

Old Traditions, New Beginnings

Bridging the Divide

Jennifer Brizel Wood '03 makes affordable education for students with autism a reality

As a young teacher, Jennifer Brizel Wood '03 was ready to change the lives of children who have autism. However, it wasn't long before Wood saw the challenges of implementing intensive programs and support services in public schools due to budget constraints. She also witnessed the financial burdens placed upon families who were providing alternative education for their children.

But Wood simply refused to stand back and watch these children fail. In 2005, Wood and her husband, Patrick, opened the Dominion School for Autism (DSFA), a charter school in Richmond, Va., that offers financially attainable education for students with developmental disabilities.

"It can cost up to \$75,000 to \$100,000 to send your child to a private school," said Wood, founder and executive director of DSFA. "Our mission is to provide education for children with autism at a reasonable cost."

The charter school addresses the needs of 20 students, ranging in age from 2 to 21, under the guidance of 30 staff members including licensed instructors, speech therapists, occupational therapists and office staff. The Dominion School, which includes a pre-school and intermediate school, offers one-on-one, direct instruction and small group learning, and utilizes the Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) approach. In addition, the charter school also has a transitional program for students ages 14 to 21 in order to help them develop the skills required to transition to adult life.



Jennifer Brizel Wood '03 and her husband, Patrick Wood, founders of the Dominion School for Autism, with their son.

Wood learned about the ABA approach in her Special Education classes at Rider and while working with a child who has autism at the Princeton Child Development Institute. The ABA approach uses careful behavioral observation and positive reinforcement to teach social, motor and verbal behaviors as well as reasoning skills.

"When you are working with people with special needs, you want to make sure that the child is making progress," said Wood, who received degrees in Elementary Education and Psychology, and a minor in Special Education at Rider. "ABA breaks steps down into the smallest parts. It gives data-driven research. Children with autism learn best through this approach, but it is very expensive to do in public schools."

Wood said she always wanted to go into teaching, but she fell in love with special education as an undergraduate student because she found the area so rewarding.

"They work so hard. You really have to appreciate the little things. It might take them months or even years to say word or to pronounce a sound," Wood explained. "When they get it, they know. It's amazing. You're changing a life."

CLAES News

Vol. 1 • Spring 2010

Old Traditions, New Beginnings

From the Dean



As the new dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Education, and Sciences (CLAES), I feel privileged to be leading the largest college in the University during a pivotal time in our history. Higher education is at a crossroads, and the liberal arts and sciences are facing great challenges.

Colleges must continually change, but they also must preserve the core of a truly liberal education: one that prepares us to live ethical, responsible, productive and creative lives in a dramatically changing world. We must foster a disposition toward lifelong learning; the ability to think, learn and express oneself; the capacity to understand ideas and issues in context; the yearning for truth; and the responsibility for ethical consequences of our ideas and actions. Those are the fundamental features of our humanity, the core of a liberal education, and what we do in our College.

To position ourselves in the ever-changing landscape of higher education, the College is undergoing a strategic-planning initiative that will be the collective effort of our faculty and other stakeholders. As such, it is with a sense of excitement and pride that we publish the inaugural edition of the CLAES News: Old Traditions, New Beginnings, highlighting some of our most prominent students, faculty and alumni.

I ask you to join me in the adventure of advancing the mission of CLAES and I look forward to working with each of you to implement the future growth of the College.

Patricia Mosto, Ph.D.
Dean, CLAES
E-mail: pmosto@rider.edu
Phone: 609-896-5155

NBS Students Corral Top Awards in Texas

The Rider University chapter of the National Broadcasting Society (NBS) captured first place awards for two categories at the NBS' 47th National Undergraduate Student Electronic Media Competition in Dallas in March.



Gina Grosso edits her award-winning piece.

Gina Grosso, a junior Communication major from Fredon, N.J., and Dave Thomas, a senior Communication major from Dayton, N.J., earned first-place nods in the Movie Trailer category for *Children of Terror*, while Thomas also merited top honors in the Open Video category for his *Rensselaerville Documentary Pitch*.

Grosso, with assistance from Thomas, produced *Children of Terror*, a documentary that details the rift between Jews and Catholics in the context of World War II and Nazi genocide, as told through the perspective of two Holocaust survivors—a German Jewish woman and a Polish Catholic woman.

The NBS award represents Grosso's first national honor, and she was predictably proud. "I am still really excited, especially after so much time and effort. I'm ecstatic about the recognition," she said, adding that while the final cut of the documentary has not been completed, she is already making plans to showcase *Children of Terror* at Rider, perhaps by the end of the spring semester.

The *Rensselaerville Documentary Pitch*, produced by Thomas, introduces the sleepy upstate village of Rensselaerville, N.Y., 144 miles north of Manhattan. Once a thriving mill town that served as a center of commerce for the region, the now-sleepy burg has dwindled from more than 3,000 residents to a mere 150. Thomas' stirring images of the town's gentle river, quaint row homes and the moss-covered stone foundations of the long-abandoned mills provide context and backdrop for his interviews with current Rensselaerville residents.

"I was introduced to the topic about two years ago by my grandfather, who owns a summer residence in Preston's Hollow, not far from Rensselaerville," Thomas said of his inspiration. In October 2009, Thomas and a friend shot some footage to be used in a pitch to develop into a longer film. "We spoke to people we met on the street who were willing to talk to us," he said. "I think we were able to capture a sense of what I hope to accomplish in the documentary."

• The Department of GEMS has a new minor in Earth and Environmental Sciences.

• Dr. Barry Seldes' critically acclaimed book, *Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of an American Musician*, examines the relationship between Bernstein's musical and political lives.

• The Student Global Village allows students from Rider to interact in a virtual, face-to-face conversation with their counterparts from Kufa University in Najaf, Iraq.



College of Liberal Arts, Education, and Sciences • 2083 Lawrenceville Road • Lawrenceville NJ 08648

Old Traditions, New Beginnings

Sense of Balance

Emmanuel Ahia uses his knowledge of law to care through counseling

It's not uncommon for professors to take pride in knowing they've had a positive influence on their students—hundreds of them, perhaps even thousands. But what about those who help steer policies that affect humanity and compassion across the globe? At Rider, **C. Emmanuel Ahia, Ph.D., J.D.**, can claim both distinctions.

Ahia spent the week of March 22 at the prestigious Oxford Round Table on Ethics and Law at Hertford College, one of the constituent colleges of the University of Oxford in England, where the associate professor of Counseling presented his paper on how mental-health ethical principles can inform public policy. The papers presented at the Oxford Round Table often become essential policy guides and best practices for a number of corporate, educational and governmental bodies, including the United Nations.

Ahia has devoted more than 30 years exploring the relationship between the law and mental health.

"Many mental-health issues can arise from legal problems," said Ahia, who has taught at Rider since 1990. "Divorce, abusive drinking, or any number of problems with the law can cause major mental issues that mental-health professionals must respond to."

Ahia's presentation at the Oxford Round Table, however, adapted a more global focus, examining prisoners of war and the effects of their treatment in captivity. It's a relevant issue, one that currently affects many thousands of military combatants, but also one close to his heart. Before coming to the United States in the late 1970s, Ahia served in the military in his native Nigeria. "I don't like



war," he said, citing his primary reason for leaving his homeland. "Nations have to show that toughness, but war offers no solutions to permanent problems."

Despite this belief, Ahia's interest in humane treatment for POWs is much less political than it is personal. "I am motivated by taking care of *people*," Ahia said, emphasizing the word. "But even as a matter of military policy, you gain more from good treatment of these POWs than you do from abusing them. In all respects, it is better to treat them with dignity."

Since his arrival in the United States, Ahia has built an academic résumé that helps explain his specialization in mental-health law. With graduate and doctoral degrees in counseling, as well as a doctorate in law, he is able to integrate his compassionate nature with his ability to navigate the often labyrinthine legal system.

"It allows me to remain a consultant to Rider Counseling graduates who may be facing legal and/or ethical challenges in their practice," said Ahia, who also provides academic mentorship to numerous alumni who have continued their quests for doctoral degrees.

"I know the legal practice and I have the skills to practice law, but it's not an environment I enjoy, the 'lose-or-win' situation," Ahia explained of his decision to be a teacher and counselor above an attorney. "What I enjoy is seeing people doing well, and seeing them happy. I feel more fulfilled by that than by money." ■

Old Traditions, New Beginnings

It's Got a Nice Ring to It

Daniel Druckenbrod says trees silently speak their stories

Hollywood actors are notorious for lying about their ages, but trees know no such luxury. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to find anything in nature as sincere as an aging oak tree, whose true age can be determined to within a year. It's all a matter of dendrochronology, the practice of tree-ring dating, according to **Daniel Druckenbrod, Ph.D.**, whose study of forests and their changing environments is the subject of his research.

Druckenbrod, an assistant professor of Environmental Sciences who joined the faculty at Rider for the fall 2009 semester, is mindful of certain celebrities, but in his case, they tend more toward George Washington than George Clooney. Druckenbrod's most recent research is set at Mount Vernon plantation, home of our nation's first president, and at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, both in Virginia, where he can better understand the dynamics of the forests on these sites since their 18-century heyday.

Though he's not a historian in the academic sense, Druckenbrod certainly has an appreciation for the "roots" of the United States, and eventually figured out how to splice his interests in the environment and history. "It wasn't until graduate school that I realized I could study my own backyard to answer some ques-



tions about this region," he explained, viewing the past through a scientific lens. "I had the chance to study forest change at some great centers of American history, but look at it from a scientific perspective."

By examining the trees at places like James Madison's Montpelier, Druckenbrod can glean historical evidence from the renowned plantations, such as when planting fields were relinquished and returned to nature. But he can also study weather and climate trends over the past two centuries, all bits of information that reveal themselves through individual trees and of growth patterns across sections of forest.

"Tree rings are very approachable. Everyone counted tree rings as kids, but you can answer lots of things besides 'how old,'" said Druckenbrod, who earned a Ph.D. in Environmental Science from the University of Virginia in 2003. "Anything that affects growth will be recorded in those rings, like summer droughts or how much light a tree has received. Even things like hurricanes or selective logging events all have an impact on the surrounding area."

A favorable environment also helped draw Druckenbrod to Rider. "I was really attracted to the fact that Rider has interdisciplinary majors, where I can teach students in a research setting," he explained, adding that his students on the Lawrenceville campus have already proposed some rather intriguing research subjects to him. Other times, they will act on his thoughts. "I'm happy to give them ideas. I like undergraduate research to be meaningful."

At Rider, it's a teaching philosophy that "rings" true. ■

• Dr. Matthew Goldie published a book with Routledge, *The Idea of the Antipodes: Place, People, and Voices* and presented a paper at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference.

• The School of Education began using the Web-based TaskStream system, which enables students to upload résumés, lesson plans and video clips.

• 2010 graduate Stacey Favocci was accepted into the Ph.D. program in French at the University of Connecticut with a full fellowship and the opportunity to spend her second year in Paris as assistant to the residence director for the UConn study abroad program.

• Meg Holland won the award for outstanding student essay for her paper, "Reel Silence: The Female Voice in Patriarchal Law as Represented in *A Question of Silence* and *The Accused*," at the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association conference.

• Senior Biochemistry major Hanna Budayeva, a native of Belarus, was one of just eight students awarded a Novartis Science Scholarship through the Independent College Fund of New Jersey.

• Julie Morcate, a junior English major and a Baccalaureate Honors Program Scholar, recently had her first theater review, of the Broadway show *Memphis*, published in the *Broad Street Review*.