Almost all of us can think back to a teacher when we were younger who believed in us. Maybe it was in high school, perhaps even earlier. We may have excelled in a certain course which helped us find our passion and set the path for the rest of our lives. Maybe it was someone who profoundly influenced our way of thinking or gave us advice we never forgot.

But how many of us ever went back and said “thank you?” The Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars Program does just that. Each year, 25 outstanding seniors are nominated to be Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars and are asked to name a UM faculty and a K-12 teacher who made a difference in their lives. These students have excelled academically and professionally - the top students at the University. Though many years have passed, the students can all quickly name their most influential K-12 teachers.

In the late fall, all the teachers are all invited to campus at the Merrill program’s expense. In the past, we have brought in teachers from Indonesia, Croatia, Hawaii and Alaska. Following a workshop led by the Center for Teaching Excellence, the president hosts a luncheon to honor all 25 students, teachers and faculty members. For many students and teachers, this is the first time they see each other after a long time. It is gratifying to see the teachers reacquaint themselves with the poised and successful individuals they knew long ago.

The highlight of the day is when students understand and introduce their two mentors. Teachers often hear for the first time about the important role they played in the students’ lives. Students point out that just the right words from a teacher made all the difference in students’ education. Many followed the path set forth from a high school chemistry class or pursued the arts they were exposed to in high school. One memorable year, 11 of the 25 students selected kindergarten teachers.

In the following academic year, the teachers are honored with a scholarship in their name to a new student at the University from each of their own high schools. This is a wonderful way to continue to recognize the good work of K-12 teachers.

The program was developed by Philip Merrill in 2004. Mr. Merrill was an American diplomat, publisher, banker, and philanthropist, who was a strong supporter of the University of Maryland. The College of Journalism at the University also bears his name. Merrill passed away in 2006, but the program continues today with the generous support of the Merrill family.

The University is grateful to Philip Merrill for recognizing the need to honor and say “thank you” to great teachers.