

Times Beacon Record

Setauket, NY
August 6, 2009
Circulation: 9,950 weekly
Online Circulation: 186,793 viewers/month



Math instructor snags national award after student cites his inspiration

By Jennifer Choi

After a scholarship-winning student cited him as her inspiration, Commack High School math teacher Derek Pope has been awarded the Coca-Cola 2009 Joseph B. Whitehead Educator of Distinction Award.



A teaching fellow of the Knowles Science Teaching Foundation, a New Jersey-based organization dedicated to strengthening the quality of high school science and math teachers, Pope, 28, credited the foundation as a source of inspiration.

"KSTF's focus on teaching through inquiry has challenged me to consistently lead students to discovery of concepts through careful questioning," Pope said in a written statement. "I want students to see the big picture of what they are learning and realize for themselves how the pieces connect to each other. The influence of KSTF goes far beyond any set of lessons; it has truly affected how I approach teaching."

Pope, who recently received tenure after completing his third year of teaching at the Commack school, was presented with the Educator of Distinction Award thanks to a nomination by his former student Alyssa Ridley, who was in his 11th-grade math class last year. Ridley, a 2009 graduate of Commack High School, was named one of three regional finalists from Long Island in the Coca-Cola Scholars Program and was awarded a \$10,000 scholarship. Upon receiving the scholarship, Ridley, 18, was asked to nominate an influential teacher to become her Educator of Distinction.

The recent graduate said she selected Pope for the award because he "really inspired me to want to learn."

"He was able to connect on a personal level," she said. "I believed in myself and what I was doing. He made me push myself harder than the other teachers have."



Ridley, who will study math and psychology at Tufts University starting this fall, said she will use the scholarship money to purchase a computer and

help pay for her college tuition. In addition to the Coca-Cola award, the Commack student has also received scholarships from the Elks National Foundation and the TD Bank American Dream Scholarship program.

Pope, a Kings Park resident, said he was surprised to receive the Educator of Distinction Award. Having begun his teaching career in Commack High School, Pope said he enjoys teaching at the secondary level because "you have a greater chance to be a real positive influence in [students'] lives."

"I really enjoy interacting with teenagers," he said, noting that he hopes to instill in his students "the confidence to be problem solvers."

Originally from Yonkers, Pope received his undergraduate degree in math from Seton Hall University in 2003, followed by a master of arts in teaching degree from Stony Brook University in 2005. The educator, who is teaching English in China this summer, said he has always been interested in math and had hopes of becoming a teacher since high school. In addition to teaching math, Pope said he enjoys reading, cooking, playing the piano and interacting with KSTF's teaching fellows and staff, who meet three times a year in various locations.

Nicole Gillespie, a KSTF senior program officer, said Pope "epitomizes what the KSTF Teaching Fellowship is all about."

"There is no better investment in the future of education in this country than supporting teachers like Derek," Gillespie said.