



October 2009

## More Than Mentors: Begun in the classroom, relationships between professors and students thrive beyond Mayflower Hill

Gerry Boyle  
*Colby College*

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



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Boyle, Gerry (2009) "More Than Mentors: Begun in the classroom, relationships between professors and students thrive beyond Mayflower Hill," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 98 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol98/iss3/7>

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.

A photograph of a woman and a young woman standing on a wooden deck overlooking a large body of water. The woman on the right is wearing a brown top and jeans, holding a drink. The young woman on the left is wearing a green dress and a brown belt. A golden retriever is sitting on the deck in front of them. The background shows a calm lake, distant hills, and a clear blue sky. The title text is overlaid in large, white, semi-transparent letters.

# MORE THAN MENTORS

**Begun in the classroom, relationships  
between professors and students  
thrive beyond Mayflower Hill**

**BY GERRY BOYLE '78**

**O**n a visit to New York City, Marina Netto Grande Campos's 5-year-old daughter, Amanda, fell in love with a dollhouse at Toys“R”Us. The dollhouse wouldn't fit in the family's luggage for the return to their home in São Paulo, Brazil, so Grande did the next best thing. She bought the dollhouse online from a seller who wouldn't ship internationally—but who would ship to the home of Patrice Franko, Grande's former economics professor.

Within days, parcels containing dollhouse parts (some assembly required) started arriving on Franko's doorstep in Maine. “The boxes started coming, and I'm saying, ‘Oh, my god,’” Franko said, laughing. A few weeks later, Franko, an expert on Latin American economies, was traveling to Rio de Janeiro for a conference. She packed the parts into her biggest suitcase and took them to Brazil—just in time. Grande was hospitalized prior to the birth of her second child, and Amanda needed a diversion: “It's been a lifesaver,” Grande '94 said.

Franko, the Grossman Professor of Economics, and Grande, who has been an investment banker and telecommunications executive, met as professor and first-year student. Grande became Franko's researcher, working on a book Franko wrote about the defense industry in Brazil. Collaboration on a book about Latin American economic development followed, then consultation as Grande went to work at an investment bank and attended business school.

The dollhouse? It's emblematic of relationships that germinate on Mayflower Hill.



While few Colby professors transport dollhouses between continents, many do forge friendships with students—bonds that last years and decades.

“I don't even think of them as students,” said Ira Sadoff, Roberts Professor of Literature, reeling off a list of alumni with whom he still corresponds and visits. “I think of them as friends.”

Sadoff and others say this is a hallmark of Colby, where personal teaching is emphasized and encouraged. The evidence of that is purely anecdotal, but the anecdotes are plentiful.

A query of a mere dozen faculty members elicited enough stories to fill this entire magazine, and then some. Professors from chemistry to creative writing readily listed former students and their accomplishments. Former mentors and



*Ryan Wepler '02, left, and Vicki Hayes '04 asked Professor Steven Nuss (music), a notary public, to perform their wedding ceremony this summer.*

students have become collaborators and colleagues. One-time research assistants are confidants. Professors who offered counsel to shy first-years do the same years later—to alumni who are 30-somethings. Faculty members buy wedding and baby gifts for former students. Years later some see former students who bring their teenage children to tour the campus or to enroll as freshmen.

“This is one of the rewards”

of teaching, said Steven Nuss, associate professor of music.

Nuss, who has taught at Colby since 1996 and spends summers in New York City, sees a steady procession of students and former students who visit when they're in Manhattan. In one week last summer three former students popped in on him. “The faucet has been turned on,” he reported in an e-mail.

*Jill Morejon Gutierrez '00, left, with Professor of Economics Patrice Franko.*

But Nuss wasn't prepared for a call earlier this year from Vicki Hayes '04 and Ryan Wepler '02. Hayes and Wepler had been dating since Hayes was a sophomore music major and sat with Wepler in a Nuss music theory class. They learned then that Nuss was a notary public and had performed weddings for colleagues. "Ever since then we had thought seriously about having him do it," Wepler said.

Eight years later, on July 11, Nuss married the couple in Lorimer Chapel. He drove to Colby from New York to perform the ceremony, which included his own remarks, in front of an assembly of family and friends. "It was wonderful," said Wepler, who is finishing his Ph.D. in English at Brandeis. "He's so well-spoken and such an affable guy. Everyone thought he was great."

Said Hayes, who teaches music at a charter school, "It was beyond what we ever envisioned."

From first-year classes to weddings to careers—faculty often are present at major events in a student's life. Case in point: Brooke Frappier Jude '00, who would be hard-pressed to find a time in her life when Professor of Biology Frank Fekete was not present, at least in spirit. Jude met Fekete soon after she landed at Colby with aspirations to become a medical doctor. After taking his introductory course in bacteriology, she signed up for a capstone honors course in microbiology her senior



*Professors Sandy Maisel (government), left, and Patrice Franko (economics), right, talk with Gillian Morejon Gutierrez '00 and her husband, Rob Gutierrez '98, at the professors' home.*

year. With Fekete's encouragement, she and others solved a real-life problem of fish infections at a Maine hatchery (it was fungal), and Jude decided that research, not clinical medicine, was for her. "It was really rewarding," she said. "It was Frank that allowed that."

And it was Fekete who recommended her for a researcher position at Jackson Laboratories in Bar Harbor after graduation, she said. It was Fekete who conferred with her on her Jackson Lab research and helped her apply to graduate programs, including her eventual choice, Dartmouth Medical School, where she earned her Ph.D. It was Fekete who, after inviting Jude to give a talk at Colby, encouraged her to apply for a sabbatical replacement teaching position in the

department where she had been a student. She did, and they became not only research collaborators but teaching colleagues.

"I had done very little teaching," she said at Colby last summer. "So when I got here I had never run a class, I had never made a syllabus. I had never made an exam. I had never done any of that."

"With Frank as a resource, I was able to show him exams, ask him for his opinion."

Fekete shrugs off credit for Jude's success in the classroom. (In August she left Colby for a coveted tenure-track teaching position at Bard College.) Instead he points to her important research (including an ongoing study of a previously unknown mechanism of the aquatic organism that causes cholera),

**"IT'S A FRIENDSHIP BASED ON HAVING CERTAIN THINGS IN COMMON ... BUT IT'S A FRIENDSHIP THAT WOULD BE IN PLACE IF I STOPPED WRITING."**

*—Gillian Kiley '95 on her friendship with her creative writing mentor, Professor Ira Sadoff*



her publications in prestigious science journals like *Nature*, her “intense curiosity.”

“One of the most important things we do here is training the next generation of scientists and educators,” Fekete said. “Brooke is the epitome of both.”

Jude says that at every important moment her mentor was present—including last year, when Jude and her husband, fellow Ph.D. biologist Craig Jude ’99, had their first child, Catherine. “Frank came to the hospital, one of those few people who came just hours after the baby was born,” she said.

Though not all mentor relationships are as direct and intertwined as Fekete and Jude’s, professors often take lasting pride in students’ accomplishments. Patrice Franko

has taught at Colby since 1986, and since then she’s seen her researchers and honors students fan out across the world. Franko points to an NGO director in Africa and a key player at the Clinton Foundation, among others. “I get an incredible amount of personal satisfaction and happiness that comes from having these people in different places, doing good things,” Franko said. “In their journey, these extraordinary people come across my life and really enrich it.”

But relationships aren’t just built on accomplishments, she said. Franko also spoke of a former student and friend who lost her husband to cancer, and of another former student, the late Ben Ling ’98, who was a friend and a researcher for Franko’s husband,

Professor Sandy Maisel. When Ling was terminally ill with cancer in 2001, Maisel and Franko flew to Oklahoma to see him and to say goodbye. Maisel eulogized Ling in an essay published in this magazine in the spring of 2001. “Those of us who knew Ben Ling will always consider our time with him one of Colby’s greatest gifts to us,” Maisel wrote. “Those who didn’t can learn as well from the terrible loss we feel by thinking of the friends they are meeting or have met on Mayflower Hill, by honoring those friendships and by building on them.”

“You see some of their sorrows as well as their joys,” Franko said. “There are some who have become like [our] children in some ways.”

## THE EXACT SAME DESK

As a chemistry major and undergraduate researcher, Kevin Rice ’96 expected to go to graduate school, then maybe on to private industry. He didn’t picture himself following in the footsteps of his mentor, Professor Brad Mundy. “And here I am, teaching, on the other side of the desk,” Rice said. “The exact same desk.”

Rice’s former professors are now his colleagues at Colby; he is back in the lab, this time leading student researchers. Mundy, Miselis Professor of Chemistry, emeritus, is Rice’s teaching inspiration. “I model a lot of what I do in his style,” Rice said.

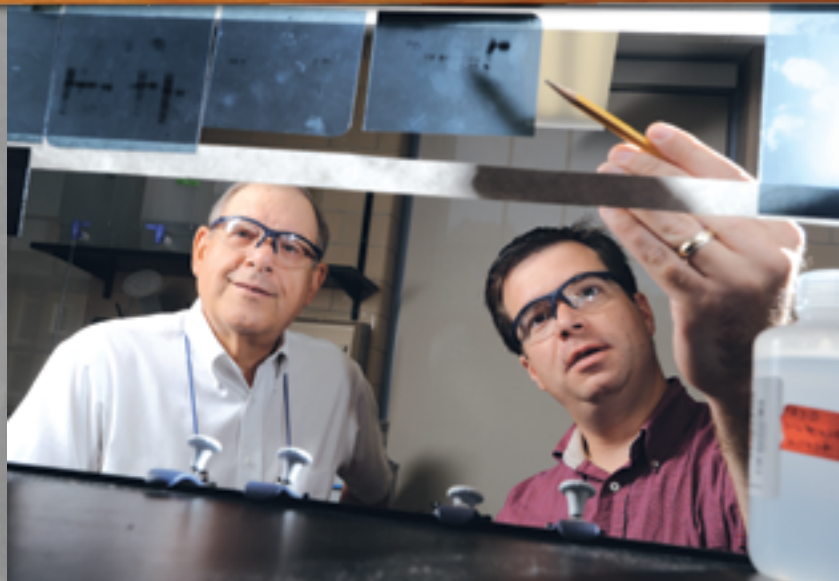
That style, prevalent throughout the sciences at Colby, revolves around students doing research to answer real-world questions. “I looked at them as research colleagues,” Mundy said. “I was Brad to them, not their big boss.”

That experience helped propel Mundy’s students to prestigious medical schools and doctoral programs. (He keeps track of them in a database, showing their graduate and medical degrees from Harvard, Dartmouth, Cornell, and the program where Mundy taught before he came to Colby, Montana State.) Now Rice, who returned to Colby in 2005 after earning his doctorate at the University of Wisconsin and completing a postdoctoral fellowship at Yale, keeps his own database on alums.

The mentee has become the mentor.

“One of the things that’s been surprising to me as a professor has been how emotionally attached I become to my students,” Rice said. “It’s almost in a way like they’re my kids.”

Channeling Mundy, he reeled off some of their accomplishments. An alumna doing cancer research at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. A



*Assistant Professor Kevin Rice ’96, right, followed his mentor, Professor Emeritus Brad Mundy, into the Chemistry Department.*

former student, the first in his family to go to college, doing graduate work at Wisconsin: “I would love to be his colleague someday,” Rice said. “I look forward to that.”

In fact, Rice can’t wait.

“I have every expectation that they’re going to do amazing things,” he said. “Part of me would like to fast-forward ten years and see what they’ve accomplished.”

PHOTO BY JASON MCKIBBIN



PHOTO BY NICK CARDILLO/CHICHO

*Billy Fong '09, left, and Aqsa Mahmood '10, right, with Associate Professor of Music Steven Nuss, second from right, and Nuss's partner, Gordon Gee, at Nuss's and Gee's Manhattan home.*

One is Jill Morejon Gutierrez '00, a program analyst for the Women's Bureau, an agency of the U.S. Department of Labor in New York. Gutierrez recalls being a "young and stupid" first-year when she first met Franko, going to her for help when she was struggling in another class. Franko would relieve her stress with small talk, Gutierrez recalled. "She'd say, 'Oh, Jill, you look nice today. Do you have a date?'"

The stress relief was augmented by serious academics. Franko counseled Gutierrez about her Watson Fellowship (traveling to Chile, Portugal, and the Philippines to study fisheries) and has been there with advice "at every pivotal moment" in her professional life, from graduate school to job changes, she said.

It's a friendship that began in the classroom but spans life with all of its triumphs and disappointments, as faculty become surrogate parents. "At [Jill's] wedding, her mother came and sat down, and I was saying how beautiful her daughter looked," Franko said. "Her mother said to me, 'Well, in many ways she's your daughter, too.'"

Sometimes the relationship is based on the support of faculty in loco parentis. At other times it begins when a professor

treats a student as a peer. Mary Medlin '05 is enrolled in the Warren Wilson College M.F.A. Program for Writers, where she writes fiction. Six years ago Medlin was a beginning creative writing student at Colby who quickly found a kindred spirit in Professor Debra Spark. Medlin found that she and Spark liked the same kinds of novels, the same movies. But it was Spark's respect that buoyed Medlin in a way she hadn't felt before.

"I had never had somebody talk to me as if I was actually a writer," Medlin said. "She

made me feel like there was something I had to say and it wouldn't come into this world if it didn't come through me."

Spark meant it then, and still does, she said insisting that Medlin's work is sophisticated and is going to get noticed. "Encouragement at the right moment," she said, may be a teacher's greatest gift. And those moments don't necessarily end at commencement.

"I'm sure I'll find myself in the throes of despair at some point in the semester and send her an e-mail," Medlin said, laughing. "She'll write back to assuage my anxiety."

From fiction to physics, those messages go out regularly from Mayflower Hill. Sadoff, an acclaimed and widely respected poet who for many years taught creative writing, is a private reader and friend for dozens of Colby writers. But recently he gave a former student, poet Gillian Kiley '95, a very public leg up.

Sadoff chose Kiley as the subject of an "Emerging Poets" feature in *American Poetry*, an influential magazine. He praised her recently finished book-length poem, *Palisades*, saying the work "illustrates the rewards of purposely withdrawing from the public eye."

"She reminds us that poetry requires



PHOTO BY BRIAN SPEER

*Professor of English Debra Spark confers with a student in her office in Miller Library.*

## VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

Three decades after the last vote was cast, a group of campaign hands stood up to be counted.

The campaign, the 1980 Democratic primary race for the 1st District Congressional seat in Maine, pitted Professor Sandy Maisel (government) against a roster of better-known Democrats. Maisel lost, but some of his campaign staff, including a corps of members of the Colby Class of 1978, still feel like winners from the experience.

"It was a really exciting way to spend senior year at Colby," said Susan Kenyon '78 P'12, a retired attorney. "From it we found what have become thirty-year friendships."

Last winter five alumni who had volunteered for Maisel's campaign decided to do something to recognize what Maisel had done for them and other Colby students. Dan Hoeffle '78 and Doug Kaplan '78 first kicked the idea around during a ride to Sugarloaf.

"I said, 'It's fine to have all these tributes after someone has died,'" said Hoeffle, a New Hampshire attorney. "'But what about when he's alive?'"

Kaplan said members of the group had turned 50 and decided their gesture shouldn't wait. "It was something we wanted to do together," he said.

After further discussion, five former Maisel campaign volunteers—Hoeffle, Kaplan, Kenyon (with her husband, Rick Abrams '78), Alan Donnenfeld '78, and Jeff Shribman '78—decided to establish a fund in Maisel's name. Their \$100,000 donation was to be matched by trustee William Goldfarb '68 (efforts are underway by the group to increase the endowment) and revealed to Maisel, with the funds to be applied to a Goldfarb Center program at his discretion. Maisel directed the money to establish the Sandy Maisel Goldfarb Center Student Research and Internship Fund. It will give students with financial need the chance to do internships related to the mission of the Goldfarb

Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement, which Maisel currently directs.

The fund was unveiled to Maisel, with whom the ex-campaigners have remained close, at a dinner during Family Homecoming Weekend in 2008. Their voluble former professor was surprised and visibly moved, they said. "He was totally speechless," Kenyon said, "which is a rare occurrence."



Philanthropy for Colby comes in many shapes and sizes. For some it is distinguished by a monetary donation; for others it is the gift of time. But for all of those who give, the inspiration comes from the satisfaction and joy of enhancing the lives of students and faculty and making initiatives possible.

This is the final year of Reaching the World: A Campaign for Colby. The time is right to begin sharing with you a variety of personal stories that demonstrate the many ways in which the campaign is already changing Colby students, faculty, alumni, and the world.

In the coming months we will present a series of vignettes via e-mail and online that will highlight ways the campaign is making an education available to deserving students who otherwise could not afford it, funding world-class faculty and facilities to sustain a rich and vibrant environment for learning, and creating opportunities for Colby students to give back in their own ways around the world.

We hope that you will enjoy these uplifting stories of inspiration, initiative, and impact as everyone involved in the Reaching the World Campaign works together to achieve its crucial goal.

As Henry David Thoreau said, "Philanthropy is almost the only virtue which is sufficiently appreciated by mankind."

—Richard Ammons, vice president for college relations

For those of you who do not communicate with Colby via e-mail, please look for these pieces at [www.colby.edu/campaign/impact](http://www.colby.edu/campaign/impact).

solitude and a degree of unworldliness..." Sadoff writes. "The poet who finds some shelter from commerce and composes out of necessity is more likely to resist literary fashion and eschew facility in favor of urgency and difficulty."

Kiley, who earned an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop, works in library external relations and stewardship at Brown University. Her poem is a meditation on her father's death.

"I just have enormous respect for her integrity, her talent, her modesty," Sadoff said.

Even after years of conversations and conferences with Sadoff about her work, Kiley was bowled over by the essay and its praise of her new work. "The fact that it came from Ira—I'm still having a hard time absorbing it."

While Sadoff's endorsement most likely will have an impact on her writing career, Kiley said the special thing about their longtime friendship is that it extends beyond poetry. "It's a friendship based on having certain things in common ... but it's a friendship that would be in place if I stopped writing," she said.

Kiley recalled a conversation when she was in graduate school and worried about her marks. "He said, 'Don't worry. We'll be friends anyway.'"

Sadoff, who still corresponds with a professor who was his own mentor in graduate school, said he simply has a genuine admiration for many of his students and an interest in how their adult lives unfold.

It is a sentiment heard across the campus.

As Franko put it, "You come to Colby as an eighteen-year-old," she said, "but you don't leave." 