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Two U of W professors listed as best lecturers

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News Reporter
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They can put on quite a show in the classroom. Now, two Windsor professors will take their act to television.

Professors Ken Cramer and Finney Cherian are nominated for TVOntario's Big Ideas' "Best Lecturer." The student-nominated teachers have been chosen from 38 applicants for the 10 finalist competition.

Both professors say their success secrets are to keep students engaged using multimedia tools, and discussions coupled with intense preparation.

Cramer, who teaches psychology, says that for every hour he lectures at least three hours of preparation are required. Once a lecture is sewn together, the psychology professor says he refines it over and over, adding videos and new information to keep his presentations dynamic and relevant.

"I'll switch my lecture to include a demonstration, or a video clip, or have a discussion," said Cramer. "A straight lecture is just death. It is death for students, and it is death for me."

Cherian, a professor of education, says every lecture is an active example for students. "I never really know if I am going to hit my mark. The last thing I want to do is walk up unorganized...poor preparation leads to poor performance."

The Toronto-born education professor started teaching Grade 4 students in Toronto's Jane and Finch neighbourhood. The notoriously troubled area taught him lessons he passes on today.

"I walked into the classroom on my very first day of teaching and a kid tells me to 'F off' and tosses a chair at me," recalled Cherian. "The kids that go left when everybody goes right, instead of sending them to the principal's office, I try to figure out why they are doing that," he said.

Through employing this engaging approach to teaching, Cherian says he came to understand that troubled student, who later became an engineer and friend.

Later, Cherian taught in Providence, Rhode Island, where he and his wife, cancer treatment specialist Dr. Sindu Kanjeekal, decided on moving back to Canada and a universal health care system. Cherian then accepted his current position in Windsor, where the couple now raises their two young children.

Cramer's first taste of teaching, on the other hand, came at the University of Manitoba as a graduate student. The proud father of three remembers teaching his first introductory psychology class as an intimidating experience.

"There must have been 150 students," said Cramer. "I was just terrified. It was a nerve racking experience, but the key I think to solving that was just preparation."

"After an exam, I usually write an e-mail to the top students, and the very top student usually gets a book prize," said Cramer, who also uses the messages as a relationship builder, inviting students to come see him about future pursuits.

"It's good for them because when they get to the end of their four-year degree, they are going to need someone to write them a letter of recommendation, and this way they understand I know them by more than just a student number," Cramer added, explaining that many of those students still maintain contact with him once finished school.

Regarding the competition, the hobby oil painter says the lecture he chose for Big Ideas will be applicable for a wide ranging audience, adding that anybody who has not taken psychology before will be able to take something away from it.

Cherian's video also goes beyond an average lecture. One seemingly forgettable evening in 2006, Cherian finished clearing his desk like every Thursday, when he received a knock on his door.

He says a student frantically came in to his office saying, "I'm freaking out. I have this assignment due tomorrow." Nearly three hours later, Cherian and the young woman hammered out a solution.

The student said she also needed help developing a teaching philosophy. Impressed by her willingness to learn, Cherian suggested the young woman consider her past teachers' styles and write her own philosophy for review. In turn, Cherian began planning his next lecture around philosophies of teaching.

Arriving the next morning to a pile of work, Cherian found the student's teaching philosophy tucked under his office door. Putting the envelope aside, Cherian set about creating his lecture while the student set out for London.

After leaving the envelope for the weekend, Cherian was met by the faculty dean Monday morning, informing him that the girl, Hara Kim, died in a weekend car crash. Since that time, Cherian has not opened the letter, nor given the lecture he planned for that week.

To honour Kim's memory, Cherian performed the shelved lecture for his contest entry, and if he wins, vows that he will donate the \$10,000 grand prize to Kim's memorial scholarship fund.

The third annual edition of "Best Lecturer" will be voted using the American Idol style, with viewers being able to watch and vote for the professors during the show's "Windsor weekend" on March 22 and 23.

The one-hour program will have both professors' videos shown back-to-back with voting to follow. Voters will be entered for a chance to win a flat screen TV and home entertainment system.

Although the lectures are taped in advance, Cramer says he was "a little nervous" as crews captured his video for the show.

Even after 10 years of teaching at Windsor, the professor says nerves strike him before the opening day of classes. "I can't sleep, I can't eat, and I feel so sick, and it's just on the first day...But the students can appreciate [the feeling] because they are nervous too."

Though Cherian hasn't "tossed his cookies" since his first university lecture, he still feels "the butterflies." Like Cramer, however, it is the students who put him at ease.

"If they know you really care about them, and you've done your best, they are always forgiving," said Cherian.

TVO's Big Ideas program airs at 4 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays over five weeks beginning March 1. Viewers can cast their votes at www.tvo.org, or by telephone at 1-866-281-3536. The program will air lectures by Cherian and Cramer on March 22 and 23 with the winner being announced Apr. 1.