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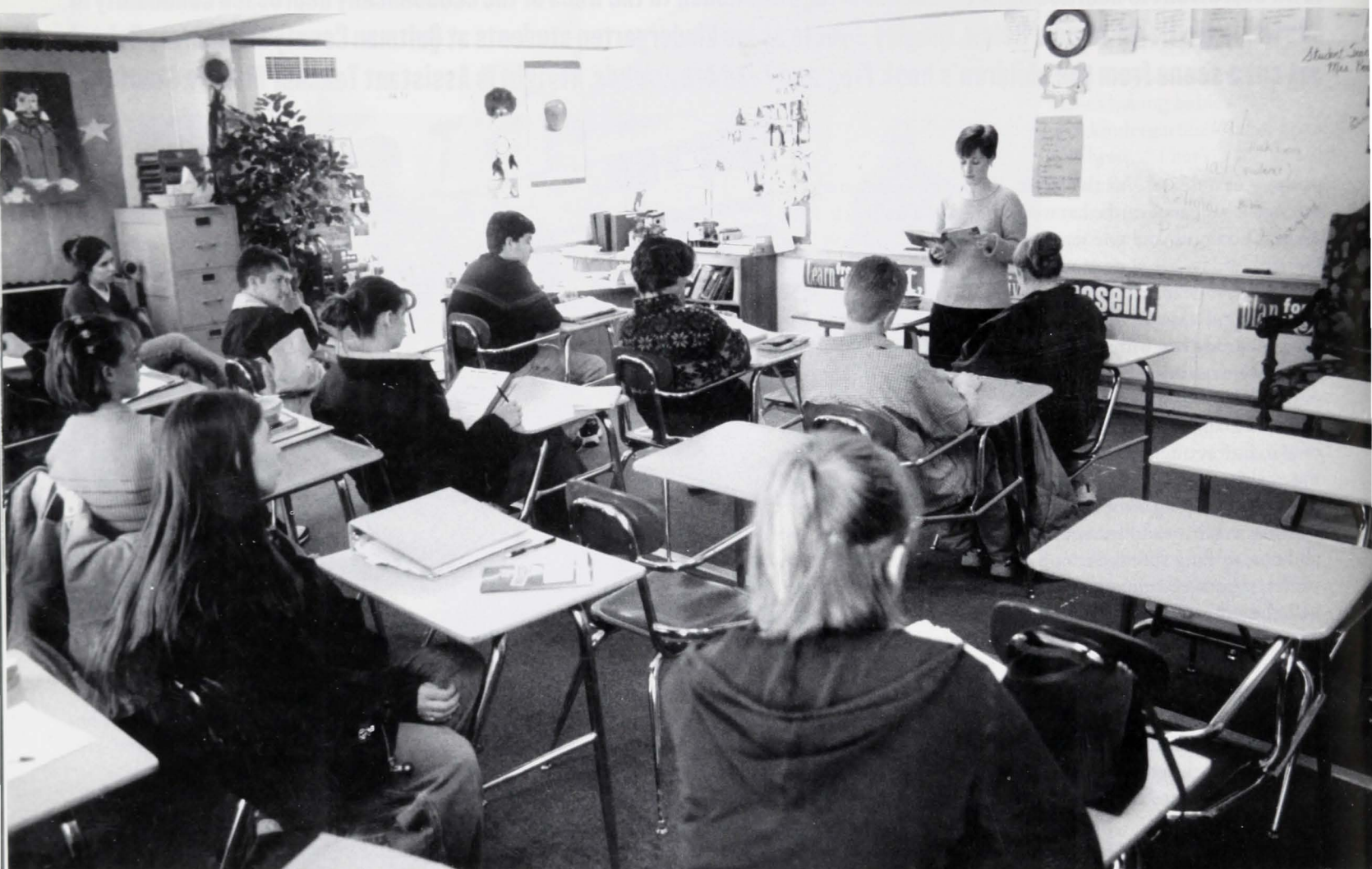
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A RAY OF HOPE

Brittany Ray '93 inspires where she found inspiration

By Gerry Boyle '78, photos by Brian Speer



High school English teacher Brittany Ray '93 grew up in the tiny Down East town of Milbridge, a fishing community perched at the mouth of the Narraguagus River. Ray's father, Gary Ray '72, helped run the family business, a sardine cannery, and he made sure his daughter worked there, too, packing sardines beginning when she was 11. "He wanted me to know I needed to get out of Milbridge," Ray said. "He really questioned, 'Is teaching what you really want to do? And coming back [to Washington County]?' But I convinced him that that really was what I wanted."

Ray did get out of Milbridge. An English major, she spent her junior year in Dijon, France. At Colby she was valedictorian of her class. But by her sophomore year, Ray had decided she wanted to go back home to teach high school in Washington County. Weathering questions from skeptics ("Why would you want to teach if there were other options?") she returned to the county, teaching a year in Machias and then moving to Narraguagus High School in Harrington, where she was once a student. Since she first stepped to the front of a classroom, Ray has known it's where she belongs.

"I was hooked," she said, between classes at Narraguagus High recently. "I still am. I love what I do."

Colby historically was a college that turned out "teachers and preachers," and although the preachers' numbers have dwindled considerably over the past century, graduates continue to answer the other calling. For teachers like Ray, there is a missionary aspect to the vocation, a sense that there are productive lives hanging in the balance, students to be inspired, if not saved.

Ray got that inspiration from her own English teacher at Narraguagus High, Liverpool native Robbie Weller, who brought with her to the States a contagious love of literature. Weller set Ray down the path that led to Colby and a teaching career. Now the younger colleague tries to do the same for another generation of Down East teenagers. "I just felt I got a lot and I wanted to give back," she said. "Obviously the schools are poor, and people might think you can't get a good education. I feel that I was really well prepared by a community that might often get a bad rep."

What is Washington County's reputation? That it's naturally beautiful but economically depressed, relying on seasonal industries like lobstering, blueberries, lumber and pulpwood. The area is geographically isolated, beyond the reach of most tourists and their dollars. Many children here have never been anywhere else. "We do





creditation. "It's hard to teach out there sometimes," Ray said. "I keep my heat on high, but I don't tell anybody that. But it's cold coming back. There's no bathroom. There's no place to wash your hands. It's a hard thing."

But if a bigger school is a pipe dream, it doesn't intrude on her teaching. Weller and Principal Peter Doak lauded Ray's enthusiasm, organization, commitment to the students and contagious love of

have an overwhelming number of impoverished households," Ray acknowledged. "That's something that we struggle with every day. For the most part [students] are eager to try new things. They just haven't had the exposure that another person might have had."

Poverty and isolation create obstacles similar to those faced by disadvantaged children in cities. The essay question for the statewide fourth grade assessment test for Maine was about a visit to a museum; many fourth graders in Milbridge probably have never been to one, Ray said. And Narraguagus High School was built for 175 students; it now houses just under 300. "I have you seen where I teach?" Ray said.

She led the way to one of five double-wide trailers set in the school parking lot. Her classroom is one of two in the trailer, and while it is clean and new, it's feared that having students trek back and forth through the snow—and other issues—could cost the school its ac-

books and writing. That day, one of her classes had just finished *The Crucible* and was heading into *The Great Gatsby*. The discussion was about censorship and challenged books. The students fanned out to cull the shelves of the classroom for books they thought might have been challenged in the past. The conversation leapt from Maya Angelou to *Yertle the Turtle* to the television series *Boston Public*.

"We don't come up with a firm answer but they do a lot of thinking," Ray said.

She does, too. She talked of finding just the right book to hook non-readers and of the college-search program she recently introduced as part of the curriculum at Narraguagus High. Ray and the students explore different colleges and talk about ways for students to tell which college is right for them. She invites parents to bring in their financial aid paperwork so she can help them through the process.

Do you think the nation's public schools are doing their job?

Michael A. Gerard '92

English Teacher and Department Chair, Mary Institute & St. Louis Country Day School, Webster Groves, Mo.

I believe that the nation's public schools are doing as good a job as can be expected, given the extensive factors allied against them. Low pay, overcrowded classrooms, less educable students and a general lack of respect from pupils, parents, administrators and general society all contribute to the failure to draw or keep talented teachers in the classroom. Until conditions change substantially, schools will be powerless to improve the quality of education that they deliver.

Arthur Goldschmidt '59

Retired Professor of Middle East history, Penn State University, State College, Pa.

I don't believe that, overall, our nation's schools are doing what they should to prepare an educated citizenry, although I believe that many states and districts have improved their own schools during the past decade and hope that the Bush administration will continue what the Clinton administration has tried to do. But in general I think that too much time in our schools is wasted and that the young people who emerge do not have the academic or intellectual skills that they need to do college-level work or to succeed in their jobs. There is much room for curricular reform. The leadership should come from the teachers themselves.

John Gibbons '64

Teacher, Mattituck High School, Mattituck, N.Y.

Certainly, some of the nation's public schools are failing miserably, but I am convinced that this situation . . . might result from what scientists would call a Type 2 Error—a false negative. Furthermore, I would suggest that the answer to your question might fall prey to the "Third Variable" problem. The failure of public schools to produce well-educated students, who score adequately on evaluative testing instruments, may not be the result of any variables connected to the school whatsoever. The best indicator of academic success is the education and, perhaps more importantly, the subjective value placed upon the importance of education in the student's household.

Students leave mobile classrooms at Narraguagus High School in Harrington, Maine. The trailers ease overcrowding at the school but present logistical problems for teachers and students, says teacher Brittany Ray. Below, long-time English teacher Robbie Weller confers with students as she did with Ray when she was a Narraguagus student. Ray says she hopes she can serve as an inspiration to her own students just as Weller inspired her more than a decade ago.

“They’re frightened to apply to colleges with high tuitions,” she said. “I really want to get the message out that my senior year at Colby I went for under \$300 that my parents could contribute, and the rest was my own and scholarships. I want them to know that in the end, going to an Orono or to a Colby or a Bates might be the same financially. I like to really push thinking about a junior year abroad because, again, they’ll say, ‘We’ll never have the money to do that.’”

Ray is concerned about a tendency for local students to leave college after a semester or two and is trying to come up with ways to lessen the culture shock some Washington County students feel when they go away to school. She also is concerned that outcome-based school reforms (testing to see if students have reached a certain level of information or proficiency) will continue to whittle away at the opportunity her students have to be inspired rather than taught. “I think the outcomes are important but I’m not sure if the process of getting there is something that should be told to a teacher, because how can you be excited about doing that every day? You need to be excited about what you do.”

That excitement can overcome daunting obstacles. Ray’s husband, Ron Smith, teaches in a nearby elementary school that recently was selected as one of five outstanding schools in the country. Narraguagus High can’t claim that sort of notice, but Ray said she hopes her students benefit from their time with her. “I hope that for some of them,



I can be a person they look back on fondly and say, ‘Oh, you know we really did learn something.’ . . . I hope that I make a difference. That’s all I can do, I guess.”

And that the torch will be passed?

In the class that day, junior Danielle Meneses of Harrington said she felt her career path being set already. “I know for a fact that I’ll be a teacher,” she said.

Do you think it is the school’s responsibility to teach character and morals?

Jane Hunter Bates ’66

Flanders Elementary School, East Lyme, Conn.

Education should be a partnership between parents and teachers. The responsibility lies in both sets of hands. The character building and moral standards can’t stop at either side of the school door. Students need models and strategies to help them live a life that considers the effect their individual conduct has upon others as they make decisions.

Sandi Hayward Albertson-Shea ’64

Middlesex College, Middlesex, Mass.

I think it is the responsibility of academia to expose students to models/examples of morality and character, to reinforce and affirm those qualities [that] reveal the best of what it means to be both human and humane. When I discuss plagiarism with my composition students, I tell them that, in addition to being a form of theft and a negation of their ability, I know that they have to do the assignment on their own [and that] the act of plagiarizing diminishes their soul. A student wrote last semester that she’d never had a professor care about her soul before.

Richard Abramson ’71

Arundel Public Schools, Arundel, Maine

I believe that schools are in the best position to provide character education to our young students. It is the most consistent place and has the most well-trained cadre of individuals to provide such education. Ideally, it would be the home and church.