

# HOW TO CHANGE A LIFE

*Great Teachers Have a Gift:  
They Find the Best in You, and  
Then Nothing Is Ever the Same*

*By Katie McCabe*

*Photographs by Susie Fitzhugh*

All eyes follow the seventeen-year-old actress pacing across the Holton-Arms School stage and delivering her final lines. "My oldest son committed suicide. Oh, he went to a great deal of trouble to make sure it wasn't directed at *me*. But what I can't understand, what I can't get over, is how I failed. I failed to impart to him my delight in just being *alive*."

The line reverberates for a few seconds before silence gives way to applause. Then silence descends again and, one by one, other performers challenge their peers and parents with other true-life dramas from Studs Terkel's *American Dreams*, *Lost and Found*. For 90 minutes, these teenage actors evoke ugly adult realities like divorce, alcoholism, and prejudice so convincingly that they seem not to be acting at all, but spilling secrets from their own lives.

While the audience's attention is fixed on stage, there is another drama unfolding—between the student-actors and a woman sitting cross-legged in the front row. She is their acting-technique teacher. They shoot their strongest lines at her, and in response she leans forward, nodding, frowning her brow, mirroring every emotion the characters express as intensely as if she were hearing the lines for the first time.

In reality, she has heard them several dozen times, through four weeks of acting-technique classes and late-night rehearsals, where teacher and students hammered out, polished, and occasionally fought about the characters now coming alive.

The rest of the audience has no way of knowing about that process—and instructor and pupils would not want them to. After all, great performances are supposed to look easy. As the audience stands to applaud the last monologue, the acting-technique teacher sits back and lets her stars shine.

It is a moment that captures the essence of great directing—and great teaching, every great teacher being at bottom a great director. To see the star potential in each student; to push him or her to center stage; then to challenge, prod, criticize, and cajole him into doing things he never thought he could: That is great teaching.

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Writer Katie McCabe taught English for thirteen years in area public and private schools, most recently at the Holton-Arms School in Bethesda.



**JUDY WHITE, HOLTON-ARMS SCHOOL, BETHESDA**  
*"Let the Imagination Do Its Work"*

Sprawled across the floor, exhausted, Judy White's students can tell you, now that the show is over, how it all began, and what Judy White had to do with their character-sculpting.

"She had *everything* to do with it," says Shelly Brown, who conjured up an American Dream-turned-nightmare in her monologue of an Indian woman. "We could always learn the lines and say them, but there wouldn't be any color if it weren't for Mrs. White." Somehow, the students say, White leads them to conclusions about their characters without telling them what to do.

The first part of the "somehow" is undramatic: writing out their "acting intentions" for every line of their monologues. That sounds like hard work, and it was, says Landon senior

Lex Sant, who commuted to Holton-Arms every day to take White's course. "At the beginning of the year," he remembers, "I wanted to fire-bomb her house, the course was so hard!"

But after the initial shock, the work seemed more like play, given White's talent for camouflaging her demands in a stream of creativity. A week before the performance, for example, White had her actors in a circle, firing the strongest lines from their monologues at each other. As they sharpened their characters through line-exchanges about love, death, parenthood, and God, the process of discovery was all over the classroom. And that is the way White wants it, all the time.

"The most fun for a kid," she says, "is to discover on his or her own. Otherwise, the teacher gets the fun. Learning is a human, wonderful thing. To take away the organic part of learning and substitute a preprocessed, plastic-wrapped version is wrong, I think." And so White looks for ways to "stimulate the imagination and let it do its work." Once she has released the students' creativity, she looks on, encouraging, criticizing, praising, always pushing her students—sometimes harder than they'd like.

The students stretch, opening themselves to criticism and risking failure. That is, they insist, no more than their teacher does for them. "She shares with us," Leigh-Anne Ingram says simply. "She'll tell us what she's doing in her own acting classes. We get a part of her, so she gets a part of us back."

And that, finally, is the heart of it. Judy White, like all great teachers, teaches not only subject matter, but students; not only students, but herself. She is, in two important ways, teaching Judy White: first, by passing on the legacy of her values; second, by becoming a student as well.

"She has a life beyond school, and she brings that into class with her," says Michelle Hicks of White's classes at the Studio Theater. "She's a student herself, so she's learning right along with us."

A teacher must feed herself, White believes, if she is to continue to feed her students. She compares her professional acting classes to a subterranean spring: "I continually touch bottom and come to the surface again. And the kids somehow get it from me—there's something about the fact that I'm experiencing the learning process too."

Comparing teaching with other fields in which she has been involved—professional acting, writing, editing—White finds teaching "so much more affirming." The students, she says, "are continually refreshing to me. There's something about their vulnerabilities, their sensitivities. There's something so appealing about the private part of them that comes out in the creative work we do. You want to evoke that little creative core, to contact that little spark."

That sounds like something film director Francis Ford Coppola said in a recent *Washington Post* interview. "If I were to teach young people," he said, "I would find in each student his creative potential. Creativity is, after all, what

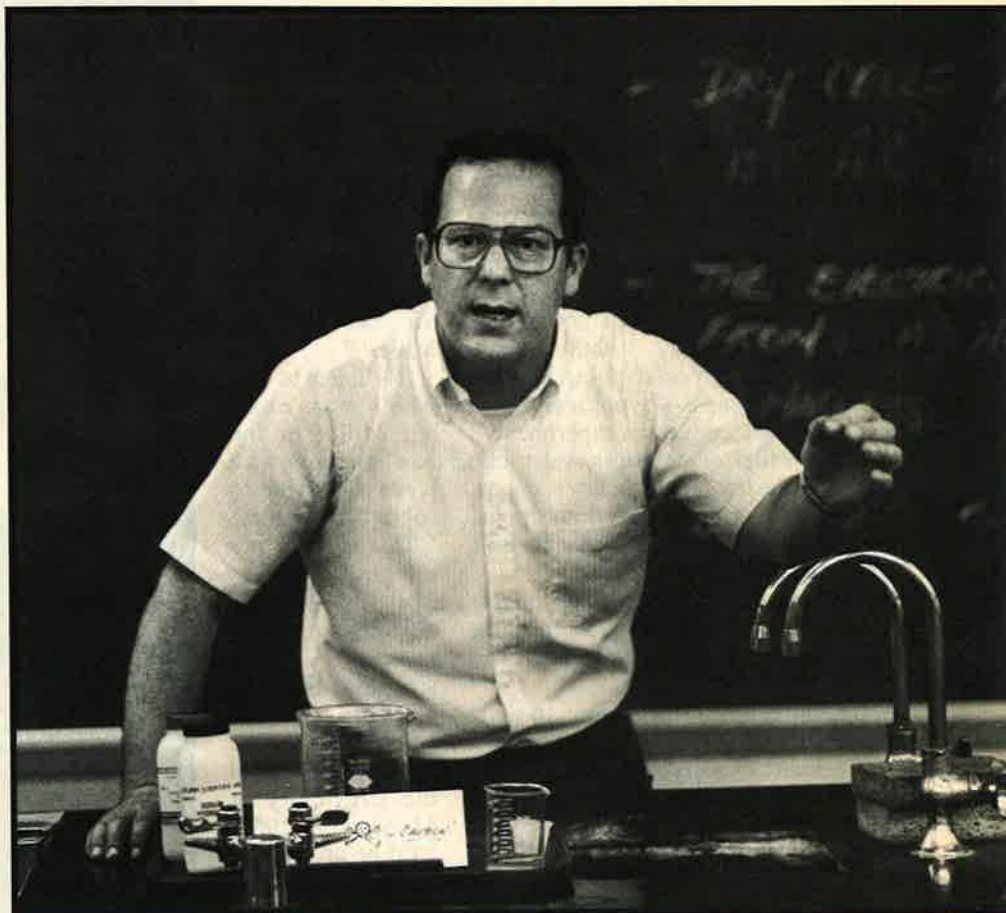
makes us like God. It's a kind of optimism. . . ."

Optimism. Look inside classrooms where master teachers are at work, and you'll find it—this belief in potential, this insistence that students can—must—make themselves better.

Whether the subject is Studs Terkel, Shakespeare, or Sumerian texts; whether the teaching style is gruff or exuberant, gentle or relentless, the result is the same: Students stretch themselves, and they walk away feeling like winners.

In 50-minute bursts of creativity called "class periods," the teacher triggers reverberations that last through lifetimes. "It's like a message in a bottle," says Judy White. "You never know whom you touch, or how."

Here are more scenes from some of the area's great classrooms, where Washington's teachers go about the day-to-day business of life-changing.



### **GARY MILLER, EISENHOWER MIDDLE SCHOOL, LAUREL**

*"They Should Put Their Hands on Things"*

The spine-chilling howls of a wolf pierce the walls of Eisenhower Middle School's science wing. But it doesn't take a naturalist's ear to discern the noise of another species on the Halloween tape: Those high-volume yelps are unmistakably human—eighth-grade human, to be exact.

It is a subspecies that middle-school teacher Gary Miller has studied at close range for twenty years. He understands their penchant for flashy special effects, and he delights in their curiosity. For the moment, he plays on their baser instincts with flashing strobe lights and a sheet-draped monolith glowing eerily in the corner.

But as the strobe lights go down and the house lights go up, Halloween hoopla turns into intense concentration as all eyes

focus on the "Mystery Apparatus" soon to be unveiled.

"Come on, Mr. Miller, lift the sheet!"

Gary Miller's grin belies the professorial look of his black-rimmed glasses and argyle sweater. He tugs at the sheet and teases the students: "Hey, I forgot to ask how your Thanksgiving was. Everybody have fun?"

"Lift the sheet!"

When Miller yanks the sheet away to reveal a perplexing mass of tubing connecting two jugs, no one knows what in the world it is.

No one except Gary Miller, who spent five hours of his Sunday afternoon disguising the siphon action inside the jugs by painting them black, and confusing the paths of water and air by interlacing yards of rubber tubing connecting the two jugs.

Enjoying the students' perplexity, Miller outlines Mission Impossible: to figure out how the Mystery Apparatus works, and then to duplicate its action in test tubes at their own lab stations, by Friday, with color drawings to show the movement of water and air, please.

"I want you to commit yourselves ahead of time and say, 'I think I know how this works.' You're going to make an educated guess—hypothesis—and then test it by means of an experiment," explains Miller as he pours water into the jug on the left. Within a few seconds, water begins dripping back into the jug from a funnel positioned just above it. It's still a mystery to the students.

Their eyes on the tubing, their fingers tracing twists and turns in the air, the students fire questions at Miller, who refuses to answer.

"Is there water in the jug to start with?"

"No hints," insists Miller.

"Air bubbles! Why does it make air bubbles?"

"Is air pushing the water?"

"No, water's pushing the water!"

Miller loves it. "This lab's worth its weight in gold," he tells me later, "because they don't have a 'right answer' ahead of time—and they want to know. It's probably the closest thing to pure science they'll ever get. It's so frustrating for them that some of them want to quit. But I don't let them."

There are no quitters among the three dozen kids who charge into the lab the next day, to test their hypotheses with test tubes and rubber tubing. But by the time they're five minutes into their testing, and sneaker-deep in water, they've figured out that there's a lot more to duplicating the Mystery Apparatus than just filling the containers. "Our water won't transfer. There's something different about his."

And it's back to the Mystery Apparatus, eyes on the tubes, fingers in the air.

"I wish we could bust those jugs open!"

"Yeah, or take the paint off."

"I asked my dad how it works. He said it was like the stills they use to make whiskey."

"Hey, Mr. Miller, is there whiskey in there?"

Miller goes from group to group, reminding the students to sketch out each trial. He stops to listen to an exchange between two boys who haven't asked for his attention. "It's gotta be air pressure that's moving the water," says one.

"Maybe it's gravity—one of those jugs is higher than the other," his partner offers. "Maybe it's both."

Suddenly, from the other side of the room: "It's working—there it goes again! Look at the air bubble! Mr. Miller!"

It's hard to tell who's more excited, Miller or the two students who were the first to solve the mystery. "This is what it's all about," says Miller. Miller has always taught science this way, since his first job at Nicholas Orem Junior High after he graduated from the University of Maryland in 1967. "I'd be up there at 3 AM," he laughs, "playing with the equipment, trying to come up with ideas and demonstrations, doing it for myself, because it wasn't taught in college."

Miller's class is a powerful ad for "hands-on science," and he is passionate about it. "To have kids in science class, and not do experiments, is a crime, I think. They should put their hands on things—that's the way to learn. I want them to think—if they can think through the steps, they'll really understand the concept."

Even hands-on science at its best has its frustrations. "These kids need constant, instantaneous reinforcement," says Miller. "For some of them, there's no carry-over from one day to the next.

It really keeps you pumping."

In fact, he admits that "there are times when I'd rather paint a house than teach. When I paint, I can see the end results. In teaching, you never know."

But most of the time Miller is having too much fun cramming two hours' worth of science into 42-minute periods to worry about the long-term. And his kids are having so much fun they don't realize how much they're learning.

"When you see kids get turned on like this," says Miller, surveying the wet floor and excited kids, "you get an adrenaline rush that lasts a long time."



### FAYE DIXON, EASTERN HIGH SCHOOL, NORTHEAST DC

*"These Are the Kids We Have to Wake Up"*

It's Friday, and it's raining. Thirty-two minutes into first period at Eastern High in a second-floor classroom just above the main entrance, a history teacher reads from a textbook. Not one of her 24 students is looking at her. They're all watching the clock.

The scene could be one of any playing itself out on any Friday morning inside any ordinary classroom. But this is no ordinary classroom, Faye Dixon is no

ordinary teacher, and if her students are counting the minutes, it is not because they are waiting for the bell to ring.

“In one hour in South Africa,” Dixon reads, “six black families have been thrown out of their homes—what time is it now?”

Twenty-four pairs of eyes turn toward the clock above the door. The students report: “9:47.”

“So, since our class started, at least three black families have been thrown out of their homes—”

An ambulance screeches down East Capitol Street. Dixon pauses. The siren fades; she reads on.

“In one hour, 60 blacks have been arrested under the pass laws—since our class started, how many?”

“Thirty.”

“And 30 black children have died of the effects of malnutrition, while profits of about \$35,000 have been made in South African mines—since our class started, just 32 minutes ago.”

No one is looking at the clock now. “Remember,” she says, “I want you to be *uncomfortable* when you think of what is happening while we sit here.” The 24 sophomores sitting before her are quiet; they are thoughtful. But uncomfortable? Not yet.

There is too much reality right under their noses to keep Faye Dixon’s tenth-graders from being uncomfortable about something 2,000 miles away—a reality that Dixon, as a former school social worker, knows too well.

“So many of these kids are just walking through life in a haze,” says Dixon, who battles passivity seven hours a day. “The only thing they understand is the label of jeans that they wear, and, if they’re into the drug culture, that’s the only thing that puts some spark into their lives. Nothing else matters.”

But Dixon is determined to make something else matter. Armed with M&Ms and masking tape, she sets out to make every person in her world-cultures class as uncomfortable as she can.

Jammed inside the masking-tape borders of an imaginary South African homeland that Dixon has marked off, the twenty students representing the black majority are beginning to get on each other’s nerves. Elbowing, pushing, and yanking their toes back inside the tape, they clutch their “passbooks” and listen to Dixon lay out the rules of a game they know they can’t win.

She holds up eight packs of M&M candy—their wages. “The object of the game,” she tells the group crowded under the “bantustan” sign, “is to earn two M&Ms apiece, by doing the jobs these folks assign you.” Dixon hands two packs of candy to each of the four smiling kids in the huge space on the

other side of the masking tape—those who represent the white minority in South Africa. The first bag, she says, they may eat; the second they will dole out to their twenty “employees” as wages.

Tearing open their candy bags, the “employers” hand out menial jobs, relishing their power as much as their M&Ms.

“Straighten the desks.” Some M&Ms change hands.

“Dust the baseboards.” Five minutes later, a few more M&Ms cross over the line.

One of the “employers” is counting the windows. There are twenty, all open. “Okay, you all, go close those windows.”

By this time, the kids in the crowded homeland are glad to stretch their arms and legs for a moment. But the employers are beginning to feel their power.

“Now go back and open them all.”

“No way! We just finished closing them. Mrs. Dixon, do we have to?”

Dixon is standing across the room, her arms folded. “Looks that way,” she says, “if you want those wages.”

Shooting dirty looks at the four classmates who are polishing off their M&Ms, the twenty noisily shove the windows open, then return to the twenty squares of linoleum between the file cabinet and the wall. They’re watching the clock, counting the minutes. *Now* they’re uncomfortable.

In less than a week, Faye Dixon has managed to turn apathy to attentiveness to anger. The anger, she hopes, will move at least some of her students to action.

All this, from a woman who never intended to teach, who began teaching seventeen years ago because “there were no other jobs” when she and her husband moved to Washington, and who was at first, by her own admission, “an awful teacher.” For two years, she recalls, “I lectured; I gave notes. The students were bored; I was frustrated.”

But once she broke out of the tradition-

al mold, Dixon says, “I began to love teaching.” Her reputation as an energetic and innovative junior-high social-studies teacher caught the attention of Eastern High’s principal, Ralph Neal. Two years ago, Neal hand-picked Dixon—then at Fletcher Johnson Junior High—to chair Eastern’s social-studies department and to launch a world-cultures course.

Dixon laughs now at the youthful idealism she wore on her sleeve as a social worker fresh out of college. “I wanted to go out and save the world. But our society is made up of public-school products. These are the kids we have to wake up, because they are going to be the ones who make a difference. When I see kids get excited, when I see them *understand* that this course is relevant, I realize that I am making a difference, and that is very exciting.”



**ROGER BOWEN, ST. ALBANS SCHOOL, NORTHWEST DC**

*“It’s the Unwritten Curriculum They Remember”*

Barefoot and puzzled, a boy named Jason looks down at his teacher, Roger Bowen, who is kneeling before him on the floor. Jason looks from his teacher to

his St. Albans classmates, who are silently wondering what their teacher is doing.

Five minutes into the period, Bowen has yet to say a word, but the subject of today's sacred-scriptures class is hard to miss. The subject is feet. Bowen wrinkles his nose as he peels off Jason's sweat socks and begins to pour water over the boy's feet into a plastic bowl.

The ritual completed, Bowen reaches for the Nikes next to his Bible on the desk, pushes them back on the well-scrubbed feet, and stands, motioning Jason to his seat and picking up the Bible.

The boys relax, relieved to see their teacher back on his feet, smiling, and ready to talk to them. It would have been so much less confusing had Bowen begun with the day's Gospel reading, which describes the Holy Thursday ritual he has just re-enacted: the scene of Christ washing the feet of His disciples.

It would also have been a lot less embarrassing. After all, sitting and listening to a teacher read is a fairly painless experience; watching him on his knees washing the feet of a student is harder to take. It's also hard to forget.

"How did you all feel while I was doing that?" Bowen wants to know. "Weird."

"Uncomfortable."

They are clearly accustomed to telling Bowen just what they think.

"Why uncomfortable?"

"Because," explains the boy whose feet Bowen has just washed, "teachers don't usually do things like that."

The image of Bowen on his knees lingers, though he quickly moves the discussion away from foot-washing at St. Albans, circa 1987, to Judea, circa 25 AD. "What kind of sewer systems were there in 25 AD?" he asks, searching for a way to impress the Nike-clad crowd with the indignity of foot-washing at the time of Christ.

"No, forget 25 AD for a minute," says Bowen, evoking a more immediate image of dirty feet—his own, on a South Pacific island called Tonga. "When I was in the Peace Corps," he tells the class, "I went without shoes for two years. The calluses on my feet were so thick, I could walk barefoot on coral reefs. At night, the Polynesian rats would nibble on the calluses—"

He is interrupted by groans. The boys love Bowen's Peace Corps stories—they're so exotic, so disgusting. To fifteen-year-old boys, the combination is irresistible.

Bowen talks Peace Corps a lot, he says, in part because it gives his St. Albans students—"on their own kind of island"—a window into worlds they can hardly imagine.

As his image of filthy feet sinks in, the students' hands go up, one by one. "I

guess if you show reverence to the lowest part of somebody, the part that comes in contact with the dirt and grime, you're showing even more respect for the rest of him," observes one of the boys.

But it is not the image of Bowen's feet that teaches the final lesson. "There's something else, Mr. Bowen," says a boy in the back. "When you washed

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Jason's feet, you were kneeling in front of him."

"Yeah, it was a complete role reversal," says another student.

"What does that show?" Bowen asks.

"Total humility."

"Vulnerability."

Bowen seizes on that. "You're baring your neck, aren't you? That's the position for the sword to come down."

"So it shows trust, too," someone says slowly, "both ways."

It was trust that transformed awkwardness into openness in the first ten minutes of Bowen's class; it is trust that lies at the heart of his ministry, and of his teaching. "A school," he believes, "is what happens in that little world of twenty. That's where the trust is built up, not standing in front of hundreds of people and preaching."

With teenagers, trust-building takes time. "A kid whose main enterprise is freedom and exploring is not going to accept religion easily," says Bowen. "To express uncertainty about who I am means weakness, and in the Washington power game of infallible masks, that doesn't happen often."

Lessons in humility and vulnerability—"the Truth I want you to try to discover in the Gospels," Bowen says at the end of class—are not the primary lessons of life for most St. Albans students. "A lot of what we're about is breeding excellence," says headmaster Mark Mullin. "The boys have so many messages about what they're valued for. Roger is a voice crying the opposite: that human beings are valued, ultimately, for other things than high SAT scores or admissions to Ivy League colleges."

At a school whose business is pushing students to the top of the mountain, Roger Bowen's business, as chaplain, is not so much to teach as to unteach—to per-

suaire those on the fast track to admit doubts, to trade in right answers for lessons in the not-so-obvious.

The deepest lessons are learned, Bowen believes, not in the classroom, but far away from the St. Albans campus: in Haiti, or Appalachia, or in the soup kitchens or halfway houses of inner-city DC. It is to these places that Bowen's students go—tentatively, fearfully, awkwardly—and from which they return "visibly shaken," Bowen says, "and hooked, wanting to go back." The first time, they have no choice; every student must complete 30 hours of social service in order to graduate.

"When I first heard about the requirement," admits junior Justin Penniston, "I thought it violated my Constitutional rights. But then I realized I was just making excuses because I didn't want to do it." Penniston, who spent last year's Easter vacation building houses for homeless families in Appalachia, surprised himself by deciding to return. Bowen, he says, "knew how to ask just the right questions to help us decide why we did it, how we were able to overcome the awkwardness, and why we might want to do it again."

The boys level with Bowen, says headmaster Mark Mullin, "because they realize they're in the presence of a really honest adult. He reaches them by being willing to share his weaknesses. He encourages them to admit that they were scared, and to tell how they grew through that."

"It's something that kind of gets you inside," says sophomore George Watson of his trip to Haiti last year. "Until you see it, you don't feel it. You go down there and find they're people, the same as we are." Adds Watson, who plans to return to Haiti: "They don't only need the money. They want to see the faces of the people who are giving them the money, and I want to see the faces of the people I'm giving it to."

Bowen sees his job as laying seed for the future. "It's the unwritten curriculum they remember," he believes, "the teacher's values and what he had to say. If they can remember feeling good about things that fall in the ballpark of religious or spiritual, knowing that they've found a safe place to explore whatever it is they want to explore, then I think we've got a win, because they've got something to come back to."

When or whether they come back, Bowen seldom knows. He is consumed by the day-to-day challenge of penetrating the cynicism of the upperclassmen and holding the attention of the wriggling lower-schoolers in chapel.

Thirteen years ago, history and theology teacher Jamie Evans was one of those wriggling little boys. He came back. As

an Episcopal priest, he now teaches and ministers at his alma mater with his former teacher, Roger Bowen.

It was Bowen's example and his own father's, Evans says, that led him to enter the ministry. He remembers Bowen as "such a gentle chaplain," a man who was at once an open-minded scholar and "an unabashed Christian."

Evans sums up Bowen this way: "For him, it's both a gift and a conviction. It's not just a job; it's a calling, a vocation. His whole self is involved."

And so in Roger Bowen, as in all great teachers and ministers, the two roles become one, because both begin and end in love. "In the same way that those of us who are parents brood about our children, Roger does about his students," says Mark Mullin. "They are rarely out of his mind. He feels for them in ways they'll never know."

### DAN AND BARBARA McSWEENEY, WAKEFIELD HIGH SCHOOL, ARLINGTON

*"You Have to Touch the Inner Person"*

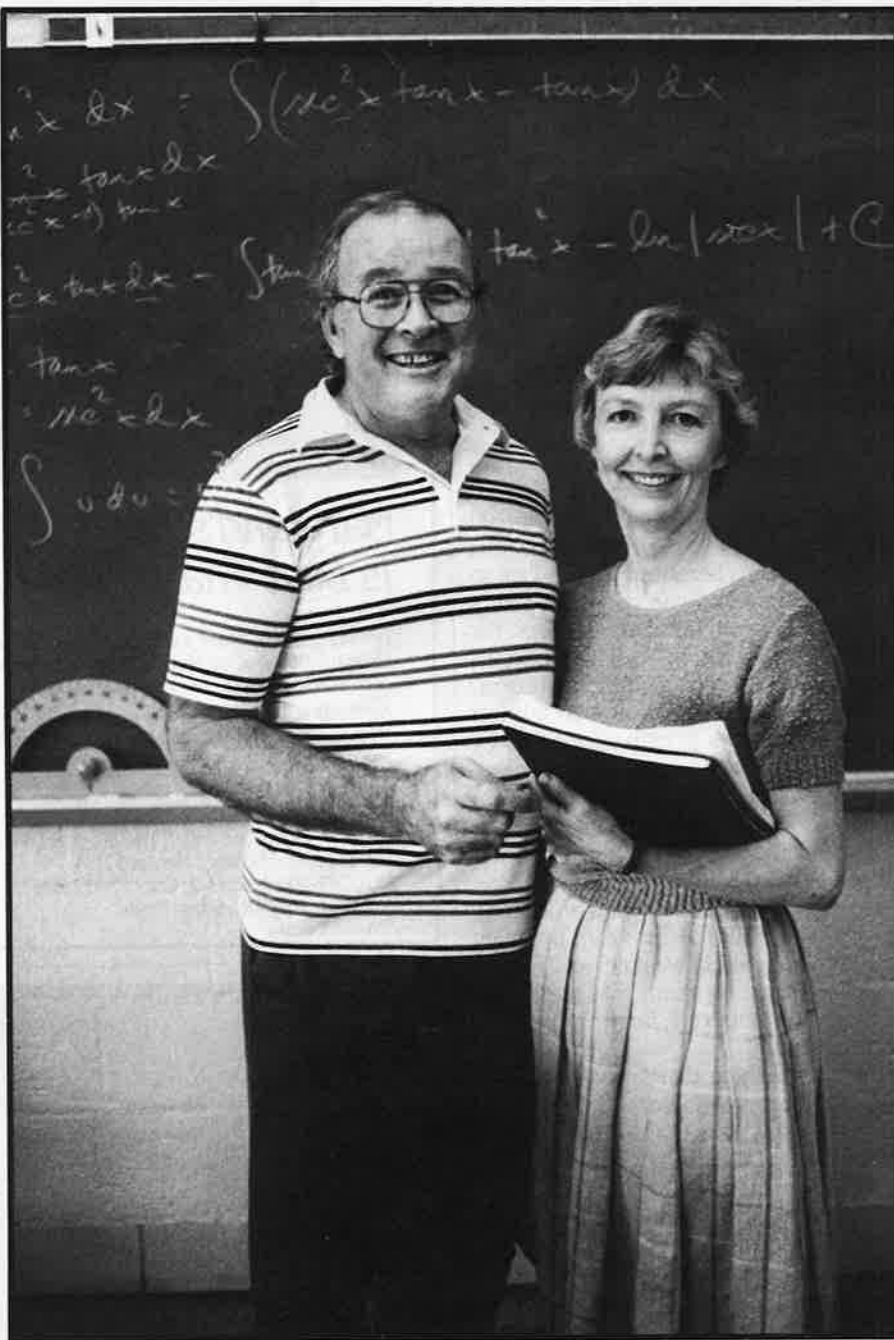
His fist poised inches above a student's skull, Dan McSweeney prepares to check for hollowness. How else, he asks the 40 advanced-placement calculus students in his Wakefield High School classroom, can he be sure that the brand-new process of integration that he has just pushed into their heads hasn't fallen out the other side?

Skull-banging, though legendary among Jesuit-educated men, is not what one expects to find in the modern classroom. And Dan McSweeney is no black-robed taskmaster. With his graying, over-the-collar hair and wire-rimmed spectacles, he looks like a chalk-dusted Ben Franklin—with a Brooklyn accent, an impish sense of humor, and a love of math and kids.

Besides, the fist-to-the-skull routine is just for looks. His students' impressive test scores prove that the calculus taught here not only penetrates but stays firmly in place. There are two good reasons for that: Dan McSweeney is one; his wife Barbara is the other.

Caught between Dan, stalking the front, and Barbara, working the aisles, the McSweeneys' pupils reap the benefits of five decades of classroom experience, and a team-teaching style so smooth it looks effortless.

Shoulders thrust forward and knees bent as he paces in front of the blackboard, Dan McSweeney is pulling from his students, one point at a time, the graph of the inverse function  $e^x$ . Now, he asks, "How do we use the rules of logarithms to find the derivative of the function?" He's not knocking on skulls



now, but the students look as though their heads are hurting.

Smiling at their intensity, McSweeney tantalizes the group: "Now, I would *hate* to deprive you of the opportunity of discovering this on your own!" Eyes roll—but these are clearly kids who pride themselves on mental agility.

"You try it at your seats, and I'll do it up here," he says, turning to the large-screen computer. "If I graph the function, this'll graph the derivative. Let's see what we come up with." In less than two minutes, hands go up—but tentatively. "I got an answer, but it doesn't make sense," says one boy. "It can't be this easy," says another.

"The derivative of  $e^x$  is . . ." McSweeney presses the computer keyboard, *"itself!* What? That's not possi-

ble? Well, friends, you've just met the only function that's its own derivative."

"Now," he asks rhetorically, "what's the derivative of  $e^x$ ?"

" $e^x$ !" shout the students, their brows smooth now.

"Sounds like a test question, Mr. McSweeney!"

"Yeah, that'll be the extra credit on the quiz tomorrow," he laughs, relaxing against the door frame and folding his arms as Barbara McSweeney moves to the front and begins whizzing through homework problems.

As the chalk dust flies, she asks, "Am I losing anybody?" A hand goes up. "Bill?"

"Could you do it using the quotient rule instead?"

"Could I? Yes! Do you see what Bill is

saying? Good for you! I hadn't even thought of that." Barbara McSweeney's style is as low-key as her husband's is flamboyant.

The tough transition, if there is one, comes when the bell rings at 8:30 and Barbara McSweeney heads for her HILT students. The initials stand for High Intensity Language Training, Arlington County's program for children who arrive in the United States speaking little or no English.

To her thirteen HILTers—refugees from Afghanistan, Iran, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Central America—Barbara McSweeney is a math trouble-shooter, English teacher, and mother. The topic this week is figuring percents.

"This year, we have 160 percent more HILT students at Wakefield High School than we did last year. What does that mean? How can we have more than 100 percent of something?"

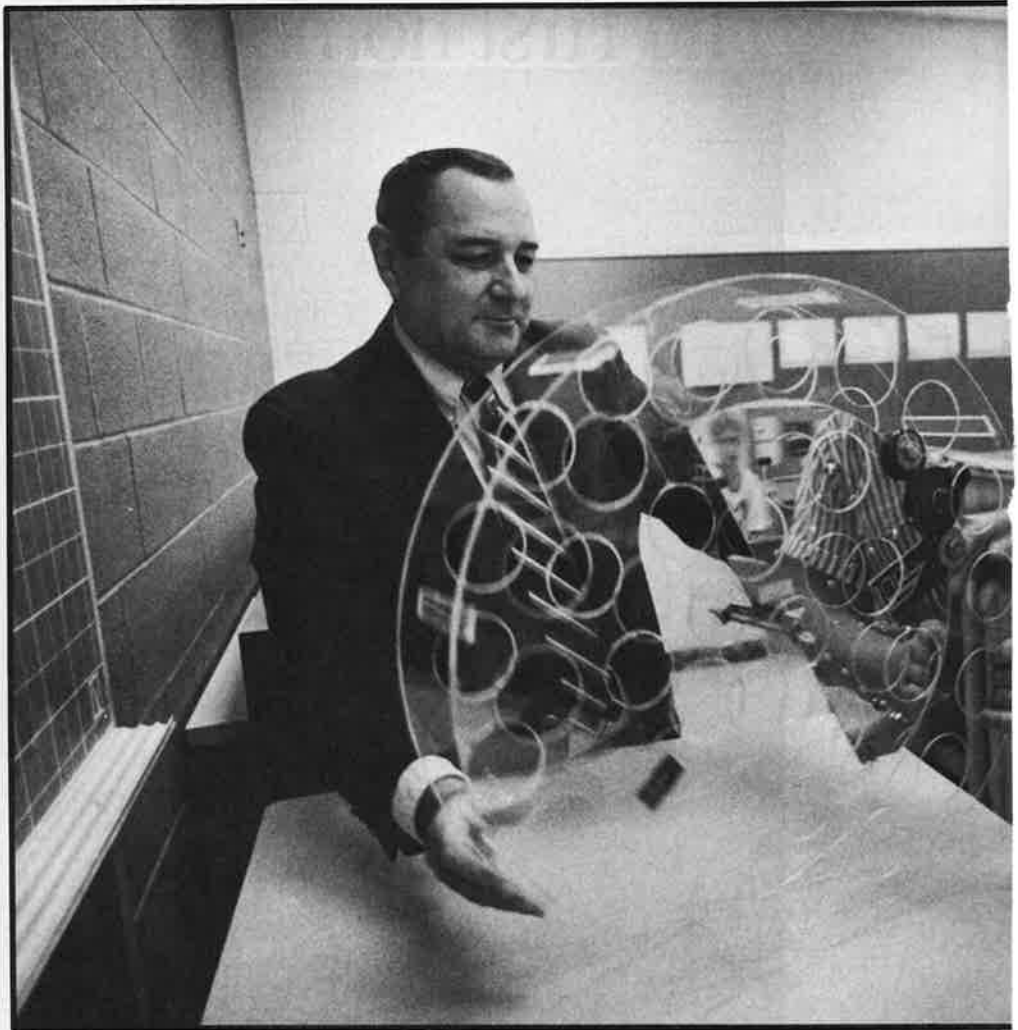
She begins drawing pie graphs on the board, explaining that "we can draw pictures using a circle to show 100 percent of something. If we had 100 HILT students here last year, how many would 160 percent be?" She moves around the room, sitting down at empty desks beside the students as they work, sometimes signaling numbers with her fingers, until everyone understands. They want her attention as much as they want the right answer.

When she returns to the front of the room, she holds up the Metro section of the *Washington Post*, pointing to a pie graph and a headline that reads, "Area Schools Increasingly Multi-Racial."

"Do you remember yesterday that I said I was going to bring in an article that was about you?" she asks. "Look, the *Washington Post* uses pie graphs to show percents, and their graph tells about you!" The thirteen students, accustomed to feeling lost in a big public high school, hang on McSweeney's every word. The *Post* article describes something she, and they, know firsthand: the influx of foreign students, mostly refugees, into the Washington area, with the greatest percentage in eastern Arlington County, where Wakefield is located.

Putting down the *Post*, McSweeney turns to practical percentage problems such as sales tax and store discounts. "We're talking about economic survival," she says of her HILT students, all of whom must work after school and at night to keep families afloat. The stakes are high—much higher than they are for the McSweeneys' calculus students, whose success or failure will be measured in college credits earned early.

"In calculus," she explains, "you're absorbed in the mathematics; in HILT, the focus is almost totally on the peo-



ple." Most teachers, if they are honest, will admit that they're at their best with their superstars, at their worst with their struggling pupils. But when Barbara McSweeney says, "Public education means teaching all of the public," she really means it.

For both McSweeneys, motivation is the heart of teaching. "You have to touch the inner person to trigger real learning—even at the very high levels," says Dan, whose personality transforms the school's computer center into a "home away from home" for a handful of brilliant students. "He picks at them, he teases them, and they love it," says Barbara of her husband's teaching style. "Some of them are here when I arrive at 7 AM, and I have to sweep them out the door at 3:30," he laughs.

And the McSweeneys' students keep coming back, long after lessons of derivatives and integrals have sunken into deep memory. What do they remember from calculus or computer science or HILT? "They remember the atmosphere in the class," says Dan. What do they talk about? "We talk about their lives. . . . They want us to know they've been successful, and that we had something to do with that."

## MIKE STEVENS, FAIRFAX HIGH SCHOOL, FAIRFAX

*It's Tougher Than the Marines*

"Teaching," growls ex-artilleryman Mike Stevens, "is so much like the Marine Corps you wouldn't believe it." No, you wouldn't—not after living through an eight-hour day on the front lines of Stevens's battlefield: the industrial-arts wing of Fairfax High School<sup>1</sup>.

Marine drill sergeants don't laugh out loud when their troops stand on tables and sing—as Stevens did the day his engineering class serenaded their balsawood bridges into oblivion. They don't receive candy and thank-you notes from their men—as Stevens did for volunteering to make the signs for the school's model UN. And they don't take kindly to interruptions, distractions, and chaos—the kind Stevens thrives on as he crams nine separate courses into six class periods a day.

Take that back, Stevens says after some thought. Teaching *is* different from the Marines—it's tougher. After twenty years in the field artillery, he

<sup>1</sup> As of this fall, Mike Stevens is on the faculty of Jefferson/Science and Technology in Alexandria.



says, "I thought I knew what a stressful job was. Well, I did not. In teaching, you're 'on' every minute of the day."

He does admit that much of the pain is self-inflicted. He was the one, after all, who couldn't say no to the engineering, electronics, and technical-drawing students who signed up for second-year courses. "What was I going to do, turn them away?" he says, explaining how he wound up teaching six courses in three periods to accommodate basic and advanced students. It's a schedule that would break a teacher—or a Marine—30 years younger than Stevens.

There's so much happening in H-wing at any given moment that it's hard to sort it all out, or even to locate Stevens. You hear him before you see him. Suddenly, from the direction of the wind tunnel in the back of the room comes a command. "Back in your cage, Paul!" That's Stevens. He warns the visitor, "The natives are restless today. You can tell it's vacation time."

He's settling down the "Basic Tech" natives in the front, he explains, so he can work with the "Advanced Tech" students in the back on descriptive geometry. A boy in a power-driven wheelchair zips past Stevens to the computer-

assisted drafting equipment in the back. It is brand-new, a donation from two Fairfax alumni, and the otherwise low-key Stevens fairly glows when he talks about the job opportunities it opens up for the handicapped students who train on it.

"For years I've wanted to have the severely handicapped kids in here," he says. "Now we've got them, and they're doing fine."

With one eye on the boy doing computer drafting, the other on the kids up front, Stevens heads for the eight bewildered-looking advanced students who are poring over descriptive-geometry drawings.

"I'll admit it looks terrible," he consoles them, "but with five minutes of instruction, any one of you could solve these problems." He picks up a piece of paper, folds it, and launches into an explanation. "This object we're drawing is sitting in space, and we're projecting the points onto a glass wall. . . . Okay, Chris, you're looking at this line right there, and I put a point up here. . . ."

Their heads are twisted, their bodies sprawled across the table as they follow Stevens's hands. He could simply pull out the descriptive-geometry models that last year's class built, and save a lot of time. But that would be too easy.

"I don't believe in spoon-feeding them; I want them to think," he says, "so I just dump all this stuff onto the table—soda straws, straight pins, bamboo skewers, crochet thread, Q-tips—and say, 'Your job is to build a 3-D model of one of the descriptive-geometry problems.' I'll tell you this: They'll never forget how those relations go!"

By now, the natives in the front really are growing restless. He begins rapidly checking their drawings, without appearing to hurry. Stevens has at least two things—or two dozen things—going on at once, depending on how you count.

Does he ever think about quitting teaching? "Yeah, every single day," he says. For Stevens, great teaching is the job he loves to hate. But the alternative—mediocre teaching—is something he'd hate more. "It would be easier," he concedes, "to teach the same thing to everybody at the same time. But if I were a student, I'd find that pretty deadly."

Stevens's students are spoiled—the way all students should be: with double the usual dose of subject matter, patience, and individual attention. When he talks about his kids instead of his workload, Stevens starts smiling. "We've got a great bunch of kids here. I've got 168 of them, and there's not a bad one in the bunch."

He's "up" every minute, for all 168,

but the intensity peaks when he moves on to his third-period engineering classroom, where 33 of the school's top students sample the challenges of a first-year engineering program. It's the course that broke the non-academic stereotype of technology education, put Fairfax High's program on the national map, and pushed Stevens into the lime-light when he piloted a second-year engineering course this year. And on a day-to-day basis, it's the course that gives

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*"I just dump all this stuff onto the table—soda straws, straight pins, bamboo skewers, crochet thread, Q-tips—and say, 'Your job is to build a 3-D model of one of the descriptive-geometry problems.'"*

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him the rush of adrenaline that keeps him pumping.

It's bridge-building time—a good four-week period for the fiercely competitive engineering students. Their eyes fixed on Stevens, their egos on winning, the class absorbs the rules for building the balsa-wood bridges that they will subject to stress testing.

The winner: the lightest, toughest bridge, as measured in pounds held per gram of its own weight. As Stevens reviews the various types of bridge designs, you could hear a pin drop. But the intensity is deafening.

Four weeks later, it's the noise that's deafening. It's "Flyweight" vs. "The Little Bridge That Could" in the final round, and the crowd is standing on tables, hungry for destruction. But "Flyweight" is hanging tough, not even bending with 80 pounds of lead harnessed to it from below. As Stevens begins to add water, the class intones a dirge. A tiny smile is tugging at the corner of Stevens's mouth.

At 87 pounds, the bridge is bowing slightly. "Break, bridge, break! Break, bridge, break! Kill that pyramid!" The tiniest crack is heard. "Typical over-designed government bridge!" shouts a jubilant member of the "Flyweight" team. The crack is louder, and suddenly, pieces shoot all over the room. There is wild applause, whistling and shrieking. As the kids launch into another chorus of their funeral chant, Stevens bursts out laughing.

No, this sure doesn't look like the Marines. But Stevens says it is, and he ought to know. It's enough to make you want to enlist.



**MARY FLYNN, H.B. WOODLAWN  
SECONDARY SCHOOL, ARLINGTON**

*Do-It-Yourself Magic*

It's a world where Jean Valjean meets Ronald Reagan face to face; where seventh-graders help twelfth-graders with French adjectives, and vice versa; where *tout le monde* fearlessly speaks French.

In Mary Flynn's classroom at H.B. Woodlawn, magical language-teaching is dazzlingly successful: On that most unmagical measure of proficiency, the College Board French Achievement Test, Woodlawn students average a very good 600, year in, year out.

But no one in Flynn's advanced-placement French class is thinking about test scores as they settle in for a lively re-enactment of the death of Jean Valjean's adopted waif, Fantine. The histrionics and homemade costumes make their version of *Les Misérables* a few shades less tragic than the original, but their French is flawless. Victor Hugo would have nodded somber approval.

As for Mary Flynn, she is too busy applauding to hold the video camera she was using to tape the performance. She hands the camera to a student as she continues to congratulate the performers. It looks for all the world as though the students, not the teacher, are doing all the work. And that is the greatest illusion of all.

As Jean Valjean and his now-resurrected Fantine exit with their classmates, a horde of French II students—of all ages and sizes—converge on the room. For openers, she takes roll. But "Marie," as

her students call her, turns such ordinary rituals into something more: Roll call is a chance to greet each student individually. Returning tests becomes more than handing out grades. A girl who tells "Marie" that her B-plus grade is "so-so" is told, "*Comme çà, comme çà? C'est formidable, chérie!*"

Thus, with intimacy and personalization, begins the 50-minute burst for which Flynn has spent hours preparing. Nor have the students come empty-handed. The younger ones pull favorite stuffed animals and comic books from their backpacks; a senior produces a book on French Impressionist painting. In groups of five, they will talk about their treasures. Flynn sees to it that no English slips in.

She is patient. "You have to have a sense of 'wait,'" she says as a seventh-grader struggles to describe the virtues of his pet rock. "The other kids know that, when they're in that position, they'll be waited for also, and I think that makes a difference."

Already, 12 minutes of the precious 50 have passed, but in Mary Flynn's mind, nothing is more important than making time to talk. "I've always felt that students who went through my program were not going to be adults who said, 'I've taken years of this language, but I can't speak it.'"

Flynn is determined not to let that happen to any of the 110 students who come through her door each day. For the next twenty minutes, she keeps four balls in the air at once, blending rigorous drill with personal attention.

In the front of the room, she works

with five students who had trouble with a test. At a table in the back, two students are practicing numbers with flash cards, while at the board, three others are labeling a character named "Gros Albert" to learn the parts of the body. And beyond the room divider, you hear the hum of a good old-fashioned grammar drill. But there's something different there, too. In pairs, advanced students are helping their struggling classmates with adjective agreement under the watchful eye of

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*Advanced students are helping their struggling classmates with adjective agreement under the watchful eye of Flynn's French-born aide. It's French without fear, and it works.*

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Flynn's French-born aide, Françoise Mengebier. It's French without fear, and it works.

Forty feet away, with five students in a circle around her, Mary Flynn's antennae are up. Using her own radar and a report from Françoise on the group in the back, Flynn can tell you, on any given day, who needs help with what, who's the best one to help him, and where he ought to be by next week. Maybe that's why, when the bell signals the end of a class where the students do all the work, Mary Flynn's shoulders slump a little. Magicians really do earn their money.

Mary Flynn's career in do-it-yourself magic began 26 years ago in an old-fashioned language lab, complete with wooden dividers to ensure that the students were isolated. "It was a nightmare," Flynn remembers, "so I came in and built shelves to the ceiling, hung a clothesline on an angle, and clipped bags to it with things the students could interact with and manipulate." Thus began a long and loving foray into iconoclastic language-teaching.

The awards and recognition Flynn has received since then have confirmed her desire to stay in the classroom. "My only ambition to do anything beyond this," she says, "is to teach teachers how to teach."

When Flynn talks to tradition-bound colleagues at teacher workshops, she loves to quote the children's author Shel Silverstein, who contrasts magic of the leprechaun variety with another sort:

*All the magic I have known  
I've had to make myself.*



**LARRY BROWN, WEST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, NORTHWEST DC**

*"I Respect Myself, I Respect Them"*

"Safecracking was sort of his profession, you know? It was like he was addicted to it—he couldn't help himself. So it's not exactly a crime for him to crack safes."

"It is too a crime—he was taking stuff out of the safes!"

"Yeah, money is money. He should be punished, whether he acted like he was going to reform or not!"

The subject is criminal justice, and Larry Brown's eighth-graders at West Elementary School are tougher on reformed safecrackers than O. Henry, tougher than the US judicial system, and a whole lot tougher than their English teacher, who is trying—unsuccessfully—to focus their attention on the bank robber's courage. After all, says Brown, safecracker Jimmy Valentine risked blowing his cover to save a little girl's life. But the students are too wrapped up in the unfairness of a crime left unpunished to admire the "guts" of O. Henry's "redeemed" criminal.

"I'm trying to get you to deal with the critical moment when Jimmy has to decide whether to expose himself as a bank robber and save the girl, or to play it safe," urges Brown.

"But Mr. Brown, I do *not* like the way the detective just lets him go," objects one girl. "I don't think it's fair at all."

"Is this man a hard-core criminal?" Brown asks the class.

"Nooooo," they chorus in one moment of agreement, but a boy in the back

jumps in. "Okay, he's not *all* bad, he's not an ax murderer or anything like that—which means he knows how to act for real. So that's just exactly why he should be punished!"

Brown tries once more. "What did Jimmy stand to lose?"

"His girlfriend."

"His trust in people."

"His self-confidence about starting a new life."

With one minute left until the bell, Brown puts the question again, this time more personally: "Would *you* do what Jimmy did if it meant losing your boyfriend or girlfriend?"

Half a dozen hands shoot up.

"I might or I might not. But I'd expect to get punished if I'd done what he did."

"I wouldn't get into that situation in the first place!"

The bell rings. Brown calls it a draw, handing out a ditto sheet and telling the students, "Give me your final verdict in your essay tonight!"

The students are still arguing with each other and with Brown as they leave. He is beaming.

To Larry Brown, values are the heart of teaching. "Some of these kids can sit down and tell *me* what's going on out there, but they've learned it in the wrong way. I tell them, 'The person on the street doesn't care about the way you learn it; he's only concerned about himself.' So we're trying to correct the mistakes the street has made with these kids. You're not going to change it overnight. Sometimes it might take forever."

He should know. As a social worker, then a crisis-resource teacher in Savan-

nah, Georgia, Brown began his career with kids for whom the lessons of the street were a lot harsher than they are on upper 14th Street, Northwest, where Brown's present students hail from. The ten years between Savannah and West Elementary have been filled with "special children": learning-disabled kids in DC, then emotionally disturbed youngsters in the Alexandria City Schools. Now Brown says, "Children are the same, really. Every child is 'special.'"

Years of working with children whose needs are painfully obvious has fine-

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*It's Brown's sensitivity that turns a conventional grammar lesson into something extraordinary.*

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tuned Brown's sensitivity to even the most ordinary needs. It is that sensitivity that turns a conventional grammar lesson into something extraordinary.

Four minutes after his eighth-graders exit, Brown launches a quiet group of seventh-graders into a review of the parts of speech. Tall, handsome, ramrod straight, impeccably dressed, Brown is all business—but quietly he begins ministering to needs. A muffled sneeze from the back of the room, and Brown passes the sneezer a Kleenex without missing a beat. He moves around the room, helping one child with his handwriting, gently correcting another's spelling. Silently, he is teaching something just as important as the parts of speech: that excellence matters, and that he respects his children enough to demand it.

Respect: It is a word that describes Brown's classroom, and one that recurs as he talks about what it means to be a man teaching in elementary school. "Younger children don't see enough positive male role models, so many of them don't understand what it is to be a man," he says. Brown believes that, in a school system where fewer than 7 percent of elementary teachers are male, his presence "says something to these children. I respect myself, I respect them, I encourage them to achieve, to respect authority."

The son of two teachers in South Carolina, Brown sees teaching as a "worthy profession," though he says friends frequently ask him when he's going to "move up and out." But the classroom is where Brown finds satisfaction. "You have to find the strengths in every child and make sure you come out with some viable reason to move on," he says. "If I am able to motivate a child because of something he sees in me, that to me is very rewarding."



**LEE VICCELLIO, SPRINGBROOK HIGH SCHOOL, WHITE OAK**

*"They Teach Me More About Life Than I Teach Them About Shakespeare"*

It's barely eight o'clock on a gray morning, and the second-floor hallway of Springbrook High School vibrates with a rich, throaty voice announcing that Hamlet is crawling—"That's right, crawling, like a reptile, ladies and gentlemen!"—between heaven and earth.

The picture of Hamlet on all fours is so vivid that you half expect to trip over his body in the doorway of Room C-28, where Lee Viccellio weaves up and down the aisles of her "Mystic Purple" classroom selling Shakespeare. And the students are buying it—or rather, grabbing it—as Viccellio hands out parts in the play.

"We need a king! Do we have a king

here? Who's our king? Mark? Thank you! Who will be our queen? Bing! Wonderful! Oh, you'd rather be Hamlet? All right, you be Hamlet. What? You're volunteering Robin to play Ophelia? How generous of you. . . . No, Robin, I won't put you on the spot; I'll play Ophelia. Now, are we ready to jump into the mousetrap scene? Okay, *hit it*, Hamlet!"

And Hamlet, in a black leather jacket and wire rims, zings Ophelia with a string of insults so painful that the students squirm. But it is, after all, Viccellio who has taken the most embarrassing part for herself, and she leads them by the hand through the difficult lines, gagging at the puns, stopping to define a word, challenging them to go beneath the surface. Finally, a girl in the back bursts out: "How can he *treat* her like that? I thought he was in love with her!"

"Whooaaa!" Viccellio's already wide eyes widen behind her pink-tinted glass-

es, and her hand flashes out, grabbing up the student's question and tossing out another: "But who is he *really* thinking about here?"

"His mother," whispers the leather-jacketed Hamlet, and the students dig into Hamlet's disgust with women. Viccellio, her purpose accomplished, recedes except to punctuate their discussion with an occasional "Yesss," or "Absolutely!"

By this time, they're hooked, but it

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*"Children today have experiences that are painfully close to Hamlet's—remarriage, a stepparent, a death in the family. In some ways, they're more comfortable with the play than we are."*

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didn't start out that way when they began *Hamlet* three weeks ago. "It is distant at first because the language is difficult," acknowledges Viccellio, more analytical than theatrical outside of class.

But, she points out, "Children today have experiences that are painfully close to Hamlet's—remarriage, a stepparent, a death in the family. In some ways, they're more comfortable with the play than we are, because they're closer to it. And when we share the roles *together* in class, it becomes a *live* experience, working with living, breathing human beings. That way, they bring something of the play back into their own lives."

It is not only the students who are touched by the process. "I sometimes think," muses Viccellio, the italics now absent from her voice, "that they teach me more about life than I teach them about Shakespeare."

There, beneath the layers of theatrical craziness, lies the secret to Viccellio's sellout Shakespeare. Inside C-28, the line between student and teacher blurs, and *Hamlet* becomes everybody's show. That's why 90 blue-jeaned seniors shed their carefully cultivated images at the door and jump into Shakespeare, just for the fun of it.

Some dozen or so, hungry for more, converge on C-28 after school for "Shake Troupe," an outlet for Bardophiles that Viccellio created six years ago. At 4 PM, "Miss Vic"—as her students call her—is running in overdrive, squeezing in time with her Troupers before heading home to tackle stacks of student essays and her own PhD dissertation.

Except for the occasional tidbits of

Renaissance trivia that she throws out, Viccellio keeps her scholarly self hidden under an almost childlike exuberance. Now she sips Diet Pepsi Free, pulls tinsel out of her blond curls—“Yes, the theater class decided to decorate me!”—and cranks up the Troupers for their annual performance at the Folger Theater’s high school competition.

Calling for an “instant replay” of last year’s scene from *As You Like It*—“just to get us in the mood”—Viccellio rips into packages of costume fabric for the Folger performance.

Caught up in costume talk, the Troupers almost drown out Viccellio. But it is her voice—a shade throatier than it was at 7:45 AM—that echoes down the hallway, full of praise for the girl who was Mistress of the Revels at the group’s Renaissance Festival. “Oh, yes, I did, I heard every word you said while I was back there cooking. You were introducing everybody, you were ad-libbing, you were wonderful. . . .”

## BEN COLLINS, SURRATTSVILLE HIGH SCHOOL, CLINTON

*‘It’s the Process, Not the Product’*

Stories of great teachers always end with stories of great students. They don’t always start out that way.

“The first time I met Ben Collins, I was shouting and throwing a book against the wall,” recalls lawyer Jim Turner from his Dupont Circle office, at a safe distance of sixteen years. He can laugh now about his memorable “performance” as a member of Surrattsville High School’s student government. “I was sixteen years old and mad as hell at the school administration.

“Ben let the meeting break up,” choosing instead, Turner now realizes, to make his point the long way. “The next time I was that angry”—about the draft, in 1970—“Ben made me argue both sides—one of his favorite tactics.” Turner’s two years in Collins’s class were an “ongoing lesson in respect and gentleness, the two things that suffuse everything Ben does with kids.”

The temper tantrum was never mentioned again, but Jim Turner will never forget what Ben Collins wrote in his yearbook. “He said, ‘I enjoyed watching your maturation.’”

“Watching? He did a lot more than just watch it.”

Like Jim Turner, most of the kids who have Ben Collins as a teacher never quite get over it. They may forget the details of Mesopotamian culture, every fact they learned in his ancient-civilizations course at Surrattsville. But they never get over Collins.

“It’s because of him that I want to be a teacher,” says ’82 graduate Diane Krahe, who recently finished her studies at Bridgewater College. “I can’t seem to shake the need to make a difference”—the kind of difference, she says, that Collins made in her life.

“Even in graduate school, I had no one with Ben’s gift for sparking ideas,” says Beth Ward, a graduate of the master’s program in Yale’s department of East Asian studies. “Part of the joy of being in his class,” she recalls, “was that he was learning all the time, reconsidering history each time he taught it, thrilled when you came up with an idea he’d never thought of.”

Sooner or later, stories of great teachers circle back to the classroom. And it’s all there—the rigor, the respect, the intensity, the gentleness—in the form of a 34-way conversation so enticing that you want to do more than just eavesdrop.

In the shadows of an overhead projector, a bushy-browed Ben Collins circles in and out of trios of students hunched

Together, he and his 33 students are hammering away at a Sumerian property deed, circa 3,000 BC, as intensely as if they’d just unearthed it. Amid the columns of numbers recording quarts of barley and shekels of silver paid for acres of land, there are clues about what the people were like, how they lived.

“What’s more important to these people, barley or silver or land?” Collins zeroes in on one raised hand. “Patrice, what do you think?”

“Without land, they couldn’t grow crops.”

“That’s one argument,” Collins acknowledges, peering out at her classmates over his black half-glasses, moving all the while. “Cindy?”

“But their land could wash away, and their barley could burn, couldn’t it? So I think silver was the most important.”

“So durability could be a factor. What about it, people? Is silver the most important thing to the Sumerians? Remember, it’s not money. The Lydians invented money, and they’re 1,000 years away yet. Chip?”

“The silver’s no good by itself. What good is it if there’s nothing to buy?”

“So need is a factor. Need—that’s a powerful word, isn’t it?”

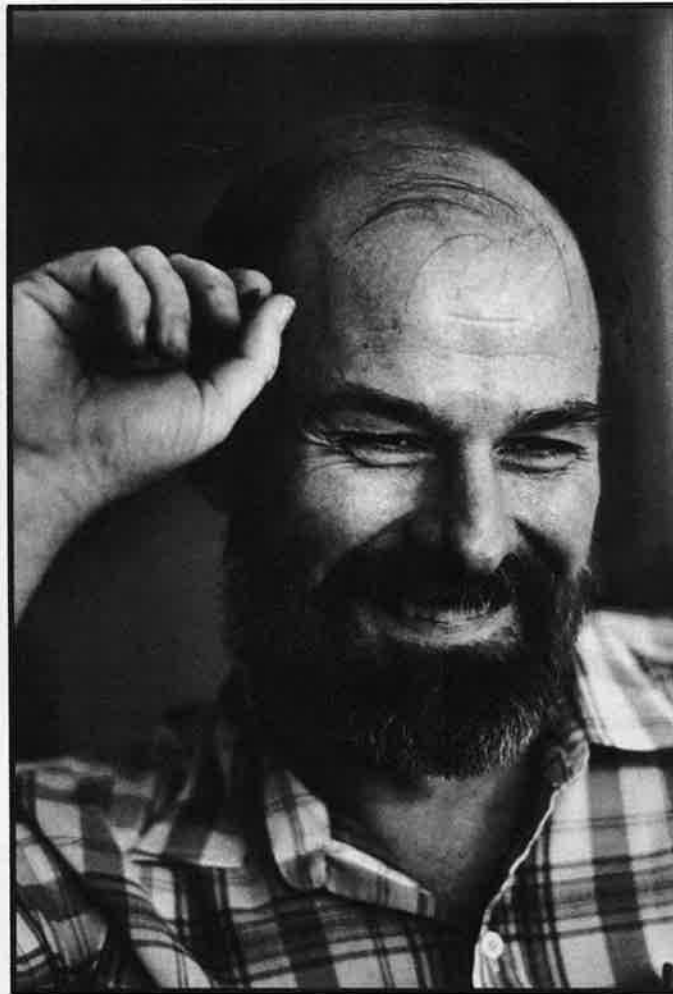
The next comment stops Collins—literally.

“If you look across the chart,” says a red-haired boy in the center of the room, “it goes from land to barley to silver, and sometimes they add in silver to balance out the deal—so couldn’t you make some kind of equation?”

Collins stops pacing for the first time in twenty minutes. “I’d never thought of that before, Jeff,” he says. “A math equation? Try it, everybody, for to-

night, and see what you come up with.”

But there’s something on the chart more exciting than the relative value of land, barley, and silver. A student named Leslie has caught a Sumerian



over a document, firing round after round of tough questions in a soft Tennessee accent. He’s excited when he gets the answer he’s after, more excited by the ones he’s never heard.

named Man-ishtushu, King of Kish, buying up all the land. Everyone takes a hard look at the "Buyer" column, and discovers that a man 5,000 years ago was seeking something that the competitive students understand well—power.

Collins starts pacing again. "How powerful is this king? How many acres of land did he buy?"

They begin to add figures: "9,732."

"What would you say about that? That's a lot of land, so this is no penny-

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*"Part of the joy of being in his class was that he was learning all the time, reconsidering history each time he taught it."*

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ante king here! Now, here's the bottom line: How strong is this king? Give yourselves a minute to think."

Two hands go up. "That's two people who think they know. You've got to learn to take risks." He waits until ten hands are in the air.

"Melissa?"

"Well, all the other families are under his control."

"How do you know that? How do you infer control from the data? Jeannine, if I were a king, an all-powerful king, and I wanted your land, what could I do?"

"Take it!"

"Does he take it?"

"No."

"What does that tell you? Kim?"

"Maybe he's just manipulating the people."

"He may be—by buying the land, instead of seizing it, he may be trying to gain respect. . . . But there's an important point here. Did he have to go by the rules?"

"Yes."

"In the United States, does the leader have to go by the rules? Why did President Reagan have to go on TV last night? To explain a position that somebody thought was—? What?"

"Against the law."

"So in the US, does your leader have to abide by the same rules you do? Jeff?"

"Yeah, in an elective government, he does."

"Does it apply to a Russian leader? Did it apply to Adolf Hitler? Is there a certain set of rules they have to go by, or can they violate them for the moment?"

Almost everyone has a hand up, but, for once, that's not what Collins wants. "Don't answer me yet. I want you to bury that one in the back of your mind, because we're going to be pulling it up

again and again for the rest of the course."

Collins flips the lights on, the overhead projector off. "Let's get these desks back into five straight rows," he says, signaling to the students the end of the 52-minute dialogue they've had together. In a week, they will have synthesized their data into a "definition of a civilized culture," a task for which the program of study allows two days. It takes Collins's students two weeks.

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*"Problems are always more enticing than answers, people are more exciting than dates, and past and present are one."*

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There's no doubt in his mind which way to go. "I could have shortened today's process," he says, "but I wouldn't get the interplay I need. I want them to have the experience of hammering out something together. It's the process, not the product, that's important to me."

That's how Ben Collins teaches history. How he teaches people is not quite so easy to explain, though it's obvious his dialogues with students are packed with more than course content. You'd be hard put to draw the line between facts about Mesopotamian culture and references to gender roles, sexism, the draft, the nature of rules, political ethics, risk-taking, and careers that Collins interweaves into the discussion. "Everything," he insists, "can be turned into a lesson."

That's a lesson he learned teaching in the Freedom Schools in Knoxville, in the Peace Corps, and, most of all, from reading teacher Jean Turner.

"My son Chris hated milk," Collins remembers. "We tried everything—he absolutely refused to drink it. Jean took him into the kitchen, and the two of them sat down at the table. She served him his milk from a beautiful pitcher instead of an ordinary carton. She made a milk-lover out of him. She could do that with anything, with any child."

That's what Collins does with history. In his hands, it's more than just bearable, it's alluring—because problems are always more enticing than answers, people are more exciting than dates, and past and present are one.

"Technique can be mastered with practice," says Collins, "but Jean gave me the soul of it." That's what happens when you try to end stories of great teachers—you find out they don't really end. Go back far enough, and there's a story of another great teacher in there somewhere. □