Inspirational Teacher Mike Sinclair
A Story by Adrienne Erickcek

I was nervously excited when I entered Mike Sinclair's physics classroom for the first time. Other students in the 11th grade at the Kalamazoo Area Math and Science Center shared both my anticipation and apprehension; we all knew of Mr. Sinclair's reputation as an excellent and demanding teacher. For me, the stakes were particularly high because I dreamed of becoming a theoretical astrophysicist. Prior to my first physics class, I had read several popular science books on astrophysics, and tales of spinning black holes, wormholes, and the Big Bang captivated me. Unfortunately, I was not nearly as excited about pulleys, circuits, and inclined planes. Not only was I scared that I would not enjoy my first physics class, I was terrified that I would discover that I was not smart enough to be a physicist.

Within a month, Mr. Sinclair had vanquished my first fear; he has a passion for physics, and during his lectures, pulley configurations became breathtaking windows into the inner workings of the Universe. When Mr. Sinclair finished a lecture, I often wanted to break out in applause. My insecurity about my ability to do physics was more persistent since physics deserves its reputation as one of the hardest subjects. After a few weeks, I was lost and enthusiasm alone was not enough to pass the quizzes. I ventured into Mr. Sinclair's office with a list of questions, and I will never forget the warm welcome I received. If he does not enjoy being pestered with questions from students, then he deserves an Oscar. I have seen Mr. Sinclair explain the same problem over and over again to a confused student without ever showing the slightest impatience. Sometimes, I was the student needing help, but often I was there to ask about astrophysics.

Mr. Sinclair shared my interest in astrophysics. To my utter delight, special relativity and black holes were often featured in his lectures. Before long, discussing astrophysics with Mr. Sinclair became part of my weekly routine. I would bring him questions based on the books I was reading even after I was no longer in his physics class. In January 1999, I saw a Scientific American issue with the headline "Revolution in Cosmology", which described an astounding new discovery: contrary to all expectations, the Universe's expansion is accelerating. I knew exactly who would share my excitement and I raced to Mr. Sinclair's office.

"Have you seen this?" I asked, and he nodded enthusiastically. "What does it mean?" I continued. "I don't know," he replied. "Let's talk about it." In that moment, Mr. Sinclair treated me like a fellow explorer of the cosmos. He listened to my ideas with excitement and respect. My newfound confidence in my ability to be an astrophysicist was cemented. I went on to earn a Ph.D. in physics, and now I am a theoretical cosmologist working at the Canadian Institute for Theoretical Astrophysics. And I am *still* trying to figure out why the Universe is accelerating.