good teachers/good friends

My lunch with Suzanne

It’s hard to imagine the Puget Sound faculty without Suzanne Barnett, but, alas, our teacher’s teacher will retire in May. Professor Emeritus Walter Lowrie, the man who hired her, looks back.

Upon completing her 34th year at Puget Sound this spring, Suzanne Barnett is hanging it up. She’s ready for the next phase of her very active life: the possibilities and the adventures of retirement. On one of those rare sunny January days that are so special in the Pacific Northwest, Suzanne and I lunched at the Old House Café, reminiscing about our shared years on the campus, years that began in 1973, when Suzanne applied for the recently established faculty position in Asian history.

Back then, her already emerging talents were important factors recommending Suzanne to us. Her mentors at Harvard and faculty supervisors at part-time teaching positions in the Boston area wrote of the qualities with which she would be later identified on our campus. One recommender approvingly noted her “forceful personality, a strong sense of her own independence.” Another lauded “Suzanne's unwillingness to let sloppy talk pass for meaningful discussion.”

Small wonder, then, that she made the department’s short list of candidates. In fact, she was then-President-elect Phil Phibbs’ first faculty interviewee. In the spring of 1973, as he was preparing to leave Wellesley College for his post here, Phibbs cheerfully agreed to interview Suzanne on the East Coast, just so we could be sure of the value in flying her across country to meet with Puget Sound folks. His report was highly encouraging, the visit highly successful, and, as they say, the rest is history.

When she arrived in the spring semester, 1974, Suzanne had just completed the fall term as a visiting faculty member at the University of Virginia, where she was engaged in both graduate and undergraduate teaching. Although stimulated by working with the bright graduate students, Suzanne nonetheless felt insufficient time remained for her undergrad classes. She wanted to teach undergraduates at an institution centered in the liberal arts—like Muskingum College, her alma mater. At UPS, Suzanne felt she had found a home. And although she is too modest to say so herself, over the years she has eschewed opportunities for faculty and administrative positions elsewhere.

Mission defined
Suzanne is a presence on campus. She is known everywhere. Her ubiquity reflects her conviction that all parts of the institution impinge on an undergraduate’s potential success. Famously organized—indeed, hands down the most organized person on campus, her reputation for faculty service and governance work is legendary on campus. Not just for the hours and hours involved. As one colleague has observed: “Suzanne continually steps up to keep this university functioning, and functioning efficiently: Her inspired dedication and her unshakable belief in the value of our work help me to remember why I do what I do for a living.” Her career in this regard was capped last August when, at the annual beginning-of-the-school-year dinner, Suzanne received the 2006 Sustained Faculty Service award.

Administration of the Asian studies program, which she took over from the late Bob Albertson, is an enviable legacy. So is her teaching. From a treasure trove of student recollections, more than there’s room to include here, a few excerpts from student letters to me capture the essence of a remarkable teacher:

Rob Rozehnal ’91, a scholar of Islam in South Asia, now on the faculty at Lehigh University, wrote: “I will always remember Professor Barnett for her straight-laced, sober, and stern style in the classroom. She really scared the hell out of a lot of students. But in my informal conversations with her in her office, at her home (eating cucumber sandwiches!), or in brief encounters around campus, I remember her honesty, frankness, enthusiasm, encouragement, and kindness.”

So many students learned so much about writing. Steve Harvey ’84 recalls: “One of Suzanne’s dictums that has stuck with me over the years is the importance of writing for a general audience. In her assignments, Suzanne would instruct us to avoid jargon, use simple language, and write so that any intelligent reader could follow the argument, even if he or she has no familiarity with the topic. In this light, I’d like to share with you the first few sentences of the instructions to authors from The Lancet, one of the world’s most prestigious medical journals: ‘The Lancet will consider any original contribution that advances or illuminates medical science or practice, or that educates or entertains the journals’ readers. Whatever you have written, remember that it is the general reader whom you are trying to reach. One way to find out if you have succeeded is to show your draft to colleagues in other specialties. If they do not understand, neither, very probably, will The Lancet’s staff or readers.’” Steve continues, “I’d hate to make any careless accusations of plagiarism, but I have to tell you that when I read that paragraph, it occurred to me that whoever wrote it might have taken a course from Suzanne at some point in the past and was being a bit sloppy about citing their sources.”

Brian Threlkeld ’83 also remembers, “At the beginning of your paper, perhaps the first two or three paragraphs, Suzanne does a close critique of your writing style, grammar, and other mechanics. Red ink being a finite resource, unlike our mistakes, she eases off after that, but continues hitting the high points, and the really low ones. Studying with Suzanne is a great education in good writing. Her attention to detail builds the discipline of a student’s own eye and ear, and her praise and encouragement when you start to get things right are profoundly gratifying and encouraging.”
Firmly adhering to the principle of mentoring, not mothering, Suzanne conducts her classroom with good-humored leadership. On a day when visiting a couple of years ago I was struck by the before-class rapport between students and their instructor; they genuinely liked each other. Her students call her “Suzanne” without any sense of loss of respect, and she conveys her respect for them, too. I thought of the early Protestant missionaries to China with which Suzanne began her scholarly career: She exudes their zeal, their intensity. Secular though her mission may be, it is a mission.

Brian Threlkeld addressed this quality in remarks he prepared to deliver last fall. “That devotion to a mission is manifest in all our memories whenever we think about Suzanne. . . Her life is full of teaching, and her teaching is full of life. For Suzanne, the calling of teaching could never be limited to the four walls of a classroom. The Barnetts frequently invited students to dinner in their home, where we enjoyed both excellent company and excellent cooking. . . Suzanne and Redmond taught us by example and immersion that the pleasures of the life of the mind, of informed and inquisitive conversation, are most fully enjoyed when they are organic within one’s whole life. And by bringing us into their lives, they helped us get used to the idea that this, the academe, might be our world, too.”

The teacher’s teacher

These moving alumni reflections are mirrored by formal faculty evaluations. And a significant external validation came in 2002 when she was named the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Washington State Professor of the Year.

While students will primarily remember Suzanne as an exceptional teacher, she also has carved out a respected position as a scholar—by her journal articles, by skillful manuscript and book reviews, and by her edited volumes, *Asia in the Undergraduate Curriculum* and *Christianity in China*. She’s currently completing her book manuscript, *China’s New Geographies in the Nineteenth Century*. And not surprisingly, with her organized energy, she has shouldered leadership positions in several national historical organizations.

During her years here, the faculty and three presidential administrations—Phibbs, Pierce, Thomas—have moved the University of Puget Sound to the front ranks of national liberal arts colleges. But no college can rest on its laurels. To do so is to lose ground. Along with the rest of the university community, Suzanne is determined to continue the climb to the top. Helping to ensure that faculty keep excellence foremost, she is often seen informally participating in faculty searches in other departments, activities that might be considered peculiar but that reflect her philosophy of a shared academic enterprise, all parts helping to ensure excellence in each. UPS is a special place, she asserts, because, unlike most colleges, there is extensive interaction among the faculty: frequent team teaching, and much visitation in each other’s classrooms as guest specialists and evaluators in the regular faculty review process.

As we prepared to leave our lunch and the reminiscing about our long careers at UPS, Suzanne’s affection for and deep commitment to Puget Sound was tightly summarized: “UPS is a remarkable place, and I feel blessed to have had my career here.” Equally blessed has been the institution.

*Walter Lowrie ’58 is a Puget Sound professor of history, emeritus.*

**Two events to honor Suzanne**

Having worn two hats almost from when she first set foot across the intersection of 15th and Lawrence, Suzanne’s final year features two formal farewells. At the end of September the history department hosted a dinner, preceded by a colloquium with two graduates from the ’70s and ’80s who spoke to a packed room on “What difference did it make to have studied history?” (A lot, to hear them say it.) In April it will be Asian studies’ turn. “Asia and the Liberal Arts,” a three-day symposium will feature distinguished scholars, many of whom have been or are a part of the UPS program. The events, open to students and the public, promise fresh scholarly understanding of several Asian topics. Suzanne wants to keep the focus on the teaching/scholarship these events showcase—a mirror into “what the university has become.” Her retirement, she insists, is an occasion to celebrate the academic enterprise that is the University of Puget Sound. — WL