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U of A engineering prof wins national medal of distinction

By Katy Campbell, Edmonton Journal May 29, 2014 6:04 PM

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U of A professor Suzanne Kresta has won the 2014 Engineers Canada Medal for Distinction in Engineering Education, the highest award in Canada for an engineering educator.

Photograph by: Greg Southam , Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - For the third time in seven years, a University of Alberta professor has been awarded the 2014 Engineers Canada Medal for Distinction in Engineering Education — the highest award in Canada for an engineering educator.

Suzanne Kresta teaches chemical engineering at the University of Alberta and already has a long list of accolades under her belt including international research awards.

After listening to her messages, one in particular stood out. The president of the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta (APEGA), a friend of hers, informed her that she had won the national award.

“It’s really lovely when you find out from somebody that you have worked with and respect and is part of your professional community,” Kresta said.

Walking into a course with a 30-per-cent failure rate she thought, ‘Hey, that’s not OK with me,’ and worked to turn it around.

“What I’ve done with that particular course is go through it one step at a time and figure out where the students were getting stuck and change the way that we teach it,” she said. “It’s actually quite hard for us to figure out what is difficult when we’re teaching normal humans. We’re not normal humans,” Kresta said.

Reflective of her teaching, comments on Rate My Professors (a website which allows students to comment on their professor’s teaching quality) seem to echo one general impression: “Course was hard as hell. Prof was actually god’s gift to engineering. Bar none the best professor I have EVER dealt with,” read one.

Originally from Prince Edward Island, she moved to Edmonton 22 years ago and has been with the U of A ever since. She completed her schooling at the University of New Brunswick, spending a year in England, and finally four years at McMaster in Hamilton, completing her PhD in engineering. She also has a Master’s in the design of chemical plants.

When asked why she decided to pursue a career in teaching, she struggled to relay just one reason.

“I could give you about 18 different answers to that question,” Kresta said. “The thing that I love about teaching is the sparkle that happens when somebody goes ‘Oh, I get it. Oh I get it.’ That is a really good thing.”

As an undergraduate, Kresta said she pestered her department to let her teach. Both of her parents were “great teachers” and the inclination to do the same came naturally to her.

While she’s not winning awards, she works on a variety of side projects. One of these projects works to set up new professors for success in the classroom — a project that has been going on since 1996. Oh, and she also helped write a massive handbook.

“I got to 40 and I had finished my wish list except for one thing which was to write a book and so I think maybe 1,467 pages was a bit of overkill,” Kresta said.

When she first started out, she said there was a clear lack of women in her field — a trend that is quickly changing.

“I think it’s really great that we have a lot more young women in engineering now than when we did when I started and it’s just so lovely,” Kresta said. “I have friends in the ladies room now.”

“I think that if people could see how much is invested in teaching really well — they would be surprised and pleased by what we’re actually doing behind closed doors. We love the privilege of having young people in our classroom and we love how they turn out,” Kresta said.

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