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Hanging It Up: Charlie Bassett and his trademark trenchcoat prepare to leave Colby

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Charlie Bassett and his trademark trenchcoat prepare to leave Colby

It is a Friday morning in April and students are assembled in Lovejoy 100 in clumps and knots. The course is The American Short Story. The story de jour, "Goodbye, Columbus" by Philip Roth. Five minutes into his lecture, Charlie Bassett is ranging the hall like a border collie, moving up and down the aisles, into the rows, leaning over his charges and holding their attention with his furrowed gaze, his almost-maniac gestures, the mesmerizing sing-song of his voice.

"And where did Neil go to college?" Bassett asks, of the Roth character's short-lived social climb.

"Rutgers," the students reply.

"Rutgers," Bassett repeats slowly, enunciating carefully as though the word contains a subliminal clue. "Rutgers is not Radcliffe. It never will be. He's a *librarian*."

The word hangs in the air like a soap bubble. Bassett lets it turn slowly as smiles break out around the room and the lesson sinks in. That in America, we are defined by what we wear, by what we eat. We are how we earn our money.

And then Bassett's off again, arms raised in exhortation, alluding to Fitzgerald, Raymond Carver, calling on students by barking their last names. But of course, it is a bark that has no bite, an affectionate gnawing felt by hundreds of Colby students over the past 30 years.

But it may not be felt much longer.

Charles Walker Bassett, Lee Family Professor of American Studies and English, officially retired at the end of the spring '99 semester. After 45 years in the classroom, Bassett, 67, is scheduled to step down. The father of American studies at Colby has reached the point where he will no longer have to play Lovejoy 100. As they say in the central Maine that he has long called home, Charlie Bassett is getting done.

HANGING IT UP



By Gerry Boyle '78

"The word got out that this is the old man's last course," Bassett said, heading for Lovejoy that morning. "So there's the physics people, the bio people, the chemists. It makes me feel kind of good that I could pull out a mob this big in my 66th year."

The course filled quickly despite the rumor that Bassett might be back in the classroom next year as a sabbatical replacement. The acknowledged master of the big lecture, Bassett has attracted throngs of Colby undergraduates to his courses with his stage presence. His backstage generosity has kept mobs of Colby alumni in his life.

When word went out that this article was in the works, the Bassett stories started pouring in. Just a few can be recounted here.

Susan Maxwell Reisert '86 recalled that Bassett actually dissuaded her from going directly to graduate school in American studies. She did some soul-searching instead and eventually received her master's degree in divinity from Harvard University. Reisert is now a part-time minister in Waterville, where her husband teaches at Colby.

"Charlie really embodied what I believe a college professor should embody," Reisert said. "He was just a wonderful advisor."

Susanna Montezemolo '97, a researcher for the Association of Trial Lawyers of America in Washington, remembered going to Bassett at a time when she was unhappy at Colby. Montezemolo said she was thinking of transferring. Bassett listened, she said, and then didn't try to change her mind. He simply said he'd do every-

thing he could to help her if she wanted to leave.

Montezemolo decided that if Colby had professors like Bassett, she'd better reconsider.

"That he should be so supportive . . ." she said. And still is.

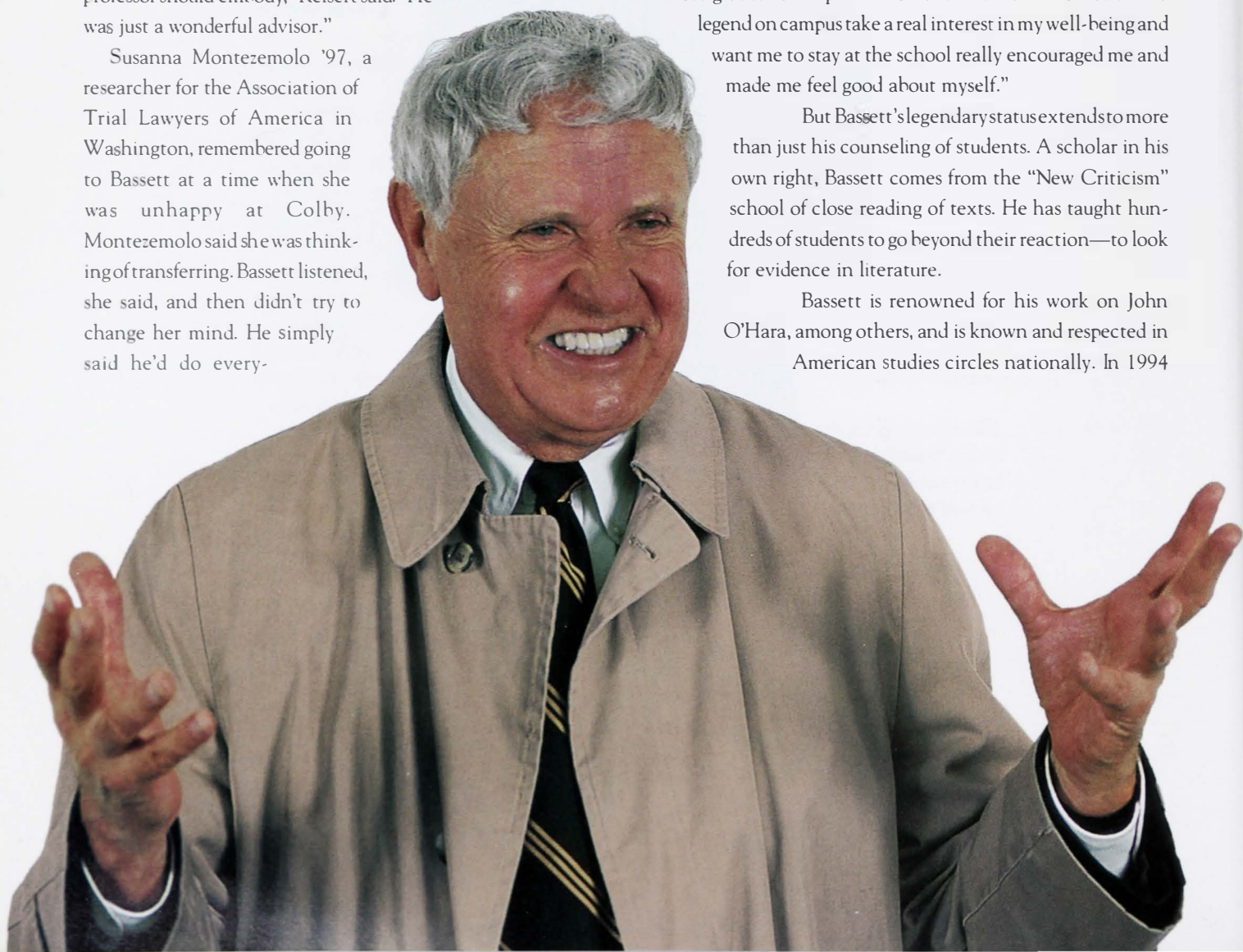
At the end of his "Goodbye, Columbus" lecture that day, Bassett was approached by a student, Angela Cannon '99. Cannon told Bassett that she had been hired to work in the Farnham Writers' Center at Colby after graduation. For Cannon, this was a singular triumph. For Bassett, it was one of many in which he's quietly played a part.

Cannon came to Colby from Eastport in Downeast Maine. Valedictorian at Shead High School, she traded a community where she knew everyone for a place where she didn't know a soul. After 12 years of straight A's, Cannon found herself failing one course her first semester, getting a C in another. She was considering leaving Colby when she talked to Professor Bassett.

"Somehow he made me feel it was OK," Cannon said recently. "He said, 'You have a tutor and you're going to bring those grades back up.' . . . To have this man who was such a legend on campus take a real interest in my well-being and want me to stay at the school really encouraged me and made me feel good about myself."

But Bassett's legendary status extends to more than just his counseling of students. A scholar in his own right, Bassett comes from the "New Criticism" school of close reading of texts. He has taught hundreds of students to go beyond their reaction—to look for evidence in literature.

Bassett is renowned for his work on John O'Hara, among others, and is known and respected in American studies circles nationally. In 1994



he received the first annual Mary C. Turpie Prize in American Studies from the national American Studies Association. The selection committee cited him for taking over Colby's modest program and, over the years, building it into "the largest and most successful undergraduate [American studies] major at any liberal arts college in the country." He directed Colby's American Studies Program for almost 25 years, chaired the English Department and has advised generations of colleagues.

"He really is considered the wise sage," said Cedric Bryant, associate professor of English.

But both Bryant and Margaret McFadden, assistant professor of American studies, emphasize that Bassett not only continues to dispense wisdom, he absorbs it as well.

"He's sixty-seven years old," McFadden said recently. "He's entitled to be set in his ways and he just isn't."

For that reason, Bryant and Bassett recently teamed up for lectures on a collection of stories by Alice Walker. Bryant noted that the stories are not easy to read or to teach, that they contain new ideas and perspectives that some people Bassett's age would reject out of hand.

"Charlie is precisely the opposite of that," Bryant said. "He has never stopped expanding and revising his courses. He's always broadening his own syllabus."

And not for his own benefit.

In 1993, Bassett was awarded the first Senior Class Teaching Award for Outstanding Teaching and Support of Colby Students. The next year Bryant received the award, which has since been renamed in honor of Bassett. Recently Bryant noted that Bassett continues to try to teach as many students as he can, not for egotistical reasons but because he believes it's imperative that students not miss the literature he teaches and the insights it offers.

"He honors teaching in a way that acknowledges it as the centerpiece of undergraduate education at Colby," Bryant said.

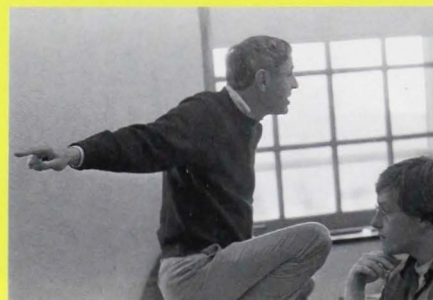
And as teaching is the centerpiece of a Colby education, so is Bassett the centerpiece of many students' Colby experience.

Bassett's office on the third floor of Miller Library is lined with books. And posters. And signs from South Dakota and Kansas, his early turf. And postcards from all over the country—Plains states predominate—and around the world. And photographs of Bassett at class reunions. Bassett with brides and grooms. Bassett with ushers and bridesmaids.

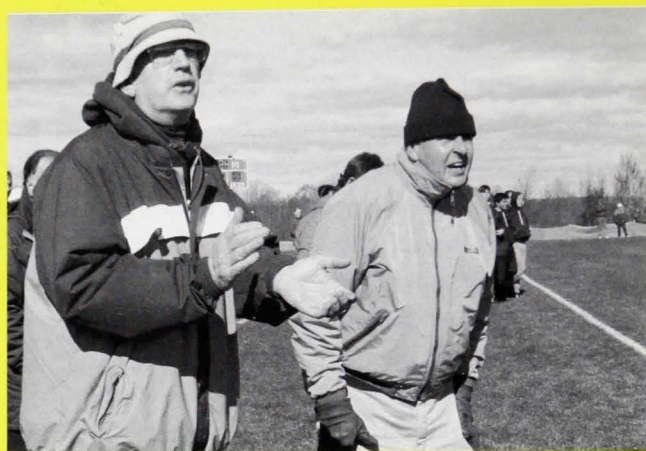
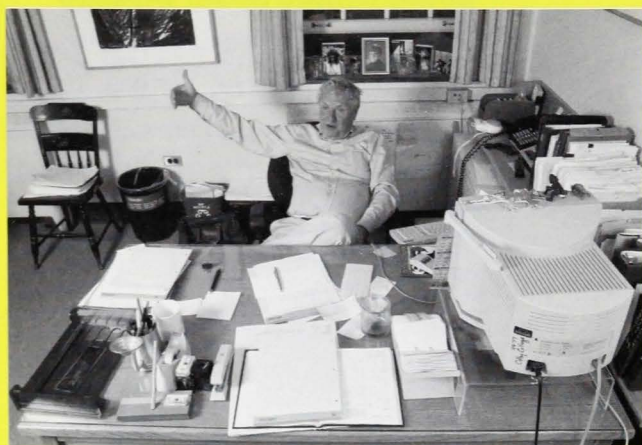
"I just go down to the bookstore and get these little bottles," he said, in his trademark faux grouse. "[Colby bookstore manager] Bruce Barnard gives me a discount because I buy so much crap over there. I'm pauperized between babies and weddings."

Some Things Never Change

Bassett has been waving his arms at students since he arrived 30 years ago.



A Symbol of Colby to Generations



Bassett in his office (left), where generations of students have been consoled, cajoled and counseled, and on the sidelines of the soccer pitch where, with Don Allen (geology), he has been a fixture.

Nor is his participation limited to attendance.

Last year, Bassett says, he got a call at home from a former student.

"This woman said, 'Bassett, I want you to marry me,'" he recounted. "I said, 'Don't you think there's a little disparity in our ages to get around?' She said, 'No. I want you to become a notary public and marry me on Halloween night.'"

So Bassett did, writing to the Maine secretary of state and requesting the test. "It was open book," he marveled.

And on Halloween, Bassett married Leah Greenman '92 and Don Stauffer '91 in a ceremony on the shores of Sebago Lake. "He was perfect," Greenman said. "He explained who he was and read a poem that he had picked out."

The poem was by Ann Bradstreet. A dog was the ring bearer. "The best man had this dog on the leash," Bassett said, chuckling and shaking his head.

If that was one of the more unusual manifestations of his friendships with former students, it was just one of many. Bassett tours the country doing alumni events. He is the first faculty member booked for alumni reunions.

"I get twenty e-mails a week," Bassett said. "I keep in touch with mobs of alums. It seems to me that's part of my job."

But it's hardly work.

With the least prompting, Bassett will wax on about Colby students, almost marveling that they could be such nice kids. "They really are. They were our babysitters. They were our leaf rakers. They were our wood stackers. These kids have been part of my family for thirty years." When his wife of 38 years, Carol, died in 1995, Bassett received more than 600 letters of condolence from alumni and other friends.

Carol Bassett, emeritus associate professor of mathematics at Colby, succumbed to cancer. During a recent interview, Bassett said he had just gotten word that his sister, his only sibling, had been

diagnosed with a tumor. Bassett had been up much of the night worrying, and that morning was uncharacteristically somber.

But then a student appeared in the door. He mustered a smile, listened as she explained a scheduling problem relating to her junior year abroad. Bassett cheerily gave her some advice, called her "Sweetie."

"See if you can find a solution," he said, "because Bassett is no magician."

If not a magician, then what? What is it about this rumpled uncle of a man that makes him so important to so many?

Michelle Rainforth '93, a systems manager in Cambridge, Mass., gave it a try.

"He's just so good-natured," she said from her office recently. "He's one of the people that I admire most of anyone I've ever met. He's so righteous—no, not righteous. He's just a great person in so many ways."

Rainforth, like others, then offered a Bassett snapshot.

"I went to visit him a couple of years after graduation," she said. "His children [David, now a banker in London; Beth, now working with a dentist in Alaska] are adopted and he was talking about them, about how thrilled they were to get them. It was just the most wonderful story to hear. He worships his kids. I felt like he almost adopted me."

Mary Federle '88, of Cumberland, Maine, mother of five children, said Bassett was at the top of her list of outgoing birth announcements. Raised in Waterville, where she knew the Bassetts and their children, Federle said she came to Colby to learn that Charlie Bassett's circle extended far and wide.

"He made everyone feel welcome," Federle said. "It's not as though it's this select group of American studies majors."

Select group? I don't think so.

Set out to amass evidence of Bassett largess and you soon find



Bassett's Halloween readings (left) have filled Lorimer Chapel for a dozen years. He attends so many weddings that the bookstore gives him a discount on gifts, and he hasn't missed a reunion (right) in 25 years.

yourself wrestling with a Ken Starr-sized file of anecdotes.

The time Bassett offered to "put the fear of God" in the administrator of a renowned art museum who was dawdling with paperwork for a student's internship. The time Bassett incorporated part of a senior's honors thesis into one of his lectures, giving the student full credit and a much-needed shot of confidence. The time Bassett congratulated a bench-warming basketball player, recounting in detail every move she made—in her three minutes in the game.

Bassett sending books to alumni because they touched on something they'd studied years earlier. Bassett apologizing—for years—for standing up a student for dinner. Bassett, who can pack alumni meetings across the country, spending a big chunk of a Saturday taking a sophomore's parents out for breakfast.

One former student said she and Bassett exchange e-mail every couple of months. It would be more frequent, she said, "but we're both busy."

And on and on and on.

"About him," said Montezemolo, the Washington law researcher, "I could go on forever."

But why?

"He loves them," said McFadden, Bassett's American studies colleague. "He cares about them. To whom is that not important?"

It certainly is to Bassett, who describes his relationship with Colby as "a mutual love affair." That the procession of new initiates into the Bassett circle would suddenly end seems somehow unthinkable. But that is the point to which Bassett has come, and it has left him puzzling over what form life will take after Lovejoy 100.

A day or two after his Philip Roth lecture, we sat and talked at his home in Waterville. There was a stack of blue books on

the floor by the couch, Colby mail on the tables. Asked what he hoped he'd accomplished with his students at Colby, Bassett was succinct:

"I guess if I could make a student see in ways that he or she had not seen before," he said. "If you could train a student to look at things in a different perspective, in a broader perspective."

That he certainly has done, countless times. And when the time for training is over?


Bassett spoke fondly of his colleagues at the College, present and past, living and dead. He mentioned retirees who are scattered in warmer climes around the country. Though recently diagnosed with diabetes, he's got that under control—"diet and exercise, the two most hated words in the English language"—so Bassett likely will be able to travel in retirement. He said he'd like to see the Northwest ("I have friends there"). The Southwest ("I have friends there"). The Carolina coast ("I have lots of friends there").

But there was a tone of self-persuasion to the travel talk. Indeed, in an earlier conversation in his office, Bassett had come right out and said it: "I'm not somebody who goes and stands in front of the Parthenon."

"Gerry, I've been doing this for 40 years," Bassett said. "When the leaves begin to turn, I begin to salivate *The Great Gatsby*. I don't know what I'll do. I don't know what I'll do."

But he does know what he'll do for the upcoming fall semester.

It seems that, after all, an odd intersection of sabbaticals created a shortage of professors. Charlie Bassett, newly retired, has agreed to teach three courses.

There was a need, and when it comes to Colby, Bassett has never said no. 

Gerry Boyle '78, a former student of Bassett's, will have his sixth mystery novel, Cover Story, published by Berkley in February.