



WRITERCOACH CONNECTION

Fall 2014

Vinay's Way New Richmond Councilman Inspires Hopes and Dreams

By Steven Cohen

He's a blind Indian American immigration attorney, a former software engineer with a doctorate in English literature, and the newest member of the Richmond City Council.

Vinay Pimple is not your average writer coach. No, he's above average.

Pimple leads with heart, not the degrees after his name (pronounced Vin-NAY Pim-PLAY). He moved to Richmond in 2010 after earning a J.D. from UC Berkeley four years earlier. Since then, he has volunteered with WriterCoach Connection, mentored for the Literacy for Every Adult Program (LEAP) and Richmond Police Activities League, donated blood for the American Red Cross and planted trees for Richmond Trees.



Pimple shows off his WCC T-shirt as Richmond recruitment coordinator June Pangelinan looks on.

“What I really appreciate about Richmond is that there are so many groups that I’ve found that work to make life better here,” he says. “That is really positive.”

On coaching days, Pimple’s wife, Joni Owen, escorts her partner about four blocks to Richmond High School, where he volunteers in two regular 10th-grade English classes in their Engineering Academy. Sessions start when students hook his arm for the short walk from class to coaching room.

“There’s an immediate connection that takes them out of their own world,” Pimple observes. It’s a familiar role for the 47 year old – who taught literature at Mithibhai College in Mumbai, then at Rutgers University, where he earned a Ph.D. in English literature – because his college students would often offer to take him to the bus stop or his next class.

“In those situations you are not the teacher and they are not the student,” he says. “They just see some person who is easy to talk to.”

When Pimple first signed on to coach two years ago, Richmond High School site coordinator Karen Larson recalls someone asking her whether she thought a blind person would make an effective coach. Her answer was affirmative, and today Larson is more confident than ever that her assessment was correct.

“I think it's important for students, teachers, other coaches and members of the community to recognize that coaches can be very diverse,” she observes. “In addition, you have to be a good listener to coach, and Vinay listens very carefully to what students have written and what they have to say about an assignment, and then he asks questions to help them think more deeply.”

If students repeat the same ideas by writing similar sentences, Pimple says that he will sometimes inquire how often an actor repeats the same line on their favorite TV show. “Then I’ll ask them, ‘How long is it going to take you until you turn your TV off?’ They kind of get that.”

‘If there’s something you can do, why not do it?’

Pimple says that he and his writer coach students are able to catch mistakes they wouldn’t initially recognize because he asks them to read their papers aloud and tell him where the paragraphs start

“If you’re blind and you read something, you don’t really notice where the paragraph changes or the sentence starts,” he says. “I used to get hammered for it all the time and part of it is that I don’t want to have my students hammered for it.”

Pimple’s students also complete their own session worksheets, which forces them to slow down enough to ensure that the focus is on what they discussed and was most helpful, according to Larson.

“They may not even be that interested in writing,” says Pimple, a former Verizon software engineer, “but if you know something about what they are interested in, like engineering, it’s an advantage. Then they say, ‘Wow this guy’s pretty cool. He can really be a resource for me.’ ”

And if they don’t seem interested in much of anything? Pimple says, “Just by being there, coaches are encouraging students to focus on their studies and doing well.”

It’s a lesson Pimple learned well growing up in India.

“My family was well-educated, but there were parts of my family from the village who were not well educated,” he told *India West* newspaper last month. “When they came to the city to learn, their performance improved dramatically because they now understood the importance of education,” adding: “When people don’t have a career path, there’s little incentive to get an education. Engaging with kids helps motivate them.”



Pimple before taking the oath of office in Richmond, March 3. (Photo by Faviola Leyva)

Pimple has engaged with WriterCoach Connection outside the classroom as well. He has helped recruit volunteers at Richmond events and made presentations at Neighborhood Council meetings.

“He steps up all the time for the organization,” says Richmond volunteer recruitment coordinator June Pangelinan, who has worked with Pimple for three years.

“If there’s something you can do, why not do it?” he asks rhetorically.

The comment encapsulates the Vinay Way: Helping others through community service may not sound like rocket science, or even computer science, but he says, “People who help other people become more invested in them.” And that has propelled Pimple to success both personally and professionally.

After he took the oath of office for the Richmond City Council seat in early March, Pimple told the audience:

“I am disabled and that means that I have a special place in my heart for people who have had to deal with a lot of difficulty... And to you I say that I’ll do everything I can to help you overcome those difficulties and to make your hopes and dreams real.”