



Dr. Helene Tyler
Distinguished Lasallian-Educator
2015-2016

Since Helene Tyler arrived on the Manhattan campus in the fall of 2002, she has consistently demonstrated the virtues of our Lasallian heritage.

She thinks carefully about how she expresses herself, in order to convey exactly the right message. Details matter: math study sessions for her calculus and differential equations students, complete with bagel breakfasts; opinions expressed so as to mentor rather than criticize; a phone call to a candidate that was crafted to make a positive impression; a discussion of study skills with a struggling student that built confidence.

Inspired by a paper she had read recently, Helene decided to create a topics seminar for senior math majors, which included a pair of soccer players who had not yet had a research opportunity. Six students learned the mathematics of passing networks, and used the theory to analyze the Lady Jaspers' soccer tactics. The two soccer players presented findings at a national professional conference; a third student published a paper on the work.

Helene has served three times as a volunteer lecturer at the Royal University in Phnom Penh. Cambodia lacks Ph.D.s – scholars were killed years ago by the Khmer Rouge. Sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences, the Volunteer Lecturer Program brings faculty from other countries to teach graduate classes in mathematics. Imagine conditions in Cambodia – no big box stores, only small portable markets. A differential equations final exam question on modeling store inventory revealed confusion: “Please, Dr. Tyler. What is ‘inventory’?”

Kimsy Tor, who was last year's valedictorian, was a high school student in that same differential equations class. Helene's efforts to lobby for a scholarship brought Kimsy to Manhattan. As moderator for the mathematics honor society, Helene, with Kimsy providing student leadership, put Lasallian values into practice: the students in the honor society raised nearly \$1,000, enough to fund full-year scholarships for two students at the Royal University, and to purchase textbooks for a class of twenty.

The Hebrew word for the act of giving to the poor, which we call charity, is *tzedekah*. The word *tzedekah* is derived from a root meaning righteousness, justice, or fairness. *Tzedekah* is not a generous, magnanimous act; it is simply an act of justice, an act of righteousness. This teaching resonates with the teachings on social justice at the heart of our Lasallian heritage.

Helene and I shared an office for many years. I remember one conversation in which Helene explained that certain kinds of *tzedakah* are considered more meritorious than others. There is, in fact, a nuanced

scale of merit. It has eight levels, like the octave, and begins with the “do” of *Giving begrudgingly*, to the next note, “re:” *Giving less than you should, but giving it cheerfully*, and then, slowly climbing the scale, past *Giving before being asked*, past *Giving when neither the recipient nor the donor know each other*, and ending at *Enabling the recipient to be self-reliant*. This highest level of *tzedakah* is an aim all educators surely share.

By her example, and also by discussing her values and her own heritage, with students, with her colleagues – Helene encourages us to think more deeply about the choices we make ourselves. Thank you, Helene. You truly deserve the honor of being the Lasallian Educator of 2016.

Presented by Dr. Kathryn Weld, Mathematics Department