

Teen idol

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 29, 1998](#) issue

Today I'll not debate whether baccalaureate services at public high schools violate the separation of church and state, and whether certain people ought or ought not speak or pray at such, and under which terms. Today I celebrate one such service, because it embodied a principle I've often noticed and wanted to address.

If you want to satisfy the hunger that teenagers, to the surprise of much of adult America, tell polltakers they have for role models, do not give them presidents, rock stars or even athletes. If you listen carefully, you will overhear them lauding and see them imitating certain volunteer youth counselors at church or--and I've sometimes tossed this off rather lightly--"the custodian who sweeps the halls and chats with them at high school."

Now friends have passed on to me a clip from the *Sun* (May 27), a west suburban Chicago paper, which reports: "Teens choose beloved janitor as their baccalaureate speaker."

It seems that students at Waubonsie Valley High School asked Gaylan Gunn to address them. From the picture in the *Sun* I deduce that Gunn is African-American; I could be wrong. From what I know of Waubonsie Valley's demographics, I presume that most of the students are not African-American; I could be wrong. But I do know that Jason Elster, himself a Jew who did not know about Gunn's faith, trusted the janitor to say and do the right thing, even after Gunn told Elster that he would "have to pray to God" before he could accept the invitation.

So Gunn went into his broom closet, where he cried and prayed, and then came out to say yes. Elster says, "We wanted him because he is a good man, hard working, personable and highly respected" by all students. That sounds biblical and could come from both Testaments.

Gunn is a real mensch, so he did not let his piety keep him from other important things. He had to delay work on his speech during the Chicago Bulls' playoff games. Sports are "a definite distraction" from his work for the Lord, but he got the work

done. He prepared to speak on “making right decisions.”

Gunn has a B.A. in career development, but after he graduated his “life was in shambles” and he was drifting, so he never worked in that field. He saw his best friend gunned down in the friend’s home before that friend’s two children. Gunn, now a husband and father, reacted and eventually made a Christian commitment. God asked him to do some errands, and he’s been doing them ever since.

He can admonish while he sets examples. He talks to students with problems, like smokers, class-cutters and cussers. “When kids do things deliberately, like kick holes in the walls or stuff paper in the toilets just to aggravate me”--there are devils in all plots, including at Waubonsie Valley--“that’s when I go to the Lord.” And he goes back to the students.

Why does he work as a janitor? He smiles: “God is not into high-echelon people,” and “only those who are truly humble can do his work.”

I don’t know how the baccalaureate service turned out--whether he violated church-and-state boundaries; whether he was eloquent or whether he stumbled. I do know that the Gaylan Gunns of the world do achieve in their own way what many high-echelon folk say they would like to have happen.