

Mr. Polley is head of English and a curriculum leader at the school.

He is passionately dedicated to the students, Mrs. Williams said, and goes beyond what is expected of him.

He assists students in applying to university or college or for scholarships. Mr. Polley also acts as a mentor to some of the younger teachers at the school.

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"Kids don't forget the passionate teachers," Ms. Williams said.

English has to be brought to life, Mr. Polley believes, by relating works by authors such as Shakespeare and Margaret Laurence to the students' lives.

Students have to act out the works, read them out and sometimes dress up and do skits.

His classroom is like the Old Curiosity Shop in the Dickens novel, he says, filled with books, posters and memorabilia. There are costumes, which he isn't adverse to putting on himself to help the teaching process along.

When her husband teaches English, Pamela Polley noted, students aren't just getting English, they're getting history, film and philosophy as well.

All four Singer award winners referred to the students who nominated them as a standard to which other students should aspire.

While the C+ Ms. Chan received in Grade 10 from



Whitchurch-Stouffville's Peter Polley in his classroom at York Mills Collegiate in Toronto. He was honoured by Harvard University this spring.

Mr. Polley was the lowest she had in all her years in school, she is the only student in his 37 years of teaching to whom he gave a final mark of 100 per cent, just before she graduated from York Mills.

"I have never had a student like this," he said.

He uses many of his life experiences when he's teaching. Living on a rural property in northern Whitchurch-Stouffville, he has many stories of country life to tell his urban students.

They're fascinated to hear about the deer that come to feed at the Polleys' bird feeder, by the ducks on the pond and the Polleys visits to the Stouffville Country Market.

"They think I am coming down from the great north," he said, chuckling.

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It's important for a teacher to make lessons as active as possible, he said.

And he's not surprised when every year, even after 37 years in the classroom, at least one student will come up with an insight into English literature he hasn't thought of before.

As a teacher, "you are always learning," Mr. Polley said.

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