FOR VETERAN TEACHER BONNIE BRESEE ‘93, TEACHING MAY INVOLVE THE USUAL CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT AND SAT PREP BUT ALSO THE OCCASIONAL ROAD TRIP. BRESEE, AN ENGLISH TEACHER AT OVERBROOK HIGH SCHOOL, PHILADELPHIA, DROVE FORMER STUDENT ANTHONY THOMAS TO CAMPUS IN AUGUST 2009 FOR HIS FIRST SEMESTER AT WILKES UNIVERSITY.
Thomas, now a freshman at his former teacher’s alma mater, says he might never have gone to college if not for Breese. Only a few weeks before Wilkes’ freshman orientation, Breese drove Thomas and another Overbrook student to campus so they could present their transcripts to admissions. “I liked what I saw and Ms. Breese graduated from Wilkes, so I trusted her decision that Wilkes would be a good choice for me,” explains Thomas.

Going the extra mile—sometimes literally—is typical for Breese, and her commitment has not gone unnoticed. In 2008 she was recognized with the Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching, the first time the award had ever been given to high school teachers. She also was honored as one of only 10 teachers chosen to attend a town hall meeting at the White House with President Barack Obama in March 2009.

Mentoring has played an important role in Breese’s life going back to her elementary school days. After almost 30 years, she still keeps in contact with Naomi Johnson-Booker, her teacher in the third and fourth grades. “She was such a motivating force in my life,” Breese says.

As an undergraduate communications major at Wilkes, Breese also found inspiration in communication studies professor Bradford Kinney’s class. “Bonnie was the kind of student [we] always hope we will get to instruct, but rarely do,” says Kinney. “She made my job more challenging and rewarding.”

Teaching was not her first career choice. The Secane, Pa., resident began work as a freelance writer before spending three years as a youth development aide at North Central Secure Treatment Unit in Danville, Pa., and another four years teaching adult basic education and creative writing for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections at Muncey and Graterford prisons. While working at the prisons, she also was a substitute teacher at Williamsport Area High School, requiring her to sometimes juggle three jobs at once. She decided to turn her attention to full-time high school teaching.

The young teacher made an impression on 77-year-old Philadelphia native Mary Silverstein, who coached second- and third-year teachers, including Breese, for Gear-Up, a federal college readiness program. “Bonnie was willing to try new things, caught on quickly, took initiative, and had few management problems,” says Silverstein. Silverstein also is a field supervisor for student teachers in urban secondary schools. When it came time for her to recommend classroom mentors at Overbrook, Breese was at the top of her list. “It is very gratifying,” says Silverstein. “I have watched her career soar with great pleasure.”

Breese never expected her career path to lead her to the White House. She

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was stunned when she was chosen to attend President Obama's first online town hall meeting. When the president called on her to ask a question, she was floored. “I had to tell myself to breathe, breathe, breathe,” says Breese. “[It was] life-changing, heart-stopping, and really inspiring, as well.”

Breese's students cheered when Obama said hello to Overbrook students watching at the school before answering their teacher’s question.

Breese was not the only one affected by the encounter. “This was a very emotional moment for me,” says Breese’s daughter, Bridgette, a student at North Carolina Central University. “To have a black president and to see my mother involved in the progression that African Americans are making…I will never forget it.”

For Breese, the true rewards of teaching are not found in recognition, but in helping her students. She used some of the $3,500 Lindback Award honorarium to play fairy godmother, helping three students attend prom. She covered most prom expenses, from dresses to hair appointments. One student, a senior, was not allowed to attend until Breese reassured his mother.

“Oh, yes, he was voted Prom King for the evening,” says Breese. “A Cinderella male story this is!”

Breese received her master’s degree in education from Chestnut Hill College. A proponent of life-long learning, she is researching doctoral programs. She is also a fellow at Yale University and the University of Pennsylvania, where she creates research-based high school curriculum units for publication on the Internet.

Despite the accolades, Breese insists that teaching is simply a part of who she is. “I feel as if I am not going to work each day [because] I love what I do,” she explains. “Teaching is in my blood.” Her students agree.

“Every time I speak with her, I learn something new…she is still my teacher,” says Wilkes freshman Thomas. “Words couldn’t explain how thankful I am to have Ms. Breese as a mentor but, most importantly, as a friend.”

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