

ALUM PROFILE

Alum Named Teacher of the Year

Jamil Siddiqui inspires his students to love mathematics



By Megan Woolhouse

Just an hour before this year's Advanced Placement calculus exam, jittery East Bridgewater, Mass., high school students gathered in Jamil Siddiqui's classroom for breakfast.

Siddiqui had made them homemade French toast to help steady their nerves, then gave them a last-minute pep talk, reminding them of all the effort they had put into preparing for the test: the

Math teacher Jamil Siddiqui (ENG'93, Wheelock'94, GRS'98) gives his calculus students some encouragement before they take their AP exam.

homework, before- and after-school meetings, and marathon review sessions, all designed to unlock the intricacies of calculus.

"It's time to go perform," said Siddiqui (ENG'93, Wheelock'94, GRS'98). "There is no reason to be nervous or worried, because you are prepared; you have practiced for this day for months."

The same could be said for their teacher. Siddiqui has been teaching AP calculus for 24 years at East Bridgewater Junior/Senior High School. In that time, he has coached hundreds of students for one of the most challenging exams of their high

school career. Typically, 7 out of 10 of those students receive a score of three or higher on the exam. One in three will score a perfect five. Those results are well above national averages, demonstrating how Siddiqui has conquered a professional challenge: getting high school students to like, and sometimes share his love of, pure mathematics.

That passion for his subject and dedication to his students earned Siddiqui a singular honor last May: 2019 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year.

Beyond math, colleagues and students talk about Siddiqui's decades-long commitment to his school. He is the kind of teacher who hosts barbecues for students, attends their sports games, and routinely stays late as a club advisor or a confidant.

"He has this Yoda-like presence," says East Bridgewater principal Brian Duffey. "He's the guy kids and other adults go to, because of his

Helping students figure out their thought process is where Siddiqui shines. On a recent spring morning, he is moving animatedly about his classroom, searching for the correct superhero magnet to illustrate a pre-calculus concept. He throws out a question that advances his theme and becomes suddenly still, waiting for one of his students to venture an answer.

"He's always way ahead of the kids," says former student William Pellegrino, who became a math teacher in South Easton, Mass., because of Siddiqui. "He loves math so much, even if you don't fully get into it, it starts to rub off on you a little bit—you just can't resist. Obviously, I'm a math nerd, but I've seen it happen to others who aren't."

Siddiqui and his two brothers were raised by a single mother who worked as a nurse in remote Caribou, Maine, near the Canadian border. Distractions were

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unassuming approach. And there's always this unstated deal with him that he's going to be with you the whole ride through, right to the end."

The first step in teaching math to teenagers has little to do with numbers. They need to know it's OK to be wrong, Siddiqui says. That fear inhibits them from learning and asking the questions they need answered.

"I cannot care less about your final answer," he tells students. "I want to know your thought process."

few. Video games and cell phones were a rarity. He says the three frequently challenged one another with science and math problems.

He came to BU to study biomedical engineering, but it was a stint as a tutor in the University's math lab that proved most formative. Siddiqui was by far the most popular tutor in the lab, says Robert L. Devaney, a College of Arts & Sciences professor emeritus of mathematics and statistics, who later hired him to work in his computer lab. After



JAKE BELCHER

Siddiqui received the award from Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito at a ceremony in June.

graduating with an engineering degree, Siddiqui stayed on to earn a master's degree in math education. A few years later, he returned to BU to get a master's in pure mathematics.

"In my own career as a student," he says, "it was the ideas that I struggled with and repeatedly got wrong that became the topics that I understood the most."

Devaney, past president of the Mathematical Association of America, says he still sees Siddiqui at national math conferences, which few high school math teachers attend. And at a time when most states, including Massachusetts, are facing significant shortages of qualified math teachers, Siddiqui is offering his students a window into higher order mathematical thinking.

"He's teaching students AP calculus, but he's also showing them what's new and interesting and exciting

in math," Devaney says. "And that's what clearly makes him stand out. East Bridgewater is lucky to have him."

It would be easy to fill an auditorium with all the students that Siddiqui has helped score well on the AP calculus exam. (About 700 by his count.) And that's exactly what East Bridgewater school officials did in May during a surprise ceremony to announce that Siddiqui had been named Massachusetts Teacher of the Year, a first for the district.

Cheers and applause erupted when Siddiqui, who did not yet know about the award, appeared.

Siddiqui says he is honored to be named Massachusetts' top teacher. (The official ceremony took place June 21 at the State House.) After nearly two and a half decades in the classroom, he's a role model for colleagues at East Bridgewater, who often stop by to observe his teaching methods. He also has a side gig working for the College Board, training math teachers.

"I always say, you gotta love something, either your subject or your students," Siddiqui says. "The best teachers, I think, love both."