

Teacher Appreciation Week: My Favorite Science Teachers



By Alex Berezow, PhD — May 8, 2018



Don Reibold and Alex Berezow

Most people are stunned when I tell them that, in high school, I took organic chemistry, microbiology, genetics, and anatomy & physiology. But it's 100% true. Without a doubt, I received a world-class science education, despite growing up in a largely rural area that was not wealthy.

This goes to show that it isn't just money that makes for a good education. Bright, talented teachers who care about their students are, by far, the most important factor. Sure, money helps attract them in the first place, but money alone isn't the solution to America's educational woes.

As this is Teacher Appreciation Week, I thought it would be appropriate to identify the middle school and high school science teachers who played important and memorable roles in my life:

Ms. Mary Bess Williams. In 7th grade, I was introduced not only to the tricky concept of DNA replication, but I dissected a frog. (Did you know their hearts are only three-chambered, instead of four-chambered?! Weird.) I was also introduced to the art of science communication: When a student worried that she might be hurting the frog, Ms. Williams replied, "You can't hurt it. It's dead." I remember laughing. I've incorporated the blunt and brutal honesty of science into my communication style.

Ms. Molly Jo McDaniel. Every day before lunch in 8th grade, we received a dose of physics from Ms. McDaniel. I found physics intimidating, but Ms. McDaniel's wit and humor made the class fun.

Mr. Don Reibold. Mr. Reibold had the single greatest influence over my science education. It was he who taught me chemistry, organic chemistry, and microbiology... twice. In the first microbiology class, we replicated two of the most famous experiments in all of microbiology: The

Pasteur flask experiment (which disproved spontaneous generation) and Koch's postulates (which proved disease causation). In the second microbiology class, Mr. Reibold took me under his wing in an independent study, in which I tried to isolate bacteria-killing viruses from house flies. It is not an exaggeration to say that Mr. Reibold was the single biggest influence that put me on the path to getting a PhD in microbiology.

Mr. Steve Sikorski. As a freshman, I took biology with Mr. Sikorski, but his real impact on me came as a senior, when I had him for anatomy & physiology. I will never forget dissecting a fetal pig -- nor will I forget my lab partner, who told me to stand aside while she ripped its skin off. Much of what I know about the human body to this day was taught to me in Mr. Sikorski's class.

Ms. Lori Reed. Lori will always have a special place in my heart. Not only was she my genetics teacher, but she is the mother of one of my best childhood friends. The human genome was just about to be sequenced when I was a senior in high school, so it was an incredibly exciting time to be learning genetics. Lori has a natural gift for teaching rather complicated topics, and her class gave me a huge advantage when I took molecular biology in college.

I want to thank you all so much. None of you will truly understand the impact you had on my life and career trajectory. When I think fondly back on my early education, it was teachers like you that made it so very worthwhile.

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