

May 12, 2009

To Whom It May Concern:

The past four years have been tremendously rewarding. It was always my dream to motivate others and to create within them a sense of worth and desire to learn. This was not a teenage epiphany or a spontaneous “*Sure, that sounds like a good idea!*” response to a college advisor, it was – and is – a lifelong passion that came to fruition when I was hired to teach in the Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake School District in the summer of 2005.

I was lucky to be born into a family that highly valued education and believed that any opportunity to grow intellectually and as a person should be sought after. I learned more in my first year teaching at Burnt Hills than in any class I had ever taken, and this time I was the teacher! From developing my own thorough understanding of the Java programming language to presenting it in a way that others could comprehend, the opportunity that I had always desired was finally here, with students that any school would be lucky to call their own. Inspired by the honesty of my own teachers, rather than feign omniscience, I welcomed the students’ own contributions and ideas. I was not afraid to admit I did not know every answer and often the students were teaching *me*.

I never echoed the phrase “going to work”; *going to school* was my positive and fun way of looking at each day. And as each day passed, I became better at shaping the students and they continued to improve and further my own knowledge as well. The computer science classes, in particular, had many of the same students, most of whom would take classes with me throughout all their years in the building. In addition to truly knowing my students, attending school functions, and contributing to the greater community through designing web-based programs and teaching Continuing Ed, I could not imagine feeling more at home anywhere.

For over 20 years, running has been a substantial part of my life. From weekly local races to trips abroad, mundane routes around the neighborhood to touching Mount Whitney in a beat up pair of Asics, running has always been a way for me to recharge and connect with others. Whether in the school building or standing on a starting line, I have always found strength in being part of a team and sharing a common goal.

Outside of teaching, I have spent the last several years building the Albany Running Exchange and more recently providing timing and logistical services for running events. Perhaps the best part is that a lot of what I do *outside* of the classroom is exactly what I am teaching *in* the classroom. As my involvement expanded in this arena, I was quick to bring it to the classroom, most importantly because it was completely relevant and inherently practical – I cannot imagine a better way to prepare students for the real world than to show it to them.

It is a tough reality to accept that there are only 24 hours in a day and an even harder truth to recognize that one can not do everything. In the spring of 2008, eager to continue educating the precociously ambitious students that walk in my classroom each year but equally excited about the prospect of helping others find health and happiness through fitness, I requested and received a part-time position for which I am ever grateful. I did not know what the future held but I knew that being able to motivate teenagers during the day, and in some cases, their own parents at night, would be incredibly gratifying – and it has been.

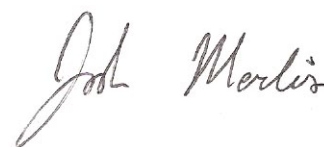
The past nine months have been an incredible journey that I have eagerly shared with my students. Software that I have developed is getting noticed by other groups and companies across the country, and some of these very programs have been partly built by my own students. I have openly shared with them criticism and critique for their work and my own – intent on removing the implied boundary that they are merely high school students and not yet ready to truly contribute outside of the walls of the high school. Through the internship program, students have joined me on the ride of interpreting RFPs, giving presentations, and taking pleasure in not being afraid to work hard and sometimes suffer setbacks.

The last few months have been beyond the scope of anything I could have ever imagined or anticipated. Outside of school, my passion for organizing events and my love for programming has led to increased opportunities to provide these services to a greater range and number of people. Programs that I have written are being used to time and orchestrate mass-participation events. Associated meetings and responsibilities are expanding beyond the weekend and into the normal work week.

It has been a difficult balance this year. No day is ever boring and rarely is a day ever like any other. The classroom has been a place of purity – I have taken solace and a small degree of nostalgic jealousy in what it is to be a student. At the same time, I've felt the rush of standing in the mix of thousands of people at an event utilizing something I envisioned one rainy day and brought to life. I have the memory of one moment eating dinner with some of the heads of the running industry and a red-eye flight later teaching for-loops and GUIs.

I never envisioned writing a letter like this, much less *thought* about writing one. I know not the trajectory of this path but I do know that happiness doesn't come in the form of what others say about you or what gets deposited in your bank account every two weeks. Personal satisfaction and a sense of worth come from doing what you believe in and providing a service to the community. It is my greatest hope that in making the decision to resign from teaching at Burnt Hills I am merely expanding the community in which I can operate to help others to find their own sense of worth and happiness. I will always remember my time, my students, and my friends in Burnt Hills and look forward to staying in touch as I continue on this path. Thank you for the opportunity to have hopefully inspired others to chase their own dreams – even the ones you think are beyond reach.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Josh Merlis". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the "Respectfully," text.

Josh Merlis