

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

JUDD A. AND MARJORIE WEINBERG COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Department of English

University Hall 215

1897 Sheridan Road

Evanston, IL 60208-2240

Telephone: (847) 491-7294

Fax: (847) 467-1545

E-mail: english-dept@nwu.edu

September 21, 1998

It is not usual to write letters in praise of a graduate student's teaching before that student has even become a TA. But I write this one in recognition of Kathryn Farley's extraordinary contributions, under very difficult circumstances, to Northwestern's "Summer in London" program in 1998. Halfway through the six-week term, she became the instructor of English C12, in which she had enrolled as a student, because the disastrous performance of her predecessor had created a situation in which we had to make a change or see the entire program collapse.

At the time, I was teaching one course, and Kathryn's predecessor was teaching two. He had also been Academic Director and, as an Englishman, our main source of intimate knowledge of British culture. I took over one of the courses but thought it unwise to take both. On such short notice, we could not find a qualified replacement for C12 anywhere in London. But since Kathryn is a graduate student in Performance Studies, with course work in theater as well, we decided to entrust the course to her, even though she had not yet served as a teaching assistant. The only alternative was simply to abandon the course.

Under the circumstances, mere competence would have been all we asked for, but we got far more than that. My visits to two of Kathryn's classes showed that she had a fine knack for generating useful discussion, asking focused but open questions that made students take positions and defend them articulately. She made use of the questionnaires that she had found valuable in her Northwestern theater courses, which gave students a chance to think in a structured way about the plays they were seeing.

Kathryn also handled the social awkwardness of her elevation from student to teacher with uncommon poise, keeping warm and informal relationships with her erstwhile peers outside the classroom but establishing her authority without the least trace of bluster or defensiveness. As one student remarked on the CTEC evaluation, "I was somewhat skeptical about Kathryn moving from student, peer, and friend to professor but her transition was flawless. She took the course and took off. . . ."

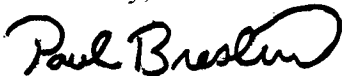
We looked together at a large sampling of papers to discuss grading policies, and I found Kathryn's judgment to be excellent. My only reservation was that in the effort to restore morale in a troubled class, she sometimes neglected to give frank negative criticism. Thus, when she came to the end, she was obliged to give Bs to students who might well have supposed, from the comments on their earlier work, that nothing more was being asked from them. But she took the time to sit down and write comments that explained to each student the reasoning behind her final assessments.

A look at the CTEC evaluations for C12 will confirm my sense that she did uncommonly well.

Apart from one negative response from a student who felt on principle that only a fully-credentialed faculty member should have been given the job, numerical ratings of the instruction were all at 5 or 6, and even with the one "2" in the mix, the statistical average came out to 5.38. The comments praised Kathryn's knowledge, ability to conduct discussion, and enthusiasm for the material. Most of all, they stressed that she had taught them, as one student put it, "how to think about theater, what questions to ask, and what to pay attention to." Another remarked that the course had led him or her to become "excited about types of theater I was previously unaware of."

In all of my dealings with Kathryn Farley, I found her to be responsible, mature, and quick on the uptake. I am very grateful that she happened to be among our students in London last summer, for it's doubtful we could have salvaged the program without her. With further mentoring and experience, she seems virtually certain to become an outstanding teacher. Indeed, on the evidence of last summer, she is already an outstanding teacher and likely to become even better.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Breslin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "P".

Paul Breslin

Academic Director, Summer in London Program