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## Small Triumphs: Alex Quigley '99 finds hope and despair in the Mississippi Delta

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# SMALL TRIUMPHS

*Alex Quigley '99 finds hope and despair in the Mississippi Delta*

**By Gerry Boyle '78, photos by Nikki Boertman**

It was an hour into the school day and Alex Quigley '99 was standing in front of a room full of kindergarten students. The students were sitting on a carpet, each child assigned to a colored square. Quigley, motioning with a pointer tipped by a yellow star, looked like he was waving a magic wand.

"Who knows a word like bat?" he said. "Bat. Bah-tuh."

"Cat," a boy named Tony said.

"Good," said Quigley.

"Fat," said a little girl named Quintina.

"What letter makes the 'fuh, fuh' sound?" Quigley asked.

Quintina looked stumped.

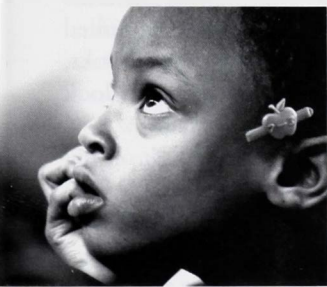
"Fuh, fuh," Quigley said, his pointer at his side. "Call someone to help you."

Eventually someone came up with the answer and the class moved on, the children blissfully unaware that they are being educated by a game young teacher working to try to make a difference in what is arguably—if you can judge a school by its students' performance on standardized tests—the most challenged elementary school in Mississippi, and one of the poorest-performing schools in the country.

Quigley arrived here in September 1999, sent by Teach for America, an organization that dispatches recent college graduates to schools where teachers are in critically short supply. A government major from Wellesley, Mass., who spent his junior year at the London School of Economics, Quigley had hoped to be assigned to Washington, D.C., but he did include Mississippi on his preference list, and that was like buying a one-way ticket to the Delta. Days after finishing a crash Teach for America education course, Quigley arrived in Quitman County. He was given emergency certification and a room full of expectant second graders. This year, one kindergarten class didn't have a teacher and was staffed by substitutes. Says Dr. June Jordan, the school principal: "We work with whatever we can get."

Quitman County Elementary School has about 620 students, kindergarten through third grade. The students travel as far as 20 miles by bus to the single-story brick school in Lambert, a smattering of mostly dilapidated buildings set in the seemingly endless cotton and soybean fields of the northwest Delta. With the exception of a single storefront used for a community center, Lambert's entire downtown is boarded up. With the exception of about eight children, all of the students at Quitman Elementary school are African American.

Most of Quitman County's vast farms are owned by







Teach for America's assistance), a depressed economy, chronic teen pregnancy and children who enter school as virtual blank slates. "We have a lot of babies having babies," said veteran kindergarten teacher Jewel Killibrew. "That's a lot of our problem. They don't know how to care for them."

Enter people like Quigley: young, smart, earnest and inexperienced. Also working at Quitman Elementary are Teach for America teachers from Williams College, the University of Virginia and other prestigious schools. In nearby Marks, Tyler Peterson '00 is teaching special education at Quitman County High School.

whites, and nearly all white parents send their children to private schools—including Delta Academy in the town of Marks, just down the road from Lambert. At Quigley's school, 98 percent of students qualify for the free lunch program. Some live in modest but comfortable homes. And others? "I've been to some of [my students'] houses," Quigley said. "None of the lights work. Some of my kids don't have their own bed, or they pull out a bed in their trailer that they sleep on with their brother. There's no desk, no place to work."

Sixty-eight percent of this year's Quitman County Elementary third graders, including Quigley's students from last year, failed the state assessment test for their grade. The school had the worst test results in Mississippi.

School officials point out that the test, a nationally normed assessment, includes references that are unfamiliar to students who probably have never left even this part of the Delta. But Jordan and teachers also acknowledge the challenges they face: shoestring budgets, a teacher shortage so dire that positions go unfilled (even with

Quigley said he got support and materials from other teachers when he arrived, but as of February he had not been evaluated in his classroom. Putting together his kindergarten curriculum, he pulled in techniques he had heard about from other schools, from books, from relatives. "In my mind this is what kindergarten should look like," he said.

That day it looked like a busy place. Quigley's charges sat on the carpet, talked about the visitor to the classroom. They spelled "February" aloud and then sang enthusiastically about the days of the week to the tune of *The Addams Family*.

"There's Monday and there's Tuesday, there's Wednesday and there's Thursday . . ."

Quigley sang along; it was apparent he was never in *The Colby Eight*.

There was a snack—animal crackers handed out by assistant teacher Maudie Stanford, Quigley's right hand. Quigley read aloud from *Frog and Toad Are Friends*. Students selected painted clothespins that designated different activity centers: a play kitchen, blocks, a computer game,

## Alumni on Education Reform

In an effort to further explore the national debate on education reform, *Colby* posed questions to 50 alumni in the education field. In their responses, excerpted here, alumni expressed widely differing views on the merits of many proposed reforms, from school vouchers to linking federal funding to assessment test results. The project was produced by Blake Hamill '02.

## What is your gut reaction to the debate surrounding proposed reforms?

**Karen Kusiak**

*Assistant Professor of Education & Human Development*

The suspicion is that colleges of education are not doing their job, that we're graduating people and making them teachers and they're not capable of being teachers and that's why we have poor performance in school. I question all of those assumptions.

**Mark Tappan**

*Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Education & Human Development*

I think the public discourse around public education is just really problematic all the way around because the public is clamoring for accountability and standards and all of this, or the folks who make education policy claim the public is clamoring for this. So there's a mandate to try to respond to that but it's not getting into the realities of the classroom.



**Alex Quigley '99, at left, walks through Lambert, Miss., which bills itself as “The City of Hope” though all but one downtown storefront is boarded up. A teacher shortage has added to the woes of the economically depressed community in Mississippi’s Delta region. Below, Quigley directs as his kindergarten students at Quitman County Elementary School act out a scene from the children’s book *Frog and Toad Are Friends*. At right is Assistant Teacher Maudie Stanford.**

painting at an easel. All the while, discipline was meted out through a system of cards that were moved in a wall rack. Paddling is accepted and encouraged in Mississippi schools, but Quigley said he has done it only twice, as a last resort.

That day the most serious punishment was a time out. Mrs. Stanford and a visitor were enlisted to help students, but still the room rang out with calls of “Mr. Quigley!”

“It’s so amazing, the amount of things to manage,” Quigley said. “Colby was hard but this is much harder.”

In fact, all of the pithy social problems facing this school tend to be forgotten when the room is full of 5-year-olds. Then the challenges are the same as those faced by teachers in any classroom: keeping all of the students constructively occupied; crafting activities and lessons appropriate to a broad range of abilities; making sure kids don’t miss the bus. And while one staffer, parent coordinator Dwight Barfield, praised Quigley and the other Teach for America teachers for their energy, innovation and community spirit, Quigley said he sometimes still wonders whether he is teaching his kids anything.

“Some days, no,” Quigley said. “Some days I felt like I basically stunk as a teacher and my kids weren’t learning anything. . . . There were a couple of days, I was just like, call my mom or somebody and say, ‘I’m not succeeding at all.’ That regardless of what I do, my kids are going to return to the worlds that they live in.”

And good days?

“On my good days I feel great. I feel like, it will be something little. Like you see a kid who couldn’t read and he’ll read a whole sentence. You feel like the kids are really responding to the attention and the love you’re giving them. . . .

“I had one kid after Christmas break [last year]. One of the best



moments I had was this kid. I sent post cards from Boston to all my kids when I was home for Christmas. He came into school the day we got back and he said, ‘Mr. Quigley, you wrote me a post card.’ And he proceeded to recite the post card exactly as I wrote it, line for line. He had memorized the thing, he had read it so many times.”

Progress, it seems, is measured in small triumphs. At Quitman Elementary, Quigley waves the star pointer, but there is no magic wand, just children waiting expectantly to be taught.

“I can spell ‘coffee’ Mr. Quigley,” one little boy said proudly. “C-H-C-D-E.”

“Close, Jamal,” Quigley said, giving the boy an affectionate pat on the shoulder. “Very close.”

## What are the biggest challenges facing our nation’s educators?

**Jane Hunter Bates '66**

*Fifth Grade Teacher, Flanders Elementary School, East Lyme, Conn.*

One challenge is to find the balance between teaching of life-long learning skills with the time needed for preparation and taking of state mastery tests. We need to determine how time needed for “teaching to the test” can also be time used for developing thinking productive citizens who are prepared for life, not just the test.

**Sandi Hayward Albertson-Shea '64**

*Professor of Humanities, Middlesex College, Middlesex, Mass.*

A major issue for our country that impacts educators is the need for an informed, thoughtful and compassionate citizenry. Because my field is humanities/English in a community college setting, I am acutely aware of the gaps in my students’ knowledge and understanding re: global issues and current events beyond the immediate perimeters of their own lives and day-to-day dilemmas. Motivating students to think and read deeply/critically, to explore opposing points of view and then to risk taking a stand is an ongoing challenge. The Internet, with its vast potential and abundance of material, needs to be approached carefully, not simply downloaded.

**Richard Abramson '71**

*Superintendent, Arundel Public Schools, Arundel, Maine*

The baby boomers who have been the nation’s teachers and school administrators over the past 30 years are retiring at an alarming rate. One of the biggest challenges facing our nation will be teacher and administrator shortages. Many states—Maine included—are looking at ways to recruit young teachers and retool teachers as administrators.