

# TEACHING

# EXCELLENCE



GABRIEL A. COONEY

**Eight years ago, the Dean of the Faculty Rich Bonanno decided Deerfield should teach teachers as well as students. The teaching fellow program was created to allow young teachers the time to learn the craft of teaching and to fulfill the expectations of a triple-threat faculty member. Here a teacher and three of the fellows reflect on the program that has since become a proud Deerfield Academy tradition.**

## WHY THEY ARE HERE: THE TEACHING FELLOWS PROGRAM EXPLAINED

**BY WANDA HENRY P'08**

“SHE IS THE BEST COACH I HAVE EVER HAD AND SHE WAS SO much fun on the corridor. I love her!” “We still keep in touch, and I cannot even describe how inspiring she was.” “I had her in class too, and she is my hero.” This group of girls from the Dewey House dormitory could have been describing any number of faculty members at Deerfield, but the special teacher-coach in their lives was not one of Deerfield’s masters with ten or 20 years on the faculty. Their hero was a teaching fellow, a woman in her early twenties who made such an impact on their lives that they still treasure their relationships with her three years after her departure for Kip Academy, a magnet school in New York City. And they should. Mayme Hostetter graduated from Harvard University with honors in English and American Literature and a citation in French Language and Literature. Epitomizing the tag of scholar-athlete, Mayme split her out-of-class time between serving on the poetry board of *The Harvard Advocate* and competing on the varsity

*Wanda Henry is the assistant dean of the faculty and teaches mathematics.*

heavyweight crew team in three NCAA championships with one season as co-captain. She also managed to pick up several academic awards and start every game for the junior varsity basketball team one season. A woman of some stature (her dad rowed lightweight at Harvard while she was a bit bigger than he), Mayme immersed herself fully in the Deerfield experience by running with the fastest girls on my cross country team, volunteering for projects with our community service program, and challenging girls in the dormitory to frosting eating contests; the last is an activity no current faculty member pursues. That she had the time and the energy for doing all the “extras” with our students reflects well on her eagerness to connect and also on the structure of the teaching fellow program, which allows fellows the time to learn the craft of teaching and to fulfill the expectations of a triple-threat faculty member.

Twenty years ago, the dean of the faculty hired fresh-faced college graduates to teach four sections, coach two or three seasons of sports, live on a dormitory corridor with about 15 adolescents, serve on committees, and fulfill other faculty duties as designated by the headmaster. These young people scrambled about campus trying to carry out all their commitments along with learning how to teach—an exhausting exercise, good thing they were young! Eight years ago, Rich Bonanno, the current dean of the faculty, decided Deerfield should teach teachers as well as students. Today, the fellows teach two sections of the same course with the guidance of a mentor, a master teacher who observes and shepherds the fellow through the year, and the fellows live in the dormitory and assist in coaching only two seasons. Almost without exception, our mentors have found the relationship with the teaching fellow a stimulating experience and one in which the experienced teacher has reinvigorated his/her own career while the fellows enjoy the luxury of time to visit other classes and to consider teaching strategies.

At the last School Meeting of the year, two proctors from the Class of 2005 stood up to salute the departure of their corridor resident Pete Nilsson. One broke down in tears as he shared the dimensions of his relationship with “Mr. Nilsson.” Pete had encouraged this young man to perform a tap dancing routine in front of the school to the accompaniment of Pete’s piano playing, and their partnership led to several entertaining and popular performances of tap with piano on Deerfield’s stage. His heartfelt goodbye was just one of many that students expressed to Pete, a young teacher who leaves to pursue a music career after five years of devotion to students and faculty friends. Beyond his regular assignments, Pete volunteered to help with the *a cappella* groups and even turned his Barton II apartment into a recording studio where students converged to sing and play music late into the night.

Our Dean of Admission Patricia Gimbel told me her office admitted only 21 percent of students who applied to Deerfield, and we rank as one of the most selective secondary schools in the nation. In keeping with that same level of choosiness, adult applicants find it even more difficult to earn a place on Deerfield’s faculty. For our teaching fellow program this coming year, we had over 250 resumes for three positions; that is a one percent acceptance rate. That stat looks pretty impressive;

however, when teaching statistics, I tell students to look beyond the numbers to their context in order to draw less simplistic and more nuanced conclusions. When Pete interviewed for a teaching fellowship, he presented himself as recipient of several leadership awards at Middlebury College along with a distinguished record in their English Department, and he earlier earned acclaim at Andover. Pete is not the only Andover graduate hired as a teaching fellow. A few years ago, a teaching fellow in mathematics arrived with the athletic leadership award from Andover on her résumé along with the captaincy of the Amherst College lacrosse team.

Several of our long-time faculty members have told me that when they read the credentials of the fellows, they wonder if they themselves would be hired at Deerfield today. I like the humility of my colleagues, but, in truth, the list is remarkable: a University of North Carolina Morehead Scholar who played college varsity baseball and received the scholar-athlete award from the St. Paul’s School, a *summa cum laude* graduate of Tufts University who grabbed the English Department prize

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along with a minor in fine arts at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the captain of the Bowdoin College women’s rugby club who earned honors in English and American Literature, a Hamilton College mathematics major/computer science minor who captained the ice hockey team and played varsity field hockey, and a heavyweight rower from Dartmouth who completed a five-year program in four years and earned degrees in engineering and mechanical engineering along with several academic awards.

Beyond the numbers in the teaching fellow program, one will find an extraordinary selection of talented individuals who have enriched Deerfield immeasurably. The teaching fellows certainly bring youth and enthusiasm to the faculty, but

they also continue to represent the “triple-threat faculty model” at a time when that combination of duties has become more and more problematic with the tension between specialization and generalization. We continue to believe adolescents need contact with adults beyond the classroom. Our students trust and value our faculty because relationships are based upon time spent together on the fields and in the dormitories along with academic endeavors. Teenagers need role models, and with the average age of our faculty creeping up over 45, the teaching fellows provide a young, perky alternative. Perhaps best of all, some of the fellows stay on as fulltime faculty members. This fall we list four former teaching fellows in our faculty ranks as well as three new teaching fellows. With its record of success firmly established, the teaching fellow program has become one of the Deerfield traditions of which we feel most proud. ■



## TEACHING AND LEARNING: A FIRST YEAR JOURNAL

**BY CHRISTY GARCIA**

**SEPTEMBER 12, 2004**

What habits of mind do you hope to instill in your students throughout this year? I want my students to see that chemistry isn't about memorizing the periodic table or the polyatomic ions, but that it is a scientific process. I want them to learn how to

question things and come away from the class with tools to lead them to different answers. I want them to struggle sometimes, and see that most of their learning will take place when they are challenged. I want them to learn how to fail and then how to keep going.

**SEPTEMBER 13, 2004**

The science went okay, but I think the kids could see how nervous I was. It's difficult to emanate confidence when I don't possess it. I think I'll feel more comfortable just being forced to be up there every-day and go through the motions again and again.

**SEPTEMBER 15, 2004**

It's only the first week, and I've already messed up something. I came home yesterday thinking about how I could cover up a question I answered incorrectly. I realized I had to go back today, admit my mistake and correct myself. I feel each day I'm building up my confidence but something like this cuts it all away so I have to start over again.

**OCTOBER 22, 2004**

I am too tired and too busy. There have been so many ups and downs. My mentor Toby has been amazing. The first time he watched my class, I think I was more nervous than on the first day with the students. He has been so positive and has kept me motivated. I was so focused on the material I was teaching and on my use of the blackboard. It was like my safety blanket. To me, teachers wrote information on the board and so I clung to it and let it identify me. Toby made me teach a class from the back of the classroom—and I survived. I think that's when things started to change. The next week was much more fun, and much less stressful, a reverse from the first month. I thought I had gotten over all my fears and maybe figured this out a bit but then last week was full of flat classes. It was frustrating to feel like I had made progress and then not been able to maintain it. There is no formula.

**DECEMBER 2, 2004**

This year has felt like a race, and sometimes I feel as though I'm still back at the starting line. Parents' Weekend came and went. Thanksgiving break has passed. And we're almost halfway done with the year. There's an interesting story in there though. I was a little anxious about Parents' Weekend and was bothering Toby to find me an interesting demo that would thrill all the parents. He found a great set up that even included a few sparks for effect. I was very excited for that part of the class. I went through the demo as I had the night before, this time with all the parent's eyes on me. I had my students in the front row put on safety goggles, and I dropped a little chunk of sodium metal into a beaker of water. Sparks flew—right onto the lap of one of my students in the front row. It was probably one of the worst things I could imagine happening my first year, on my first Parents' Weekend. There were still a few minutes left in class. I made sure she was okay, ducked my head momentarily, and then went on. I think after that class I realized I could

probably handle anything that happened in the classroom. The parents were very kind and understanding. Just as my students had been all year. I am very lucky to have students who are driven to learn. Being at Deerfield allows me to work with a small group of intelligent, highly motivated students, an ideal first exposure to the world of teaching.

I've also started coaching ice hockey this winter. What a difference. All fall, Toby had told me he thought it should be required for teaching fellows to coach a fall sport. It's helpful in meeting more kids and feeling

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a greater connection to the school. I'm getting better at following the conversations on the hall because I actually know some of the people the girls are talking about. One of the girls came into my apartment to make a cake for a friend's birthday. She spent two hours hanging out and talking. It was awesome. I was glad she finally felt comfortable talking to me because I felt I was having trouble reaching her. Sometimes I'll be really down and frustrated with things and a student will stop in to make a bag of popcorn and stay and talk and it just refreshes me. For every difficult student or situation I've had to deal with, there are ten amazing people to remind me why I am here.

**FEBRUARY 11, 2005**

So I no longer have study halls to plan and grade. They have been taken over by the students. I was very adamant about loving to give extra help, and I do. Working with students one on one can be one of the most rewarding aspects of this job. But it's become a little overwhelming. Before tests, and now even before quizzes, my apartment will be filled with 15 to 20 students all calling out my name. I try to quiet them with bowls of popcorn, but I still have to scramble around the room answering problems and posing questions for two hours. It's exhausting, but exhilarating.

The more I get to know my students, the less my teaching focuses on chemistry. The chemistry's covered, but I'm more concerned with drawing a smile out of Margot, or learning how to channel Yiming's energy to drive the class. The more I've gotten to know students outside the classroom, the more I'm able to draw them in during lectures.

**MARCH 10, 2004**

I gave a really hard exam today. My students have no idea how frustrating it is for me when they don't do well on a test I think they are capable of



tackling. As much as I empathize with their position, it's interesting to watch some of them react to a bad test grade. I think it's good for those who haven't experienced it before. I wonder what my grade as a teacher would be at different points along the year. I know how motivated I become when I feel I'm not doing well. One of my students tells me I've become an exponentially better teacher.

I'm going to be interviewing for jobs this break. It's hard because I feel like it takes about a year to become integrated into this community and to get comfortable with this job and I'm going to have to leave it behind.

**MAY 27, 2004**

We're almost there. The seniors graduate on Sunday. I just have exams to grade and comments to write. I'm gearing up for a final review session next Monday night. Today we had a school meeting where students read something they had written about a departing faculty member. I asked one of the girls I've lived with, coached, and taught to go up for me. She spoke of all the things I had hoped to accomplish in this year as if I actually had. She gave me hope that if I had touched her the way I had aspired to reach students here, maybe I had reached a few more than I thought I had. The connections I've made with

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students have been the most instrumental piece of teaching them well and learning from them. It will also be the hardest part of leaving. But I am prepared to put myself out there. It's just hitting me that I have had more in common with my students this year than most of the other teachers because I'm a fellow. I've definitely been challenged and tried some of the wrong things, but I've worked through it and found my way. I learned with my students and failed with them, and together we struggled through some lessons that hopefully we will carry with us when we leave. ■

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## A SLICE OF TIME: MUSINGS ON TEACHING AND MOVING ON

**BY PETER NILSSON**

I REMEMBER LOOKING UP AT THE CLOCK ONE TIME IN ELEMENTARY school and calculating the hour from the big hand and the little hand and the red line that ground its unceasing way around and around. It was one of those times like 1:23 P.M. and 45 seconds on June 7—one of those times when something cosmic seemed to be lining up. I remember seeing the uncanny pattern in the hour and feeling the same odd pleasure I now feel when I notice that the mileage on my car forms a palindrome. But in that moment in Mrs. Stratouly's third grade class, I suddenly became aware of what age meant. I realized that the time and date were marked by numbers, and that numbers always change—and would continue to change, and that in my mind I could imagine numbers other than those marked by the circling black and red lines.

This realization sparked all kinds of questions about where I would be at certain numbers of years. For instance, I suddenly became aware that the year 2000 would arrive at some point, and I would be 23 years old, and I would not be sitting in Mrs. Stratouly's third grade class. For a moment, I thought about what I would be doing. Would I be married? Would I be in school? Where would I live? "I wonder if I'll be a teacher," I remember thinking. And now I am teacher—or I was a teacher.

Five years ago, I was a teaching fellow in English. After working in residential life at Middlebury College for a year, I followed through on that impulse that first appeared in third grade. It appeared again in high school when I first learned about teaching fellowships, and then later in college when I added an English major to my already declared music major. Common at New England boarding schools, the one-year teaching fellow program seemed like the perfect way to get my feet wet without committing to a lifetime of educational service.



GABRIEL A. COONEY

When I applied for the position, I argued in my cover letter that I was more suited to teach at a boarding school because while I wanted to sample the teaching world, I also wanted to continue learning for and about myself. I was excited about the possibility of helping others learn, but I was also interested in my own intellectual growth. I argued that because of these qualities I was more prepared to teach bright, motivated students than I was prepared to enter a classroom with the challenge of less motivated students. Essentially, I was interested in learning with students rather than convincing students that learning is worthwhile.

Looking back, I now read a certain degree of hubris in my old cover letter, and I've wondered if the Renaissance philosophers were right when they proposed that all of man's actions, even his actions of benevolence, originate in self-interest. I wanted to teach on my own terms. I wanted an entry into the teaching profession that also had an emergency exit. (Teaching fellows typically move on after one year.) Teaching was a professional "maybe" for me because I was still focused on my own education. As a fellow, I wanted to test the waters without having to invest in months and months of education classes, the trials of student teaching, certification, testing, etc...

To my amazement, what I discovered is that not only do teaching fellowships offer this kind of no-strings-attached opportunity—to mutual advantage—but also that the boarding school classroom is

one of the most uninhibited and independent intellectual environments around. In it the teacher is given range and prerogative to teach what and how he or she likes—and therefore also the trust that the teaching will meet the expectations of the academy. But I also discovered that teaching at a boarding school requires skills that extend well beyond the classroom. At Deerfield, for example, where the

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triple-threat model of teaching, coaching, and living in the dorm so strongly continues to define the lifestyle of our nearly 100 faculty, a teacher's role seems more aptly conveyed by "teacher/coach/parent/friend/guidance-counselor-for-life/etc." than simply by "teacher." I had been a student at a boarding school similar to Deerfield, but I had little sense of what it meant to stand on the other side of responsibility.

The different roles that teachers play become the vitality of the place, though, and once you start teaching at a school like Deerfield, it's hard to stop. In a speech at Volunteer's Weekend I said that "Deerfield takes every skill and aspect of who we are, students and faculty, and puts them into practice. It takes everything we have learned as human beings and tests it and offers avenues for us to explore and exploit it. It stimulates us as academics, as athletes, as members of a family, and in every other way we can conceive of [inside and] outside of the classroom." For these reasons, teaching at Deerfield is easy to get wrapped up in—and it's a good, rewarding environment to commit your life to. For me, one year as a teaching fellow quickly turned into a second year as a fulltime member of the English Department, which quickly turned into the five years I have now spent teaching, coaching, and living at Deerfield.

Looking back at my five years here, the intensity of this life—the *social* intensity of teaching, coaching, and living in the dorms—has undoubtedly had the greatest lasting effect on me. Before arriving at Deerfield I found myself not



organizing my life around others, but instead classifying my life into aesthetic and intellectual arenas. At 22, idealistic and freshly minted from college, cover letter in hand, I was full of passions and ideas, and I was ready to take charge in the world. Any good teacher quickly discovers, though, that the classroom is not about the teacher and his or her ideas, but the students. Similarly, any good teacher/coach/parent/friend/guidance-counselor-for-life discovers that in boarding school education, individualism is subsumed into the lives of colleagues and students. This is a heroic shift, I think, and a testimony to teachers here and everywhere.

For me, the decision to leave such a rewarding environment comes from the realization that my love for literature and teaching is paralleled only by my passion for music—a passion that Deerfield has helped cultivate, but also a passion that, at least for now, I have to selfishly pursue elsewhere. It is a decision also informed by some of the same questions I asked in Mrs. Stratouly's classroom, the kinds of questions that come from looking at a clock and thinking about numbers. A few more of those numbers have ticked by, even if I know I still have plenty more ahead. So, since "musician fellowships" for testing the waters are hard to come by outside of the ivory tower, a running rope-swing leap into New York City feels like the best way to start. It's fast, fun, and born of the realization that the second hand doesn't stop.

Many of my students, however, will recall that the mechanical clock in Classroom 36 did occasionally pause. Both the second hand and the minute hand would sometimes simultaneously stop at the top of the hour as if reevaluating the time and contemplating whether or not to embark on another circuit. Marvelously, for us these moments seemed to occur during the final minutes of quizzes or timed discussions, and we liked to believe that some force was allowing students extra time to complete every section, check over final answers, and fill in gaps in their work. Inevitably, after several minutes, the clock's hands would start back up, somehow still fully synchronized with the bells and buzzers and other classrooms and other buildings, but having afforded a few moments to take a breath and look around.

Would that time worked like a clock. ■



JIM GIPE

## NOTES FROM THE FIRST YEAR

**BY BRYAN BOLLINGER**

OUT ON THE LAWN OF RICH BONANNO'S HOUSE, I WAS DETERMINED to make a good impression on the many faculty and staff that I was to meet tonight. This was the cocktail dinner arranged to introduce the new members of the faculty to the Deerfield Academy community, and I desperately hoped that I would be able to remember people's names throughout the entire evening. Holding a drink in hand, I strolled around, chatting amiably with everyone and repeating their names to myself over and over again. An older gentleman approached me and we began to have a nice conversation. I was doing most of the speaking and he was listening intently in such a way as to make me want to keep talking forever. As I finished up my story, which he somehow made sound more interesting merely by the way he listened, I realized I had not yet asked his name or what he did at Deerfield. Upon asking him, his face lit up with a wry smile and he replied, "For some reason, about ten years ago they decided to make me the headmaster."

A lot has happened since that night when I stared back into Eric's chuckling eyes a little unsure of what to say. I replied with something like "congratulations" or "good for you," I can't really remember now but Eric sure did when he made the toast at dinner that night. We both thought it was hilarious and I had a great story for the next few weeks. It wasn't uncomfortable at all. The Deerfield community was surprisingly open and accepting. I did not go to boarding school and what I knew came mostly from stories my friends on the Dartmouth crew team told me. After leaving Dartmouth, I went to work as a technical consultant just outside of Washington, DC, but after a year, I wanted a different lifestyle and I wanted to return to New England. Before I knew it, I found myself at Deerfield Academy, unloading my boxes and carrying them up to Field II.

Right: physics class  
“egg drop” experiment  
with Bryan Bollinger



JIM GIPE

The fall went by smoothly, I was lucky to get two great proctors in Sam Hawkins '05 and Mike Zapas '05, and I didn't begin coaching until the winter term. I volunteered driving students to “Second Helpings,” since I didn't coach in the fall, and I went for lots of bike rides with Pete Nilsson and played goalie for the faculty Indoor Action soccer team. To me, teaching felt easy, and once I learned everyone's names, I felt natural and comfortable in the physics classroom, and I had a wonderful mentor in Ben Bakker. We were teaching a very hands-on class with the use of labs, demos, and projects, and I loved seeing the students learn things for themselves. Before I knew it, winter term had begun, bringing with it the responsibilities of coaching.

The thirds boys basketball team was filled with athletic and energetic young men who found they could succeed with their hustle and speed. We loved to press our opponents and capitalize on their mistakes, whether we were scrimmaging boys JV or girls varsity or if we were at our

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ultimate rival school, Choate. Fellow faculty member Nils Ahbel and I had a very enjoyable season with this young group; occasionally I would jump into a practice, and I was disappointed when the season ended. I was able to organize a faculty and staff basketball game one night near the end of the term, with the hope of reviving the practice, and I was unfortunate enough to blow out my knee while trying to drive on Conrad Pitcher. It turned out I completely tore my right ACL (I tore my left one 18 months earlier playing soccer in DC) and I would need surgery.

I had my surgery done the last Friday of spring break after accompanying the girls varsity crew team to Virginia for most of our spring training trip. I missed a couple of classes but was back by Wednesday to teach and coach the girls crew team with Oliver Rosenblatt. The toughest part those first few weeks was a tie between finding time in the day

to get in my physical therapy and trying to get in and out of the crew launch, no easy task on crutches and in a knee brace the size of Everest. But I was blessed with an unbelievable group of girls; Oli coaches the first and second fours and I coach the third and fourth varsity fours. I waited to write this piece until we were done with the season—it is now the day of graduation and New England's were yesterday. The girls first and fourth boats won silver medals, and the third boat took home the gold, something a Deerfield girls' boat hasn't done since 1999. I was so proud of my girls, the looks of complete joy on their faces were overwhelming. I can't believe the season is done and we are already looking ahead to next year.

This summer I was lucky enough to marry Katherine Rue, (she didn't wise up first) and then we went to Hawaii, where I taught math for a month at the Punahou summer school. Kate is from Juneau, Alaska, so after our stint on Oahu, we flew up north for a month of relaxation and salmon fishing. I couldn't wait for this summer but I am also looking forward to returning to Deerfield to teach and coach and live in a place Kate and I will feel comfortable calling home. ■