

## **Inspirational Teacher Michael Mills** **A Story by Shannon Houtrouw**

Many excellent teachers double as coaches, compounding their influence beyond the classroom. Mike Mills was my math teacher and cross-country coach. Four decades later, I still feel his impact on my life and career. Mills' classes were amazing. However, it was his efforts to go the extra mile as my coach that changed my life.

I had never gone out for a sport until 11<sup>th</sup> grade cross-country. The first workout was a shock. Halfway into it I dropped out and went home. Mills called me, concerned that I did not return. Too chicken to tell him I'd quit after one practice; I assured him I wouldn't make that mistake again.

Practices were grueling. My will to continue was tested daily. However, a combination of events would steel my resolve and ingratiate me to Mills forever.

I needed running shoes. Being from a low-income family with six kids, new shoes were a luxury. Mills was ordering Nike Waffle Trainers discounted at \$35—a lot of money for me. I had some money saved from a paper route. Unfortunately, the cash was stolen from my defective locker before I could turn it in. I was devastated. I told Mills what happened, fearing I would *have* to quit. He told me he would figure something out.

What happened next set me on a course that changed me forever. When I walked into his office, Mills and a senior runner gave me a used pair of Nikes from the latter. They fit perfectly! I resolved in that moment that no matter how tough the workouts got, no matter how many injuries I sustained, I would finish the season.

Those two months were gut-wrenching. But that moment had been a turning point. Quitting was out of the question. There was no looking back. Little did I know that the decision to not quit a challenging endeavor would develop in me the will to succeed at everything I have pursued since. This passion to excel has become the driving force in my own teaching career.

I have borrowed from Mills other forms of motivation, including his quartet of incentive t-shirts given as awards (I earned a 500-Mile Club shirt). At season's end, Mills hosted a wonderful awards dinner. He honored each team member for their unique contributions. He challenged me to keep running and come back as a team leader. His expressions of belief in me motivated me to train all year and return on varsity. I earned every award t-shirt Mills offered. By graduation, I had compiled over 2000 miles and run a marathon.

Today I teach computer science and coach our computer teams. My students frequently win state and national awards. I was recently selected as a Michigan finalist for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. Mills' influence is evident whenever you walk into my classroom. Incentive computer science t-shirts hang from the ceiling. Awards and team photos line the hallway. Thank you, Mr. Mills, for your dedication and inspiration!