

Award Winning Antics

BY WENDY HAAF

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DEREK McLACHLIN



When delving into what distinguishes Derek McLachlin (PhD ’00) as a teacher, it’s easy to get distracted by – for want of a better word – his schtick. The popular professor, who teaches 2nd and 3rd year Biochemistry, is widely known for class antics that include dressing up for Halloween, singing songs like one he penned about DNA damage (I’ll Repair for You, sung to the Friends theme), and making asides about Nobel laureates.

Then there’s the way he opens every non-lab class – with an overhead of a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon that he invariably manages to link to the day’s lesson. And no doubt these things do help make the self-described introvert’s lectures – many delivered before an audience of 700 – stand out.

However, arguably it is not these tools, but the ends they help achieve, that make McLachlin exceptional. This year he was awarded both the University Students’ Council (USC) Award of Excellence in Teaching and the Schulich Educator Award.

For instance, McLachlin’s commentary on Nobel winners communicates his infectious passion for his discipline, and the cartoons get students’ mental gears turning before he even opens his mouth. For McLachlin, helping students think for themselves, and develop judgement, is at least as important as conveying information. “I want them to not just know the facts, but how they fit together.”

And while the willingness to don a Gandalf costume may not sound like a teaching tool, Sarah Harasym (Biochemistry 2012) says it helps a lot. “Between the humour and being personal, Dr. McLachlin makes it feel like he’s talking to you, not at you.”

Not only does this approachability engage students in the lecture hall, it is invaluable in McLachlin’s additional role of academic counselling. Just ask Hart Goldhar (Biochemistry 2012) who says, “I had no hesitancy asking him a question, even about more personal things, like the pros and cons of a career in research.”

McLachlin knows something about that subject, having abandoned a career in research to spend more time with his family. Before returning to Western to teach, McLachlin also served a two-year stint as a science writer, an experience that honed his ability to gauge how to explain a topic to a particular audience, and teach lab-report-writing skills.

And while he clearly enjoyed those earlier stages in his career, one gets a strong sense teaching is Derek McLachlin’s true vocation. “There’s a joy in helping people connect the dots,” he says. “And watching them progress and mature and grow beyond you in many ways is amazing.”