

The Power of One

No one is more **beloved**—or more **committed** to

Rutgers or to teaching—than Barry Qualls *By Bill Glovin*



Barry Qualls's dramatic readings of Victorian literature in class are partly inspired by Charles Dickens, who often gave public readings of his own novels.

And just when he thinks the capstone of his career is his leadership role in helping transform undergraduate education on the New Brunswick Campus, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) bestow upon him the prestigious Professor of the Year honor.

“I can’t think of anyone more deserving of this teaching award than Barry,” says President Richard L. McCormick. “He is the best citizen of Rutgers, and certainly a large part of that is his lively classroom style and his ability to engage students in Victorian novels and prose, works that students often initially resist because of the perception that they lack relevance to their own lives.”

Few in the university community would disagree with the president’s assessment.

At a reception to celebrate the award in December, three former students representing different generations talked about their professor’s passion for all things Victorian. They recalled how Qualls’s role as an adviser inspired them and others to attend graduate school and how his classes turned them into more engaged readers and better writers. In a congratulatory email—one of 600 Qualls received—Paul Thur RC’83, GSNB’90, assistant director of the Writing Center at Boston University, wrote: “Your numerous note-filled legal pads and tremendous energy made it clear that we were in the presence of a passionate scholar—someone who was not only incredibly knowledgeable but also cared deeply about his subject. Without your encouragement, I may not have applied to graduate school.”

Before Barry V. Qualls utters a word about his remarkable 36-year career at Rutgers or his 2006 New Jersey Professor of the Year award, he’s asking me how my daughter is doing as a first-year student living on the Newark Campus, and teasing that he hopes I’m also writing stories more interesting than his. That Qualls downplays his own significance comes as no surprise to anyone who knows him or has ever taken one of his Victorian literature classes. His modesty and habit of putting others first have always been part of what makes him one of Rutgers’ most beloved professors and administrators.

If imitation is indeed the sincerest form of flattery, then another former student, Janice Lieberman RC'82, the consumer reporter for NBC's *Today* show, is one of Qualls's biggest admirers. At a Rutgers event two years ago, Lieberman did an on-the-money impression of him, says Qualls, exaggerating his own Southern drawl as he breaks into it: "Ms. Lieberman, if you don't learn to write, you'll never amount to a thing." On the phone, Lieberman laughs when I mention the impression. "Barry was far and away the best professor I had at Rutgers; I took every class he offered," she says. "He had an amazing knack for bringing characters to life. And he really did help me become a much better writer."

Two current English majors, Jeffrey Kessler RC'08 and Greta Nelson DC'07, say they will never forget Qualls's 19th-century British fiction class last fall. Kessler was moved by his professor's dramatic readings and probing questions, and amazed by his ability to sense the mood in the room and improvise accordingly. Nelson, who was instructed by her mother's friend, an alumnus, to not leave Rutgers without experiencing Qualls in the classroom, recalls him bursting into a rendition of "Fly Me to the Moon" to better explain the relationship between Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester, Eyre's enigmatic employer. "Victorian literature is profound and often depressing, but Professor Qualls used pop-culture references and humor to help us relate," she says. "He was also unbelievably accessible and responsive; it always felt like he put students first."

Qualls's dramatic readings in class are legendary. They are part of a tradition, he notes, established by Charles Dickens, who often gave public readings from his novels, "so popular were they and he." The readings are steps toward talking about complicated literary language and keeping students engrossed. "I took it as a compliment when one of my former students said she was convinced that I was totally insane, but had to keep coming back to see what I would do next," he says. "You can't teach large classes without creating a lot of energy in the room, and you can't create that energy unless you love the material, which I do."

Qualls, who has had to put his role as professor of English on the back burner while serving as interim vice president for undergraduate education, is looking forward to the days when he can increase his teaching load again. Teaching is his first love, he points out, and he is determined to expand his teaching load beyond a single course, as it was over this past academic year. At the same time, he knows that the undergraduate initiatives that he is helping

to shape will be around long after he is gone. "My colleagues tease me that they should have called the latest undergraduate education task force report 'Qualls III,'" he says, sighing and referring to his leadership role on two other similar task forces in former administrations.

"President McCormick and [Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs] Phil Furmanski had the vision to see this latest undergraduate education initiative through, and for that they should be given tremendous credit," he says. Without skipping a beat, he evaluates his own role in creating an entirely new Office of Undergraduate Education from scratch. "The office has been set up with one purpose, and that is to ensure that undergraduates and their education at Rutgers are as much a priority as graduate education and research," says Qualls, who served as dean of humanities for nine years.

Qualls, 61, says that when the president asked him to chair the Task Force on Undergraduate Education in 2004, he

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advised him to find a younger faculty member who might add a fresher perspective. But McCormick knew that Qualls was universally respected and that his experience gave him the insight needed to confront the complex and sometimes confusing system that had evolved.

"People like Barry, they trust him, and they believe in him," says McCormick. "He is one of the warmest and most genuine people I have ever known, and when he is working on a university project, no one ever questions his motives or speculates that he has an agenda other than what will benefit students."

Born in a tiny, poor coal-mining town in eastern Kentucky, Qualls is the son of a railroad machinist and a stay-at-home mom. His parents were devoted to education, and he fondly recalls sitting on the wide arm of the family's itchy mohair chair as his father read out loud. When he was 8 years old, the family, also including two older sisters and a twin brother, moved to central Florida. His twin, Larry, who runs his own digital art company in Brooklyn, "was more rebellious" and "is as close as anyone in the world to me," Qualls says.

Qualls's ninth-grade English teacher insisted her eager young student read William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, which put him on a path to a lifelong love affair with such authors as George Eliot, Jane Austen, and Charlotte Brontë. Qualls spent

(continued on page 48)

Qualls

continued from page 17

his undergraduate years at Florida State University, where his favorite professor convinced him to put aside his goal of becoming a high school English teacher and instead study Victorian literature at graduate school at Northwestern University.

He first set foot in New Jersey when he interviewed for a tenure-track position at Rutgers College. Hired in 1971, Qualls found his own mentors who helped him become a better teacher: Elaine Showalter, a Douglass College professor who persuaded him to rethink the role of women writers in shaping literary text, Bridget Lyons, a

Opera and a lover of Broadway musicals. I brag that my cousin was once a dancer with the ballet company. He instantly knows who she is and teases me that, as a result of my connection to someone so talented, my own stature has suddenly risen considerably. He also boasts that he is a fairly accomplished pastry chef and has been a Barbra Streisand groupie since he was 15 years old. “I recently paid \$300 to see her at Madison Square Garden, and she was absolutely amazing,” he says.

As we settle into his Old Queen’s office that’s decorated with an oil painting featuring a book and his late cat,

the opportunity to experience all the academic possibilities offered at this large research university,” says Qualls, whose office will sponsor field trips and guest speakers to supplement curriculum for the more than 110 courses. “Students have opportunities here that they don’t have at small undergraduate colleges, and they need to leave here knowing it.”

Qualls believes students need to take more responsibility for their education and that professors need to do a better job of inspiring them in that direction. “Some of the new initiatives are designed to help students slow down and think; one cannot fully understand complex ideas, other cultures, or historical implications without taking the time necessary to sort it all out,” he says. “At the same time, professors must realize that good teaching is as much about mentoring and encouraging as it is about good lectures and research. We have to find more ways to reward and recognize professors who excel at being mentors.”

English professor Richard Miller, a Qualls protégé, believes his colleague’s most important legacy is in “creating a lasting environment where the commitment to teaching well is the value that binds the community together.” Miller goes on to say: “It is not an exaggeration to say that Professor Qualls has directly influenced the education of tens of thousands of undergraduates and the teaching practice of hundreds of faculty members. He is an inspiration to us all, living proof that undergraduate education is the lifeblood of a research university.”

As I leave Qualls’s office and head down the creaky stairs of Old Queen’s, I recall my own undergraduate days. Thirty years later I remember enjoying *Jane Eyre* but barely recall my professor and our discussion about it. One day soon I hope to sit in on the Qualls class that dissects the great novel—and maybe even hear his rendition of “Fly Me to the Moon.” □

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professor of English who encouraged him to delve deeper into the meaning of words and passages. Qualls credits Ernie Jacob RC’73, one of his students and today a Wall Street analyst, with advising him to spend more time on the poem and less time on the poet. Jacob, a student turned friend, says, “It’s healthy when it’s somewhat of a two-way street between professor and student. Barry has become a master of the material through the years, and my guess is that he still pays close attention to what his students have to say.”

If you put together a list of committees and task forces that Qualls has chaired or served on, it would probably stretch for a block or two along College Avenue. So when I make the assumption that he can’t possibly have much of a life outside Rutgers, he quickly sets me straight. “Yes, I’ve been accused of being married to Rutgers, and while there are certainly days when it feels that way, it’s not at all true,” he says. The conversation quickly turns to his frequent trips to Manhattan. He’s a longtime subscriber to the New York City Ballet and Metropolitan

Macmillan; a photo of his other two beloved cats, Heath and Nerak; a fading portrait of Queen Victoria; and a collection of Rutgers coffee mugs, he apologizes for the clutter of papers, but says it’s a sign of how busy he is. For the past 12 months, he’s been concentrating on implementing the sweeping changes coming this fall for undergraduate education on the New Brunswick Campus.

At the heart of a successful transformation, he feels, is the need to reconnect professors and students—the more personal atmosphere he found when he first arrived all those years ago. Many of the academic changes—a new core curriculum, a new honors program, and final-year capstone experiences—will help forge those stronger connections. His personal favorite is the new 1-credit seminars that will be open to all first-year students. Designed to expose small groups of undergraduates to a wide range of topics outside their majors, seminars such as “A Woman for President,” “Biological and Chemical Weapons,” and “The Oceans and Human Society” will be taught by senior faculty on a pass-fail basis.

“Students are finally going to have