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A photograph of Patrick Romans, a man with glasses and a blue polo shirt, pointing upwards with his right hand. He is wearing a blue polo shirt with yellow trim and a logo that says "LATHROP" with a bulldog head below it. The background is a blurred indoor setting, possibly a gymnasium or school hallway.

**'You get to
choose': Patrick
Romans '87, '02**

By Sam Bishop

Above: Patrick Romans teaches in his classroom at Lathrop High School in Fairbanks in September 2022. UAF photos by Eric Engman unless otherwise noted.

Three small University of Alaska diplomas — denoting one bachelor's degree and two master's — hang in frames on the wall of Patrick Romans' classroom at Lathrop High School.

Romans, who is in his 35th and final year teaching in the Fairbanks school district, placed them there to make a point about economics for his students.

Romans sat in the very same classroom, taking economics from his mentor, **Jim Ranney '82**, in 1983. Today, he's up front, sharing economic concepts with his students — sometimes by using personal, direct anecdotes.

“What I tell them is economics is the science of choice and the costs and benefits,” Romans said. “I say I'm as dumb as a stump. But to get here, I had to start here. Here's my diploma, here's my undergraduate, here's my graduate. I say, you know, anyone can do it. It just takes perseverance. So I'm not the brightest person, but I just don't give up.”

He believes his students can do the same. He'll teach 132 of them this semester.

“We've had doctors and lawyers and professional athletes come out of Lathrop. We've also had felons. You get to choose,” he said.



Top: Romans starts the day with an inspirational quote during a class in September 2022. He has used the technique during his entire 35-year teaching career to “hook” the students. “I try to inspire kids not to wait for someone like Superman to come save them,” he said. “I want the kids to realize they can be their own superheroes.” In the digital age, Romans has added memes to create levity in his demanding economics classes. “I want kids to know it is OK to have fun while learning and that learning can be a fun activity,” he said. Bottom: Romans teaches Advanced Placement Microeconomics in his classroom at Lathrop High School in September 2022.

Romans glanced at another wall in his office, where a clock counts the days to graduation and a poster features the word “apart.”

“‘Apart’ can be one or two words,” Romans said. “Do you want to be a part of the graduation? Or do you want to be apart from the graduation? You get to decide those things.”

That thought prompted Romans to recite another 30-second economics lesson he shares with students.

“One of the first lectures we have is the ‘-isms’ — sexism, elitism and racism. They’re horrible barriers,” he said. “But there’s a reason why you know about Tiger Woods or Michael Jackson or Beyoncé. They have overcome the barriers that were thrown at them. So if you’ve got the talent and got the skill, people will pay you for it.”

“You can become whatever you want,” he added. “The person that’s going to stop you in life is you.”

Seriously entertaining

Such words might seem straight out of a high school graduation speech, and Romans knows he can sound like a “Pollyanna.” (“The real magic is going to be in how you’re going to turn this into a story that doesn’t make people ralph up a lung,” he said of this profile.)

But Romans has been elected by students to deliver the teacher address at about 20 Lathrop and North Pole high school graduations in the 34 years he has taught.

Jeff Hebard '91, a recently retired physical education teacher and longtime friend, said students connect with Romans both personally and academically.

A cabinet next to Romans' desk always has snacks in it, and Hebard, who often had lunch with Romans in his classroom, saw students use it regularly.

“There are many kids, you could tell, that came by because that's what they would have for lunch that day,” Hebard said. “He's a very generous, generous guy. He buys that right out of his own pocket.”

And students know from classroom experience they'll enjoy a Romans talk.

“I think that was really true for students who weren't always as engaged in class or as excited to be there,” Hebard said. “Students who have been in his class, they recognize that they've been given an education. And they've been entertained, but not in a goofy way but in an

educational way. It makes him a very engaging graduation speaker.”

“Teachers are often paid in compliments, not currency”

Students also likely sense another thing about Romans.

“I still love what I do,” he said.

Romans has a few explanations for his continued enthusiasm. One appeared when he reached into a top desk drawer and pulled out a handful of letters written by former students. He keeps them to read occasionally, “because we have bad days,” he said.

“Teachers are often paid in compliments, not currency,” he quipped.

Another explanation for his enthusiasm is illustrated by a 70-inch digital screen hanging on the wall next to his diplomas.



Romans talks during an interview in his classroom at Lathrop High School in August 2022.

About a decade ago, Romans was among the first teachers in the district to jump into distance delivery of instruction. The enormous screen allowed him to teach economics to students in other classrooms in other high schools.

“When they were looking to start the technology, they would go around and look for people who would be interested in it,” Romans said of the school district administration. He signed up.

“There was a teacher a long time ago who said teachers have to reinvent themselves every 10 years otherwise they get stale and static, which I truly believe,” he said.

An athletic legacy

Born in Fairbanks, Romans grew up working in the family business — making cold-resistant batteries at a combined shop and home on the Old Richardson Highway near its intersection with South Cushman Street. He and his brothers — all champion wrestlers in high school — grew strong lifting the product.



Romans, kneeling at center in blue, poses with other members of the Lathrop High School wrestling team during his time on the squad. His older brother Ward, in yellow, stands directly behind him in the back row.

“It was probably a child labor law violation, but my dad paid us so well. I was 8 or 9 and he was paying me like an adult,” Romans said. “He expected a lot, too. I wasn’t a kid that got to go play or bike around every day of my life, but what he taught me was a fantastic work ethic and all things that I try to teach kids: Get the job done. Be accountable. Be on time.”

In addition to wrestling, Romans played football and hockey.

After starting his teaching career in 1988, Romans began coaching a variety of high school sports. He also served as a referee at Alaska Nanooks and Gold Kings hockey games.

Romans recalled when a friend asked him to fill in as a referee for a game against the team from Moose Jaw, Canada.

“When I got there to the arena they didn’t have sticks, they had bats,” he joked. The event was “basically a boxing match on ice that turned into a hockey game.”

Not all in the hockey community were verbally supportive, either. Romans, who had gained a few pounds after his peak fitness days, remembered one encounter.

“I was probably a good 220. But with pads on it kinda makes you look chunkier,” he said. “And I remember a comp coach didn’t like one of my calls and he said ‘Nice call, Pillsbury.’ I kind of laughed, you know, pretty original.”

Romans was married at the time. He and his former wife, who share two adult daughters, separated about 10 years ago but remain good friends. When their daughters were young, she

didn't like taking them to games because of the abuse heaped on him, he recalled.

“She heard names that didn't apply to me being yelled at me all the time,” Romans joked. “I said ‘Tammy, it doesn't bother me. They don't mean that.’”

Educational lessons

At UAF, professors Maria Reyes and Jerry McBeath sat on his graduate thesis committee and played a big part in developing his professional approach, Romans said.

But it was sometimes painful. He recalled one interaction with McBeath.

“When I went in to talk to Dr. McBeath, after I gave my paper, he says ‘I hope you like red.’ Because he just used red ink and just butchered it,” Romans said.

Later, he said, McBeath told him the revised draft was “very different.”

“And that was just his way of saying it improved in a way. He wasn’t someone that showered you with platitudes,” Romans said.

Romans earned a bachelor’s degree in history at UAF in 1987, then a master’s in instruction and curriculum in 2002. Later, he attended UA Anchorage and picked up a master’s in economics in 2004. While there, he attended a talk by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Vernon Smith, who spent some time at UAA as a professor.



Patrick Romans, in gown, stands with his father, Earl, at left, his sister Marcy Sutton and his oldest brother Wade after graduating from UAF in 1987.

Smith spoke about how chimpanzees behave in a way similar to humans, and how it can be viewed in economic terms.

“You give two or three chimpanzees one banana, and the chimpanzees would automatically split it,” Romans recalled Smith saying. “They wouldn’t hog it.”

Smith observed that chimpanzees — and humans — find it in their interest to share, likely because they'd want similar help. Romans discusses that idea in his economics classes.

“We talk about the economics of reciprocity through church or through similar organizations,” Romans said.

Having faith

Church and faith come up frequently in conversation with Romans about teaching.

“As a faithful person, it has always been a calling. You have to be passionate,” he said. “And I’m fortunate to work with great people who truly see it that way.”

Hebard confirmed that faith is a key motivator for his friend.

“From a personal standpoint, it absolutely drives his belief that he had a calling to be an educator,” Hebard said. “It’s more than a job.”

Romans doesn't evangelize in the classroom, though, Hebard said.

"He would never take advantage of that," Hebard said. "He holds himself to the absolute standards of professionalism."

Romans wrote his father's obituary for the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner in 2013. In it, he reflected on how his dad had fulfilled a biblical quote, 2 Timothy 4:7: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

"That's going to be in my graduation speech this year if I'm elected," Romans said. "Those are three major things that we want to teach kids, and it just happens to surround this biblical phrase. Can we do these three things? If so, things turn out pretty good."



Romans teaches Advanced Placement Microeconomics in his classroom at Lathrop High School in September 2022.





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