

Bennett's Legacy Celebrated

by Catherine Shoichet
Editor-in-Chief

To be remembered and admired by your students thirty years after leaving the classroom is an honor for any teacher. This is the legacy of Elizabeth Bennett, an English teacher at Kingswood School Cranbrook from 1936 to 1968. Perhaps the best testament to her greatness—to the power of a teacher to shape students' spirits—is the Elizabeth Bennett Fund, an award established by former students Caroline Cross Chinlund K '58 and Annie Sanders Bohlin K '58 in 1984 when they learned that Miss Bennett was ailing. Although they had not sat in a Kingswood classroom for 26 years, these women remembered Miss Bennett's ability not only to expand students' minds, but also to touch their souls.

"We wanted people to realize what she had been," explains Chinlund. In light of this idea, the women decided to create an anthology of reflections on Miss Bennett—a "word portrait." The modest gray cover of *Elizabeth Bennett: A Word Portrait*

Former Kingswood English teacher Elizabeth Bennet. Photo: Cranbrook Archives

greatly understates the value of its contents, for included in it are not mere testimonies, but rather outpourings of the soul. Chinlund writes, for example, "What is rare in Miss Bennett was the way she combined standards with encouragement in genuine appreciation. She knew that our stories and poems were creatures of our souls and always nurtured creative writing." In the *Word Portrait*, Dora Polk Crouch K '48 (1998 Distinguished Alumna) reveals, "My youngest daughter is named Elizabeth in her honor." Gertrude M. White, a member of the Kingswood faculty from 1957-59, poignantly remem-

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bers, “Simply by being what she was, she enriched her world and ours.”

Even today, fifteen years after the publication of the *Word Portrait*, recollections of Miss Bennett reverberate in the words of Bohlin who observes, “She gave me the confidence that if I had to take a pen and pencil and write something I could do it. She could draw a lot out of a person. She made you feel like what you did had a lot of merit. Getting an ‘A’ from Miss Bennett was difficult, but it was a real thrill.”

Bennett’s magic also touched those outside the Cranbrook community. Poet and poetry publisher Margo la Gattuta, who currently hosts a local radio show on poetry and teaches at Oakland Community College and the University of Michigan-Flint, remembers taking a weekend poetry course taught by Miss Bennett. “I remember being very transfixed,” la Gattuta recalls, “She inspired me. She was special because she knew the magic of poetry and I wanted some of that magic.” La Gattuta has since carried Miss Bennett’s lessons with her and tries to incorporate them into her own teaching. “When someone special gives the magic to you, there’s a secret pact that you have to share it, too.”

Inspired by Bennett and her memory, Bohlin and Chinlund established the Bennett Fund in 1984 to provide special projects and grants to teachers who put particular emphasis on writing and the teaching of writing. The award began as \$500 but increased to \$1000 in 1994. Interested teachers must submit proposals for the award, which are then passed on to a committee made up of previous winners, the Head of the English Department, the Dean of Faculty, and two alumni supporters of the fund. Dean of Faculty Charles Shaw emphasizes that “any teacher that

has a significant interest in writing or the teaching of writing” can apply for the award, which is announced at the Senior Awards Ceremony in June. Award recipients have the opportunity to present their work with the winner from the previous year at a reading in October or November.

English Department Head Warren Hall is grateful for the opportunities that the “remarkable commitment of these two women to their former teacher” has provided for current Cranbrook teachers. “It says something very positive about writing at Cranbrook...that it is very encouraged for students and faculty.” Hall, who has also received the award, observes, “It gave me some incentive to write, and it was a great pleasure to read things I have written to others. It’s important that people who write here are recognized.” Hall also emphasizes that while a writing award for faculty is common at a well-endowed university, to have such an award at the high school level is truly unique. “It’s something that really turns me on about Cranbrook Kingswood.”

English teacher Chris McDonald is the 1998 Bennett Award recipient. With the money he received, McDonald was able to attend a summer program directed towards a master’s degree in English at Middlebury College. Participants in the program, who were mostly private school teachers, chose two courses to take over a six week period. McDonald selected Shakespearean Comedies and Victorian England. These courses proved to be particularly useful; one of the texts used in his Shakespeare class is regularly taught by McDonald to his freshman class and the Victorian England course dealt with the writings of Charles Dickens, the author of the eleventh grade summer reading, *Great Expectations*.

McDonald describes his experience with the Bennett Award as “more idea-driven” than writing-driven. “It helped me

to become a better teacher as well as a better writer,” he reflects, emphasizing that becoming a student of literature for six weeks was very helpful to this process. “Anytime you can switch roles and become a student it’s enlightening. It gives [your teaching] a new invigoration.” McDonald echoes the sentiments of his department head in his praise for the opportunities provided by the Bennett Award. “One of the great things about teaching at Cranbrook is that you have the opportunities to enhance your education and become a better teacher. You don’t get that at other places.”

His experience at Middlebury College allowed McDonald to write several critical papers. One of these papers, on outsiders in Shakespeare’s comedies, will be presented by McDonald at a special Elizabeth Bennett Award Reading on November 2 at 8:00 p.m. in the Kingswood Commons Room. 1997 Bennett Award recipient Eric Linder will also read from his works.

The reading is open to students, faculty, and friends. Academic Dean Jeffrey Welch encourages students to attend the reading: “There is a mystery that surrounds the teachers—the teachers as writers. Part of the pleasure of going to the Bennett reading is the ability to penetrate that mystery, to come closer to their passion.” The Elizabeth Bennett reading provides a window into the multi-faceted lives of Cranbrook Kingswood teachers.

Even today, fourteen years after her death, Elizabeth Bennett is continuing to shape people’s lives. With the help of alumni contributions, her legacy will live forever.

Contributions to the Bennett Fund can be sent to the office of Development and Alumni Relations. Please make checks out to Cranbrook Schools and earmark them for the Elizabeth Bennett Fund.