

Appreciating Deena

Ryan McWilliams remembers the lessons learned from teacher and colleague Deena Barber

Over the last month, I've heard two strains repeated frequently by Deena's students and their parents: first, that Deena was the epitome of a consummate teacher; and second, that Deena was so much more than a teacher.

It's certainly been true in my life. Deena was first my history teacher, then my advisor and the author of my college recommendations. When I returned to teach at Saint George's in 2006, she became a colleague, a mentor, a friend, and, on occasion, an ad-hoc therapist—all things first year teachers desperately need.

In my toughest moments as a beginning teacher, I always tried to imagine what Deena would do. Deena was a veritable superhero in the classroom, capable of simultaneously challenging the most advanced students and reaching the most struggling learners; finding time for open discussions and covering material rigorously. As years went on, her love of history grew as she found and shared with her students ever more striking parallels with the present day world. More than anyone else I've ever known, Deena found a calling that per-

fectly suited her temperament, abilities, and immense capacity for compassion.

As a student I had an inkling of Deena's skill as a teacher, but as her colleague I have come to fully appreciate not only her gifts but her fundamental generosity. Two weeks into my first year, I realized, suddenly, that I had no idea how to make basic grammar interesting. Feeling that maybe I'd chosen the wrong profession, I realized that asking "What Would Deena Do" wasn't enough—I had to ask Deena what she would do. Within two minutes Deena had covered a desk with files on grammar instruction—who knew that she once taught English? In half an hour, she'd run me through a week's worth of dynamic, active lessons.

As often happened, Deena had found someone doubting themselves, and believed in them. Everyone's biggest fan, she expected success of those around her, but provided tools to make it attainable. Most importantly, she took the time to care—Deena's

schedule was always booked until you really needed her, and then she was infinitely, generously available. And finally, she was refreshingly genuine, acknowledging on my way out the door that basic grammar is fundamentally boring.

Upper School teacher Deena Barber made history come alive for Saint George's students from 1993–2008. Deena passed away Aug. 26, the day before school began, while awaiting a lung transplant.



“Rest in Joy” – Parent & Alumni Tributes to Deena Barber

Deena Barber was a huge person in the life of everyone I know whose path crossed hers. Certainly that is true for me and my family. Forrest always sought her out whenever he came home, and Wyatt’s great pleasure was to “go to Deena’s and weed,” knowing it meant Deena’s famous brownies and the chance to talk. When you talked with Deena, she would zero in on you with a deep, penetrating look that let you know she was genuinely listening.

As I watched her last fall... and winter... and spring... and this last, discouraging summer, I came to admire Deena as much as any fellow human being I have ever met. She never stopped living life, she never lost her interest or passion for the world and the people in it, and above all, she never stopped loving. In her dying, as in her living, Deena modeled grace and hope.

– Olivette Orme, past president of SGS Parents Association

Deena injected herself in every aspect of life on campus. She was instrumental in the burgeoning drama program, and she always found time to help out the athletic program, whether it simply be with her voice urging her charges on or in doing the books for Varsity Basketball these last six years.

It helped that she was one of my dad’s colleagues, and in that way she was part of my extended family. I always ended up taking my deeper questions to Deena, and her answers left me with more wisdom than I had before. Perhaps it is these precious conversations that I will miss most.

– Bob Tyllia ’94

I turned a few heads when I burst into tears in the internet café upon hearing of the death of Deena Barber, my history teacher from high school, who had been awaiting a lung transplant. Even when I was her student,

I knew that if I ever taught anything, she would be my model of how to do it. She demanded and received the best from people because her hopes for them were both high and attainable. She was 100% her own person and encouraged individuality in everyone she taught. The only reason Mthatha didn’t understand my tears is that it didn’t get a chance to know her. Rest in joy, Deena.

– Sarah Jackson ’03

[Editor’s Note: Mthatha is the town in South Africa where Sarah is working this year; see her story on page 12.]



Pointing out her two favorite presidents, Deena chaired both the History and Art departments during her tenure, but her greatest contribution was as a passionate advocate for each of her students and the school she loved.

The whole incident was instructive. It helped me realize that although Deena was an expert fascinated by history, her best subject was courage. Over the past two years, she taught me that there is, in fact, no tension between being a consummate teacher and being more than a teacher. Having the courage to care about the students gives you a reason to be perennially engaged with your subject matter. Deena’s love for her students—each of whom was listened to and treated as a full individual—was boundless, so naturally she was a master teacher.

Deena’s impact is immense: she inspired more than a few of her students to dedicate themselves to scholarship, pursue meaningful political change, and even become teachers. But she’s more than an inspiration for what we do; she’s a fundamental part of who we are. Her fellow students who I have talked to agree: we have been blessed to have had Deena in our lives. To give in fully to grief would be understandable, but

not in keeping with what Deena believed. While I miss her terribly, the people I feel most strongly for are those who have the least cause to grieve; the current Middle School students and incoming Freshmen who won’t have Deena to teach them about the Roman Empire, or cheer for them at their games and matches, or laugh with them at musicals, or empower them to believe in themselves when no one else does.

If there is any solace to be had, it’s that Deena can continue to teach us all even after she’s gone. While we won’t ever be able to come close to replacing her, we can keep her spirit alive by taking a little more time to care about those students, by always acknowledging the human potential for growth and development, and, most of all, by simply being the people that Deena believed us to be.

– Ryan McWilliams ’02
Upper School English Teacher

On the Web

Read English teacher Chad Rigsby’s tribute to Deena Barber and several other remembrances of her under “Publications” at www.sgs.org/news_and_photos

