

Woodie Flowers Award 2010
Rafael Colón

When Mr. Rafael Colón first started mentoring Team 694, it was accidental. Our rookie team abruptly needed a chaperone for the National Championship, and the robotics trip that was supposed to last three days has now lasted ten years. Now, his leadership defines how our team is run, and whether he's motivating us, helping us organize our time, or guiding the more than 100 members of our team, Rafael has left an indelible mark on generations of team members.

Rafael generously gives his time all year long. Our team is able to work in our school's lab until ten at night after school, on weekends, and throughout school vacations only because he is willing to be with us. Rafael is so completely dedicated that three years ago, when he sustained a life-threatening injury in our lab, he not only called us every day to see how things were going, but also made the robotics lab his first stop after being discharged from the hospital. Rafael's spirit that "robotics is your home away from home" has become the Stuypulse mantra.

Rafael's varied background makes him invaluable to the team, not only as a leader, but as a mentor. From his years of experience as a carpenter, electrician, and manager, he has become an authority on machining and lab safety. Every year, he starts us off with a safety lecture and test for each team member. Rafael shows us how to use everything from power tools to mills, and the safety procedures associated with each. As team alumnus Joe Blay puts it, "if he hadn't showed me that safety guard on the band saw, I'd be missing a finger now."

Rafael's influence on students goes beyond the team. By basing assignments in his robotics class on FIRST game challenges, Rafael brings the technology, teamwork, creative thinking, and good organization of a FIRST team into the classroom. Team members are encouraged to take these classes both to gain technical skills and to learn how to communicate their FIRST experiences with classmates. Notably, our team is fortunate receive a great deal of encouragement from Rafael in all areas, from ensuring that all students keep up with their schoolwork to making all team members in the lab stop work to eat a communal dinner. Rafael is always looking out for his kids.

As a teacher, Rafael knows how to guide members without doing their work for them. Rafael always says, "My goal is to let them try, and to let them learn from their mistakes." He starts off the day with a team-wide meeting where everyone, from president to newbie, figures out exactly what to do, how to do it, and what is needed to accomplish it. By holding us strictly to our deadlines, we are taught time management skills. More significantly, Rafael emphasizes teamwork above victory. When tempers flare in the lab, he reminds us that what we'll remember years from now are the people we worked with, not the matches we won. However, this mentality doesn't stop him from being the loudest one in the stands at competition, or letting eager newbies spray paint his beard bright red in a colorful display of team spirit.

Now, ten years after that first trip to Florida, Rafael may be a bit grayer, but as veteran team parent Nancy Yabroudi has said, "I've seen a lot of coaches where they want to win because it gives them prestige.... I have to say all day, and all night, every time, Rafael is in it for the kids."