

Steppin' Out turns

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Twenty-five years ago, a group of Baylor students decided that if they could gather some friends together to serve in Waco, they could make a difference. Since that initial gathering, Step-pin' Out has grown to involve more than 3,000 students each fall and spring — including some children of those original participants! — who “step out” into the surrounding community as volunteers, working at nearly 80 job sites around Waco.



Making math magical

To find out just why Dr. Edward Burger was named the recipient of the 2010 Robert Foster Cherry Award for Great Teaching, we asked a Baylor student, John McEntire, to sit in on one of Burger's classes. McEntire came back excited about how his classmates are benefitting from Burger's time at Baylor; here's his report.

Tucked away in a corner of Sid Richardson's three-story math department, “Foundations of Combinatorics and Algebra” is not a class an English major can stumble in to halfway through the semester and expect to follow along. Regardless, Dr. Edward Burger's reputation as one of the best undergraduate teachers in America overshadowed the intimidating class title, and by the end of the hour my head was swimming with theorems that could overwhelm even Isaac Newton.

Dr. Burger's passion for both the subject as well as the art of teaching was immediately apparent as he swept across the classroom, energetically putting each panel of the two wall-length chalkboards to use. Distilling complex mathematical ideas to succinct explanations and witty one-liners, he engaged each student by name, gaining momentum with the dialogue.

The combinatorics students sounded more like interested colleagues than untested

understudies, quick to admire and discuss Dr. Burger's involvement outside of the classroom and widely published influence in his field. The students were so excited to be learning from Dr. Burger, the after-class conversation continued well into the next class period, and for the first time since fourth grade, numbers trumped words in my scattered English-major mind.

As well-read and excited as the upperclassman math majors were, however, even they didn't match the unbridled enthusiasm I found in a second Burger class, “Ideas in Mathematics.”

Among the varied assortment of majors present in any core class, there was none of the typical grumbling expected by those who do not understand the immediate application to their narrow interests.

As the students began to fill the classroom after lunch, they struck up excited conversations with the professor as easily as they would

with one of their own. Spirits were high after the recent football victory over the University

of Texas, where Burger received his doctorate. He graciously indulged a few jibes at his alma mater and won over his class by admitting he had fully converted to Baylor's green and gold and to having sent his own victory e-mail to a colleague still teaching at UT.

Dr. Burger's lecture that day was over the nature of random chance and fractal theory. I hadn't even understood the Hollywood version of fractal theory Ian Malcolm discussed in Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*. I knew for sure we would all be lost. But after a short game of dice and graphs followed by a drawing lesson with repeating sequences of squares and triangles, we caught on to the basics relatively quickly and I grinned like a kid at the science fair, watching the shapes come together before me.

The underclassmen jumped at every opportunity to talk with Burger or about him. Each eagerly spoke of how his personable and practical teaching impacted their daily lives, causing them to see God, the natural world around them, or even the architecture of Pat Neff Hall in new and meaningful ways. Apart from even being a professor, at the end of the day, Burger was someone who inspired his students, regardless of their previous academic interest, and they in turn admired him. Leaving Sid Richardson that Tuesday afternoon, I realized I would drop my last class for another opportunity to sit in on one of his, more than partly due to mild jealousy of his upcoming pizza party.



For more on the Cherry Award — the largest national higher ed teaching honor — visit www.baylor.edu/cherry_awards.

