

Colby



Colby Magazine

Volume 99
Issue 4 *Winter 2011*

Article 6

January 2011

Thank You, Professor Bassett: Former "toads" bid farewell to their beloved teacher and mentor

Gerry Boyle
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>

Recommended Citation

Boyle, Gerry (2011) "Thank You, Professor Bassett: Former "toads" bid farewell to their beloved teacher and mentor," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 99 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol99/iss4/6>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Thank you, Professor Bassett



Charles W. Bassett: 1932-2010

Former “toads” bid farewell to their beloved teacher and mentor

It was Professor Jennifer Boylan who put out the call. Charlie Bassett was sick, his cancer had spread. He needed some encouraging words. And within minutes, the e-mails began pouring in from across the decades. Soon there were hundreds. Teachers, bankers, college professors, marketing managers. They sent photos of their kids, updates on their families and careers and travels, book recommendations, favorite poems. There were offers of beers, advice on how to fight cancer from those who had, admonitions to leave the hospital in Pennsylvania. As one put it, “Five words. Get. Your. Ass. Up. Here.”

Bassett did return home to Waterville, where he died Oct. 19.

He was officially Charles W. Bassett, the Lee Family Professor of American Studies and English, emeritus. But they called him “Bassett,” “Charlie,” “CB,” “Professor Bassett,” and mimicking his affectionate nickname for them, “You old toad.” They reminisced. A lecture. A phrase. Bassett sending a postcard, a get-well note, an encouraging word,

a needed kick in the pants, traveling across the country to a former student’s wedding. The image, frozen in time, of Bassett in full stride in *Lovejoy 100*.

They thanked him for his teaching, his lessons on literature and life, his decades-long friendship, his love. In short, they sent their love right back at him.

Boylan, a close Bassett friend and colleague, sat in his hospital room and read the letters aloud, with their references to his renowned homilies on Updike, Fitzgerald, Hemingway. One letter, from Keryn Kwedor '00, particularly struck him, Boylan said. “Lying there in his bed,” Boylan wrote in an e-mail, “it made him want to talk about Hemingway. He was particularly struck by the line, ‘No man is alone upon the sea.’ If Charlie was upon the sea at the end, all those letters made it clear he was not alone.”

Boylan shared many of the letters with Bassett. We excerpt a few here.

—Gerry Boyle '78

I know my memory of students past is fading and you might not remember each one of us, but **please know this is just one story of how you made a difference at Colby. You are one of the most loved, honored, adored, and respected people I know.** I feel truly grateful to have known you and to have learned from you. You will be in my heart always!

All my love, **Liz Helft Darby '91**

The sunset the last few nights could have been plucked from the coast of Maine. (We have plenty of painters too.) **So much of what's good in my life comes from or was shaped in Maine, not least by your lessons and care.**

Scott Stein '83



I recall you staying with [us] in Chicago when my daughter was just born. You were in town for a Colby fundraiser ... and I was honored to have you stay with us. My daughter Megan is now 12 and I have a son Matthew who is 9. **They are both avid readers ... and it is with pure joy that I see them read books that I remember with such love.** It is a wonderful feeling to re-read a book like *The Fern* and discuss it with my daughter...

Thank you.

Jen Milsop Millard '90

Also ... my mother and I ran into you at The Last Unicorn my senior spring. You were your typical self—charming, charismatic, and a bit cynical. Needless to say, my mother (who I not so objectively believe to have a great sense of humor), got a boot out of you. **She was pleased to meet one of my professors, happier still that it was a guy with such a personality, and downright thrilled when you told her how beautiful she was.** Well, you must know that you are something of a ladies' man, but I have to say that it meant much to her to be complimented. My father had passed away that year and to be flattered by a handsome professor was a nice change of pace. Thank you, Professor Bassett.

Maggie O'Brien White '00

I ended up standing behind a desk in a classroom and even more lost about what I was supposed to do once there. I wrote you a letter asking you how you managed to love the job that you were doing so much, a job that I was finding God-awful! You were prompt and most reassuring in your reply. I still have it folded up in one of my journals. You asked me if I remembered learning how to drive a car, and you said you hoped it had been an automatic (it was!), and you told me that teaching was the same thing. Well, I love to drive (and really only if it IS automatic) and you're right, I love teaching and it has become so much easier! Your words and reassurance have guided me through some times that felt rather dark and uncertain!

Sue Maddock Hinebauch '88



I have met few people in my life who are so obviously in the exact place they are meant to be. **Charlie Bassett was meant to be an English teacher at Colby. Period.**

Amy Ostermueller Wyatt '96

I was ... Charlie's assistant my senior year. He and I were very close, more so because that was the year Carol was diagnosed with cancer (I used to go to his house periodically to make dinner and play cribbage with him). And, we've stayed in touch over the years. **In fact, my five-year-old is "Charlie" because of dear Bassett.**

Suzanne Regnier '92

My older son recently brought home a fabulous reading list for college-bound students—he's a bit daunted by the list. I, on the other hand, having read many of them at Colby, am thrilled. I can hear your voice urging us to understand, to make connections, to think critically. So, with great anticipation, I've told my son that I will join him in reading his way through the list. We started with *Old Man and the Sea*.

So...know that I am thinking of you, as are legions of others. **Know that your voice is still strong in our minds, and that your love of literature and the perspectives you taught us all are being passed along to another generation.**

Kimberly Hokanson '81



CELEBRATING CHARLIE BASSETT | 1932-2010

I have now just begun my 32nd year of teaching at a small private college outside of Boston. I begin my intro lit classes with the fable that you introduced me to in Contemporary American Literature, the story at the start of *Appointment in Samarra*. I tell stories of you in my classrooms; I do your walk and your talk. ***I stroll the aisles, I get in their faces, I provoke and challenge, and I share the passion. You are with me, all the time.***

Debbie Mael-Mandino '73

I remember making a passing comment about [job] worries to you after class one day. Little did I know that, later that day, my dorm room phone would ring and you would be on the other end.

"Kwedor? Bassett here." (As if that voice could belong to anyone else!) We had been reading *The Old Man and the Sea*, and ... you told me that the message that I should take from that book was simple: do what you want to do, do what makes you happy. Don't be like Manolin, doing only what makes others happy; he only regretted that decision later.

That was the first time anyone had so bluntly told me that I could control my own fate, that even if my first job after Colby wasn't glamorous or prestigious, if I was happy then it was a good decision.

You singled me out, made me feel like someone actually understood me, and you have been my Santiago ever since.

I am glad that you have Boylan to keep you company now, and I am sure that, even if they are too far away to stop by for a face-to-face visit, there are thousands of people like me who are with you in their thoughts. Just like the book says, "The clouds were building up now for the trade wind and he looked ahead and saw a flight of wild ducks etching themselves against the sky over the water, then blurring, then etching again and he knew no man was ever alone on the sea."

Love, Keryn [Kwedor] '00



Admissions books may talk about the special professor-student relationships at Colby, but they really can't do justice to what you have brought to my life over the past 20+ years. I just re-read the Anne Bradstreet poem that you read at my wedding. It is still my favorite poem of all time.

Becky Birrell Smith '92

Many, many positive thoughts coming your way from here. I'm glad you have good friends like Professor Boylan around you if I can't be there to give you a hug. Perhaps she will do me the favor of giving you a surrogate hug. Or several.

xxooxxooxxooxxoo

Rebecca Hushing McCole '76



Thanks for the note about Charlie, although I'm sad to hear how ill he is. Your reference to Zoo Lit reminded me of one of the highlights of my Colby career—hitting Charlie in the face with a pie (banana cream, as I recall) in front of about 200 people in Lovejoy auditorium in the spring of 1975. It's probably the only time Charlie and I have ever had our pictures in the *Boston Globe*. ***Little did I know when I hit him that he would put a curse on me to become an English professor for the rest of my days.*** And so here I am—the only Shakespeare guy in Alaska—sitting in my real English professor office, pretending not to enjoy it.

Terence Reilly '75

I was looking through my wedding pictures the other day on the computer and came across one of you dancing with me with the Pacific Ocean in the background. I will be forever grateful that you were able to make the trip to Pebble Beach for our wedding. I think my dad was a little upset that I danced with you before I danced with him—I made sure he thought it was just an oversight on my part (but it wasn't). I honestly don't know how I would have made it through my senior year at Colby without you.

Alicia Haines Hammond '00



I received Jenny Boylan's e-mail today, which has reminded me that I've been intending to write to you for quite some time now.

It first happened last April. I was lecturing to a group of undergraduates about environmental justice, and asked them how many remembered the day the levees broke in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Only a few of them raised their hands. I was stunned, but then I did the math, and realized that this group of sophomores and juniors were only in middle school during the time of this, our most recent, national tragedy. They probably were not tuning in to the news all that well at the tender age of 14. ***But before I could rationally process the thought, out popped the words: "You youthful toads."***

So, last April 16, did you know that one of your former students was channeling you? I'm sure I'm not the first one to join that club of Charlie Bassett alums.

Laura Senier '90



I wouldn't have written anything memorable, nor did my hand ever shoot up to share an insight, but I never missed a class, and through the last 24 years that I've taught high school English, ***I've tried to live by your example. Though I wouldn't flatter myself to say I've succeeded, I know I've been on the right track for having tried to follow that star.***

Ted Goodrich '85

I was a biology major but your class was one of my favorite courses at Colby and I continue to love the short story. ... When needing books to read following graduation, I often turned to Raymond Carver, Philip Roth, and other authors you introduced me to. Sometimes, I choose a book to escape, only to find it addresses the condition I'm trying to escape from. This was the case when I read Roth's "The Dying Animal" - in 2002 when I was going through chemotherapy and radiation. I don't remember the full story now, but recall it as painful and beautiful to read.

Thank you, Professor Bassett, for the gift of the short story, which has helped me through difficult times in my life.

Name withheld by request



Professor Charles Bassett holds court on a spring day on Mayflower Hill, trading his customary classroom for the steps in front of Miller Library.

I'm still living the quiet life up in Northern Michigan with my wife, Carol, and 4-year-old daughter Laney. I was thinking about you this summer as I wrote some marketing copy for a client of mine. **Would Robert Frost be horrified or amused that I used "Mending Wall" to help sell woodchippers for a Vermont-based company?** If Frost could have gotten a DR Chipper out of the deal, I'm sure he would have gone for it—how else could he keep those trespassing pines and apple trees in line?

Rich Bachus '87



I graduated from Colby in 1984 with a double major in English and American Studies. You were my advisor and eventually became much more than that. **My father died when I was 15 and, you may not have known this, but you were also a father figure to me, someone who listened and offered valuable advice,** but didn't sugar-coat anything and didn't put up with whining.

Kathy Coleman '84

I am still teaching at Oxford Hills High School (chair of the English department, no less) and can tell you that I think of you and your teaching several times a year. **You brought to the classroom a passion that, while I try to emulate, I cannot quite achieve.** Every year, I tell the story of your class when you would say, "Damn it kids, if there's one thing you have to remember, it's this," after which you would nail the essentials of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Bellow or one of the other greats you introduced me to. Of course, I came to find out that there wasn't just one thing I had to "get," there were hundreds.

Brewster Burns '84

MORE ONLINE

The editors of the *Colby Echo*, Michael Brophy '12 and Courtney Yeager '12, put out the call for tributes to Charlie Bassett for the newspaper's Oct. 27 edition. The response was immediate and overwhelming.

To see the *Echo* Bassett coverage go online to www.thecolbyecho.com/news/961/.

For more *Echo* letters to go www.colby.edu/mag: keyword Bassett

For a profile of Professor Bassett from *Colby* magazine, on the occasion of his retirement in 1999, go to <http://www.colby.edu/colby.mag/BassettRetires>