Professor Michael Berch, counsel for the defense, paced nervously at the back of the court room. Berch’s long pale fingers shot out of his navy blue blazer, creasing the notes he would use for his final plea. A thin shock of frizzy red hair stood in a permanent explosion on top of his narrow white skull. His eyes, sunk in their sockets, gleamed and crackled with anticipation as he watched the jury file in and take their seats. Slightly hunched, rail thin, with a raspy cough and sharp violent features, Professor Berch, looked like a man possessed. And tonight he was.

His client, a troubled young Russian student, had committed murder; and the State was calling for blood. Only Berch’s plea for mercy stood between the frightened young man and the firing squad. Berch addressed the jury warmly, reminded them of their duty to do justice, and then launched into a passionate plea for the young man’s life. He paced before the jury in a trancelike cadence, his voice rising to a thunderous boom, then sweeping to a nearly inaudible whisper. His eyes flashed and his body quaked as he begged the jury to spare the life of the troubled young man. He reminded the jury that the young man had cared for the poor and given shelter to the outcasts in his neighborhood. The young man, he reminded them, had given his last penny to a friend that had fallen on hard times. The young man had, no doubt, committed a terrible crime; but drawing his blood, he argued, would be an even greater crime. Only they the jury, he reminded them, had the power to extend the hope of redemption; only they could stay the swift cold hand of the executioner.

By the time he had finished, Berch’s voice had grown thin. He was breathing heavily, and beads of sweat dotted his forehead. There was nothing more he could say or do. He had wrung himself out, and now he reluctantly laid the young man’s life into the hands of the jury.

Whether the young man lived or died we’ll never know, because the troubled young Russian student isn’t real; he is a character in Dostoyevsky’s novel, Crime and Punishment. The court room was actually a lecture hall on the second floor of Memorial Union. And the jury was, in fact, a group of students and faculty who had come to see Professor Berch deliver his fictional closing argument in a mock mitigation hearing. But the passion that Professor Berch infused into his performance was real. The sweat was real; the emotion was real; the urgency and intensity were real. I spoke to Professor Berch after the performance. He had a far-away look in his eye; his hands were still trembling. It would take him all night and a tumbler of Wild Turkey to come down from the adrenaline. If America’s death row inmates had been able to hear Professor Berch’s speech that night, they would have gotten down on their knees and raised their voices in thanksgiving that someone still believed in the hope of redemption, and that someone was still fighting for them.
I have known Professor Berch for three years. His performance that night was not anomalous. He sleeps, dreams, eats, and breathes for his students. His lust for learning is insatiable; and the joy and energy he brings to the classroom is boundless, and thankfully contagious. He carries a deep passion for the law, and an even deeper passion for teaching its principles to his students. He is the sort of law professor that one hopes for and imagines, but rarely meets. He’s the real McCoy, a character of legendary proportions. He’s loud, he’s brash, he’s vain at times, but he is pure gold. No one cares more for this school and these students than Professor Michael Berch. No one.

For these reasons, I urge you to award Professor Michael Berch with the honor that he deserves, the ASU Parents Association 2008 Professor of the Year Award.