

2008 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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Questions Our Students Ask

Thank you President Brogan and Dr Pritchett.

I am honored to receive this very special award because it comes from those we as faculty serve – our students.

Teaching is, however, a team effort, and I am grateful to our College of Nursing Dean, Dr. Anne Boykin, who creates an environment that makes great teaching possible, and to my fellow faculty members, who give me encouragement and guidance every day. I would also like to thank my husband Jim and son Mark, who are very supportive and proud of the work that I have done throughout my career.

Several weeks ago as part of the competition for this award, I was interviewed by the panel of students representing all of our colleges. They asked some excellent questions. I would like to briefly talk about two of those questions this evening.

The first question was what I would do if Bill Gates came to me and offered to help solve a problem in our community – what issue/problem or challenge would I choose?

I did not hesitate with my answer because I believe that we need the resources and commitment to do a better job with education at all levels from primary school through our university system if we are to truly have a competitive future in this country.

The recent reports in our local papers about the high school graduation rates have resulted in the ACLU filing a landmark class action lawsuit in Palm Beach County that contends that one in three students don't graduate on time if at all and we can do better.

We have a clear need to improve the skill sets and advisement of our primary and secondary students, but many also need encouragement and mentoring not only to complete high school but to continue their education. We need a financial investment that will make higher education more affordable and accessible to a larger number of students, many of whom are now drowning in student loans that will make it impossible for them to attend graduate school and will compromise their financial futures.

These are difficult times as our administrators struggle to deal with budget deficits when the demand for our educational programs are increasing. We can spend money on initiatives that will fix specific problems for a short time, but education is a long-range investment – it opens doors and it changes lives.

I am an example of how that can happen. Like many students here at FAU, I am a first-generation American. My parents emigrated from Ireland 60 years ago with high school educations and very little money. All four of their children finished college and went on to successful careers. It happened through education.

A school nurse here in Palm Beach County who is in our graduate program said it better than I ever could: “My friends, co-workers and family see a difference in me since I have gone back to school, but, more important, I see a difference in myself and I will never look at the world in the same way again.”

A second question that I was asked during my interview that I found very thought-provoking was what are the lessons that I have learned from my students?

I learned very early in my teaching career that I am not the only teacher in the classroom. You need to be open to learning from your students – they are not blank slates when they walk into the classroom, and this is particularly true of our students at FAU. What is challenging about teaching is that we live in the present but need to prepare our students for the future – a world that neither of us currently live in, so their viewpoints about what that may be like are as important as mine.

I have also learned from my students about courage in the face of adversity – such as my student last semester who was diagnosed with a recurrence in her breast cancer and had to undergo aggressive chemotherapy at a facility outside this geographic area. She called to talk with me about it –but she stopped me as I

talked about her withdrawing from the course or taking an incomplete and told me that school was one of the most important parts of her life right now because it gave her hope and allowed her to think about the future.

Or my graduate student who I was helping to revise a paper that he had written who apologized about his writing and then told me that he had grown up in Jamaica in a house with no electricity or running water and had first attended school at age 14. The obstacles that he had overcome to reach where he was professionally took my breathe away.

Or our young active duty Air Force officer who graduated last May with a joint MSN/MBA – a rigorous 71-credit-hour program that the Air Force had given him just two years to complete. He called me in the middle of this program to tell me that his 11-year-old son had just died from an asthma attack. He would not consider taking time off because he was concerned about finishing on time because the Air Force Nurse Corps was so understaffed as a result of their commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

These are indeed profiles in courage.

I have also learned that in time our students themselves become teachers and our professional colleagues.

I feel incredible pride when I walk into hospitals and healthcare agencies in South Florida and watch our graduates caring for patients and providing leadership in our healthcare delivery system. Inevitably, they come up to me and tell me what a great education they received at our University. A teacher cannot ask for a better legacy.

These are lessons that I have learned that will stay with me always and have helped shape my thinking about my role as a teacher.

Today is a very special day because we are recognizing you – some of the best and brightest of our students – in this honors convocation.

When we look at what is happening in our economy and in our world today, it is easy to be pessimistic but, as I have learned in my life, the dark clouds will leave, the sun will shine and you ,our students, will be part of creating a better future for all of us.

I would urge you to continue with your commitment to your education – and look for that place where your talent and your passion intersect, and when you find it you will be unstoppable in what you are able to achieve.

Congratulations to all of you and thank you for this very special award.