Kristen Foster remarks at the Pere Marquette Banquet, April 30, 2015.

I have spent a lifetime in school, and have been mentored by so many good teachers, a few not so great, and a couple who were truly exceptional. I am tremendously grateful for all of the people who have shaped my life.

-To my high school English teacher, Bruce Mitchell, who decided one day to act out a scene from Grendel on top of his desk; we watched in horror and fascination as he brought this epic existential tale to life re-creating the scene where Grendel's arm is ripped from his body. It was quite a scene.

-And to my undergraduate women's history professor, Anne Margolis, who demanded that my shy-est feminist self-confront my discomfort and get to the business of learning.

To my dissertation director Paul Boyer, who pushed, and prodded, and left me room to fail before I could succeed—my debt to him is great.

They inspire me all the time.

Thank you to Dave, whose own love of teaching inspires me to be bold.

-To my son John who teaches me every day how fast the world changes and how much the most important parts stay the same. I am in awe of your resilience and your kind heart.

The teachers to whom I owe my greatest debt, however, remain my parents, Jack and Gloria Foster. Mom has anchored us every day of our lives, and Dad was my North Star, always guiding with high expectations and love.

When I was a very young girl, I was not much of a reader; I wanted to be outside all the time, and my mother (an elementary school teacher) tried and tried to find something that would pique my interest in reading. One day she came home with a book on the heroes of the American Revolution. With chapters like "Son of Liberty," "A Time for Valor," and "A Woman of Courage," how could I resist? I loved the grand stories of liberty and equality. Admittedly, it's all more complicated than that—or it better be, since I have staked my academic career on the field—but, Mom, you got me!

In the classroom, I find myself increasingly challenged by our students, as I challenged my mother, to find that story, person, or book that hooks them. They are inundated by cool tools, razzmatazz, and quick fixes. The temptation is there to add bells and whistles to my lectures and classes, and once in awhile I do; but I continue to find that in the end, no video clip or music sample can replace the hard work of getting to know the students
themselves. My mother's tireless pursuit of finding something that would give me an appetite for learning reminds me to stay on my toes and persist in the classroom.

Along with my gentle mother, my father, a professor of English, a poet, and an Egyptologist, set an example for me of a life well-lived. He introduced me early to Ralph Waldo Emerson, and I have long looked to one of his essays to remind me why I walk the path I do, and why I choose every year, every semester, to demand that students ask "why"? "God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose," Emerson wrote. "Take which you please,—you can never have both." Repose is tempting, calling each of us to stop, and rest, and enjoy. But that search for meaning is so compelling.

I had grand youthful designs for a life of note, as I watched my father take the El into Chicago to teach English to a wide variety of university students every week of his remarkable life. He loved them all, and I marveled at his quiet commitment to learning—to everyone’s capacity to learn. He carved out solitary days in his study for his poetic translations, and as difficult as his teaching load was for over thirty years, I never heard him complain (well maybe just once or twice). I think he loved teaching. And I believe that more than anything, his teaching defined him—the best of him. I like to think that he passed along his love of both learning and teaching to me, and that in some small way, I have tried to mirror his tremendous commitment to the well-being and education of anyone who dares to open themselves fully to the process of learning.

Thank you all for sharing this with me tonight.