

Dear Mr. Emch,

Before this year, I had never tried programming, never even seen what programming language looked like. I went into your class not knowing what to expect or how well I would do. Despite this, you taught me the skills I needed to be successful in an AP Computer Science class. Over the course of eight months, you taught me programming in a way that made me want to pursue it in college and beyond. However, you didn't just do this within the classroom and within the curriculum. More importantly, you found ways to expose us to computer science in the real world. Through coding competitions and visits to tech companies downtown, you made the extra effort to show us what this knowledge could do for us. The greatest thing you did, however, was give us the opportunity to go to MHACKS.

An event usually only attended by those in college or farther, and by application only, you found 50 slots for those in your classes to fill. One of those slots was for me, and it allowed me to get a glimpse into what my future may hold. And what excited me more than anything from that weekend were the closing ceremonies. I was biking over to the downtown auditorium from my house, having gotten home no more than 15 minutes earlier. My vision and focus were fuzzy due to getting no more than ten hours of sleep over the past three days. I was going because they were presenting the top ten hacks from the weekend, and I'm glad I did. I couldn't believe the things that these college students had created and, even more unbelievable, that they had done it in 36 hours. One group built a hologram projector. Another built a program that allowed you to play instruments by moving your hands in front of sensors. The most impressive was a fully-immersive gaming device. A virtual reality headset, motion sensors on your hands and legs, and an altered nerf gun made it feel as if you were in the game. All of these amazing programs and products, and they were being created by people with five years of my age.

In many ways, MHACKS was a frustrating experience. Our code never came close to working, we were completely deprived of sleep, and we felt nauseous from the insane amount of caffeine we ingested. But it also showed me the possibilities that lie ahead of me. To see the truly useful and innovative codes I could be writing in a few years made me excited to learn all I could. It solidified in my mind the fact that this was the field I wanted to pursue at Duke. Not just for the seemingly endless amounts of free food, clothing, and gadgets that come with such a well-financed field, but for the joy of writing code itself.

This was the real-world exposure that sitting in a classroom never could have brought, and that most teachers wouldn't even think of. You, however, have done just as much for me outside of the classroom as in it. Thanks to your efforts, I feel confident

in my decision of what to pursue in college. I'm excited by the prospect of learning. I'm excited by what the future may hold.

Dear Mr. Stern,

When I first met you, I was incredibly intimidated. In fact, that didn't go away until my first semester of PPI was nearly over. However, as I'm about to leave high school, I can easily say that you were one of the most important figures from my high school years. In the two years I've known you, you have been an exemplary role model, seeming to enlighten me every time we interacted.

Most specific examples of this occurred in PPI and thus can't be shared. However, there was one thing you were sure to tell me outside of group, so that it could be shared. That was the explanation of my nickname. At some point in my first semester of PPI, you gave me the nickname "Mountain". I thought that it was just another way to reference the fact that my name had to do with rocks, or perhaps just ironic, but you made it clear that it had a significant meaning. It symbolized the view you had of me, or at least the ideal you thought I should be achieving. First, it meant that I was strong and consistent in my beliefs, described in other words as a "moral compass". You believed that this was true not only in my morals, but in my work ethic, approach towards others, and general outlook on life. On another level, it expressed your belief that I should have a large presence, not hide in the background. This was something that I had trouble with early in high school, a habit that you consistently tried to break me of.

By putting your opinion of me into plain words, my own view of myself was strengthened. It was then that I started becoming more confident in my beliefs. You made it clear that my thoughts had merit and that I could give them voice. PPI gave me an environment to enhance my ability to stand behind and articulate my views. As this new self-confidence took root, I found my persona in PPI spreading to all parts of my life. The fear of speaking up was dissipating. I used to always put the opinions of others ahead of my own, but was no longer so willing to give in. I now find myself to be a much stronger person overall. I don't let others' opinions define who I am. I have created a definition for myself, one that closely models the view you had of me.

For the most part, I am ecstatic about leaving high school and starting my college life in Durham. However, you are one of the people I will truly be sad to leave behind. You have done so much to help me shape not only who I am now, but who I will be as I develop in college. You have given me the self-confidence to create a strong, consistent character of my own. You have also given me the tools needed to be successful in building and sustaining relationships. I believe the one way I can repay you is by using these skills to lead a successful and fulfilling life. Until then, I thank you for everything.

Sincerely,
Stone "Mountain" Mathers