

Distinguished Teacher in the Arts - Denise Trimm

Staying the Course

by Denise Wadsworth Trimm



Ms. Denise Trimm receives the 2002 Coca-Cola Company Distinguished Teacher in the Arts Award from Mr. Bill Overend, Director of Travel Industry Sales, Coca Cola Company.

When I returned from teaching class on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, I had a message to call the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts (NFAA) in Miami.

Each year the NFAA honors students from various fine arts and performing arts through the Arts Recognition and Talent Search (ARTS) program. A select group of young artists are chosen from all over the country to receive scholarships, prizes, and an all-expense paid week in Miami where they attend master classes and share their talents with the other honorees.

Because my seniors had only recently mailed their packets of poetry and fiction to this contest, I assumed the call was to tell me we had done something wrong. I expected to hear that a student had labeled her work improperly or that the postage came up short.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"It's what we can do for you," the representative said, his voice almost singing. "I have great news."

I scrambled through my desk looking for a pen and paper. Apparently, one or more of our students had won ARTS, and he wanted me to let them know.

"You have been chosen as our 2002 Distinguished Teacher of the Arts."

I had no idea that I was being considered for this prestigious award, so hearing that I had won left me standing there, mouth agape, pen and paper in hand with nothing to say.

As most educators will attest, formal recognition in our profession is rare. To be honored statewide is an incredible feat, but nationally, well, it's something I never expected would happen to me. To be perfectly honest, I never would have guessed that at this time in my life I would be teaching at all, much less be honored for it.

My husband can tell you that in the thirteen years I have taught, not one year has passed that I didn't tell him I wanted to do something else. I'd love to say that I have always wanted to be a teacher and there is nothing else in the world that I would rather do or be, but I cannot.

When I was a senior in high school my English teacher, Mrs. Bessie Dunn, told me that I was destined to be an English teacher. "No way," I said. "I'm going to be a lawyer, a broadcast journalist, a novelist, anything but an English teacher!" She just nodded at me with that knowing look on her face.

The first year I taught, I found myself asking how exactly it was that I ended up in the classroom. When I got my first paycheck, I sat at my desk and cried. As a teacher, I was earning only one hundred dollars a month more than I was making as a secretary before I went back to school. One hundred additional dollars to testify for four years of hard work, and now there was a two hundred dollar a month student loan to repay.

By Christmas break that first year, I had discovered two kids having sex in my classroom after school hours, the principal had asked me to change a basketball player's semester average, and I had been warned that if I didn't contribute to the principal's campaign for state legislature my contract would most likely not be renewed.

A few days before Christmas that first year, I broke the news to my husband that I was done with teaching. I didn't even plan to go back the second semester having already written six weeks of lesson plans for the substitute and having packed up my personal belongings in one small box.

He reminded me that there was a contract to honor and bills to pay, and if I wanted to do anything else, I'd have to wait until summer. I cried every day until January fourth, when I showed up with my box under my arm and my eyes red and swollen.

I left that school at the end of the year when we moved to Birmingham. Not knowing what else to do with a teaching degree, I interviewed for a position at Jess Lanier High School in Bessemer, where I taught English, journalism, and speech. This time, however, I was determined not to be defeated. If teaching was my profession, then I was going to be the best teacher I could.

I adored the students of Jess Lanier. They were warm, loving, and grateful for consistency and high standards. I soon learned, however, that the actions of few affected the lives of many. Gang fights in the lunchroom sent chairs flying. A couple of phoned-in bomb threats cancelled pep rallies. Fires set in bathrooms led to lockdowns. Weapons brought to school made teachers fearful to demand the best from their students. Hoodlums prevailed. The best teachers left. Good kids suffered. I left after three years, disgusted with an administration that cared too little and feared too much.

Then came the Alabama School of Fine Arts. I was not the person they originally hired to teach and chair the Creative Writing Department after Charles Ghigna left. I interviewed but was turned down. I interviewed other places too--dozens of places. After each interview, I was told it was between one other person and me. They always hired the other person. You see, politics is alive and well in education. I had rocked too many of those proverbial boats with the administration at Jess Lanier, and once the reference call was made, my phone ceased to ring.

James R. Nelson called my house on the Saturday after the first week of school, but I was not there. I was attending a Mary Kay Cosmetics brunch, where I had just signed up to become a consultant, even though I was allergic to their makeup and had never sold so much as a pack of chewing gum. Desperate times, desperate measures. Mr. Nelson, it turns out, was taking desperate measures himself, because the teacher he had hired quit after one week. "Can you

come on Monday?" he asked.

I assured him I could, thanked him, and then thanked God for intervening on my behalf.

Fresh from the thrill of scaring off one teacher, the students set their sights on me. It was obvious they underestimated me. I told them I had dealt with worse than them, and I wasn't going anywhere. Battles ensued, and I quickly learned which ones to fight and which to leave alone. One by one, they put down their arms and took up their pens. Before long, I was able to address the more serious issue at hand. I didn't have a clue how to teach creative writing.

I was a few courses away from earning my Master of Arts degree in English from UAB, but I had only completed a few writing courses, and they were all fiction classes. There I was in the position of teaching poetry, and I hadn't even read much contemporary poetry, much less written it. Dennis Covington, who was my advisor and teacher at the time, encouraged me to apply to the MFA program in Creative Writing at Tuscaloosa. I applied and was turned down.

Here I was a teacher of creative writing in one of the most prestigious schools in the country, and I couldn't get into a creative writing program. Not to be deterred, I did what I have always done when backed against the wall. I fought my way out.

I read everything I could get my hands on, enrolled in poetry classes at UAB, and pretended every day that I knew what I was talking about as I taught, borrowing from the adage, "fake it until you make it." I read the students' work carefully and listened closely as they discussed their own poetry as well as each other's. I relied on the seniors to teach me what it was I should be looking for. Every night I spent hours preparing for the job I didn't deserve, determined to earn the right to keep it.

The next year I reapplied to the MFA program in Tuscaloosa and was accepted. They too had a new chair and a new attitude, for which I was grateful. I taught during the day and attended evening classes, leaving home at seven in the morning and returning around eleven at night. I drank coffee to stay awake for the drive then took Melatonin to help me sleep. I graded papers between my MFA classes and wrote while I drove, composing my thoughts on a tape recorder.

My students and I learned together. As I discovered something, I passed it on to them. When they taught me something, I applied it to my own writing. I had great admiration for them, and they grew to respect me. We were, after all, in the same boat. We were exhausted and overwhelmed, but our passion for writing fueled us. Together, we could make it.

Nine years later I am receiving an award--an award that was prompted by the number of students I have taught who have won national creative writing awards. More important than that, it was from their recommendations that I was chosen. In an interview with the publicity director from NFAA, she asked me who is my inspiration. That one was easy. "My students," I told her. "If not for them, I would not still be in education." It was an epiphany for me.

Numerous times I have asked myself why I stay in education when there are so many reasons to leave. My reasons to stay, I realize now, are not reasons at all, but names. Names and faces etched in my memory. From that first year until now, I remember the students who--if only for a fraction of a moment on any given day--made me believe that what I was doing was worth it.

On the second week in January, I will arrive in Miami to receive an award. But it will not be the plane that takes me there. I will arrive on the shoulders of hundreds of students who have taught me the greatest lesson of all. I am a teacher because of them, and no award I receive is worth half as much as those moments when I look at their faces and find a reason to stay...just one more day.

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About Denise Trimm