

At right, flanked by her award winning students, Daisy Collins (left) and Megan Harris (right), Dana Bost has also won three prizes herself in the adult category at the Writer's Eye Competition.

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Below, Grymes student, Ayana Braxton looks for inspiration in a piece of art at the Bayly Museum. In the Writer's Eye competition, each student must produce a piece of creative writing based on the artwork they choose.

PHOTO BY DANA BOST



Recently, Chelsea Wilson delivered her eighth grade speech.

It began, "I don't know what to write. I don't know what to write. I don't know what to write." She goes on to describe how she froze and asked to be excused when first called upon to read aloud something she had written.

Ms. Bost sat down with her; helped her through it.

"I think it all began the day we wrote the famous My Place In the Universe, discussing the world around us and how we fit into it," continues Chelsea. "As we sat outside, the words seemed to fill my mind, and I did have something to write. The words just flowed into my brain and spilled out onto the page. As time went on, writing got easier and easier, and I became faster and faster at unlocking my thoughts."

"When we would sit in a circle and share our pieces, I began to realize that Ms. Bost was not the wicked witch of writing I had imagined her to be. She only gave positive feedback, no matter how bad you thought your writing was. I wonder why I thought I had to be good at this? I mean after all, I was only 12 years old. We all knew we were safe in the circle and she would remind us that we were all just beginning. No one was perfect but we should try as hard as we could. Over time, we have all become better and better."

"Maybe that whole class was not just about writing," concludes Chelsea Wilson. "It was about growing as a person, and fighting our fears."

All it takes is a Muse.



the MUSE

Words, words, words...tumbling out of mouths, colliding on stage, spilling onto pieces of paper, marching across computer screens, underscoring photographs. Words... written, spoken and read; like water, they are our essence. Without them, we'd be cut off from each other; mutes making hand signals to communicate.

It must be spring time at Grymes Memorial School, because the words are fairly flying around here. Twenty two students are rehearsing Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" for the annual May play. There are lines to memorize, books to read, stories to write, speeches to give. Seventh and eighth grade English class is humming.

Actually, "English" is a misnomer; it really should be called "Words" class. We don't call mathematics "Arabic" class do we? English is all about words. Its sub-categories: grammar—rules in the game of words; vocabulary—your word savings account; drama—acting out words; poetry—musical words; speaking—"live in concert" words; writing—stringing pictures into words; reading—stringing words into pictures.

Dana Bost is the upper school Words teacher at Grymes.



Above, English teacher, Dana Bost listens intently as Spirit Karcher practices her eighth grade speech in front of her peers.

Counterclockwise from the right: Spirit Karcher, Dana Bost, Peter Lonergan, Eddie Williams, Chelsea Wilson, Marissa Brizzolara, Megan Harris (seated on floor), and Eliza Heyl. Left, in seventh and eighth grade English, students often start by "free writing" long-hand, before organizing a project in the computer lab.

PHOTOS BY PHIL AUDIBERT

INSIDER

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BY

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In order to graduate from this private day school on Spicer's Mill Road, every eighth grader must deliver an address to the student body. No exceptions. Under her watchful eye her kids practice their speeches in front of their classmates. One by one, they line up to the lectern. "Look up," she tells one student right in the middle of her speech. To some this is an opportunity to strut their stuff; to others it is a terrifying rite of passage. It doesn't matter; everybody has to do it.

These 13-year-olds are surprisingly smooth and poised, even though yours truly is walking around behind them, snapping photographs. The distraction is good practice for them.

"That's good, very good. Don't be late," says Bost to a young lady who writes about her battle with introversion. The girl smiles shyly as she darts out the door. Another writes about her fear of writing. When asked to write for the first time, she scribbled, "I don't know what to write," over and over again.

Alone finally in her cluttered classroom, the one with the costumes, props and hats, Dana Bost fidgets. She fiddles with the button on her smock, shifts her gaze, brushes an errant strand of hair from her forehead, speaks so softly, it's hard to hear. She is loathe to bring attention to herself. She's been put up to this by Lee Berry, the school's admissions director. But Berry cannot resist calling Dana, "the axis of the school program."

Former students confirm this. "She is still one of the most inspiring people I have ever met in my life," writes Win Jordan. "She taught me what it means to be creative and how to express that."

Haley Wilbanks e-mails, "After a difficult move in seventh grade from a school completely different than Grymes, Ms. Bost helped me tremendously in not only developing my creative writing skills but also socially."

John Kean writes from Woodberry. "People still say 'Wow. You are really good at writing.' And I'll just think 'Well, of course. I got a leg up. I had Ms. Bost.'"

So what's the trick? "It's not English," blurts Dana,

hesitantly. "It's... I dunno, life 101. I try to teach them how to be a good person and do the right thing. And through the writing I get to know them really well because we write about things that are important to us."

She thinks about the question, 'what is it that you teach,' and answers, "I think it's a class of discovery and they're discovering themselves. They're inventing themselves, and I am their Muse. I'm their biggest fan and also, I'm strict. I'm tough on them, and they end up loving the parameters in the end and the rules. And they do it." She leans forward to share a secret. "I make them do it... a lot," she whispers dramatically.

"Do what?" I whisper back.

"Write," of course.

She starts them out small, describing their dog; even a goldfish in a bowl. "Show, don't tell," she says over and over. "They have to show me the fish, have the fish move, have a thought about the fish and have something you wonder about the fish." Or she'll send them off on a trip. "Guided imagery, where I just take them on a journey and then I drop them off at some point and then they imagine..."

The kids start out free writing longhand in class. Then they go to the computer lab "and we just go rrrright down it," she purrs, helping them organize the random scribbles. Then they read aloud to each other and critique. "And then, back to the lab, do it again; back in here, read it again."

She forces them to zero in on the details, makes them insert another sentence between every one, doubling a 250 word piece to 500. Or, she'll make them cut stuff out. "Yeah, cutting the fat, I definitely teach that." And then there

are what former student John Kean calls, the "word games, improv, whacky stories. Those were some of the best times I had."

They fondly call her the "wicked witch of writing." Kean talks of a bumper sticker on the blackboard behind her desk that reads, 'My other car is a broom.' "This isn't saying she wasn't one of my favorite people in Grymes.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Each folder represents the cumulative work of an upper school English class student at Grymes Memorial School. Dana Bost has been teaching English at the private school for 15 years now.



PHOTO BY DANA BOST

Grymes Memorial School students have won 31 awards since first entering the Writer's Eye Competition at UVa's Bayly Museum in 1996.

She totally was, but there were more than a few times when you expected her to turn green and start threatening you, and your little dog, too. If you weren't doing something right, especially on stage, she wasted no time calling you out and making you just scared enough to do it right the second time."

But don't dare laugh in scorn at someone in this class. "They know that they're safe," assures Dana, who as a mother of two, knows full well how fragile kids are at this age. "If anybody comes close, I come after them. I can be scary."

When I took English in this same classroom some 50 years ago, it was nothing like this. We were either reading or learning about "boring stuff:" grammar, spelling, hardly any writing. "I have vocabulary and grammar running all year long over and above and around," confirms Bost. But, she hastens to add, "The more important thing is reading and writing." Especially writing.

She hefts a box of folders, each folder representing the cumulative work of a student. Some have 30, 35 finished pieces in them; others not as many. "They just get better and better and better," she marvels. "It's a combination of wanting to do well in front of your friends and, I think, me making them feel good about themselves. Success just fuels motivation, somehow." She pauses a beat and concludes Zen-like, "the Muse."

A Muse is generally regarded as an outside power or God who spurs creativity in the arts. It's another word for inspiration.

(Cue the ominous drum roll here, please). Enter Mr.

Wallace, the anti-Muse. It is both travesty and blessing that he was Dana Bost's ninth grade English teacher in New Jersey where she was born and raised; a travesty because he demoted this quiet teenager from honors English to regular English class. "I remember his name. I remember his face," snarls Dana. "He just changed my entire life by putting me down to regular English. He just ruined me academically for awhile."

But, Mr. Wallace's put-down was a blessing in disguise because it fueled her equal and opposite reaction to it. "My main job is to make them confident and willing to raise their hand and say what they think because of Mr. Wallace...I help them be successful, and they love that. And I help them invent themselves and make them feel great. And part of it is once you've tasted success; when your teacher says 'this is amazing; you have a gem in every sentence. You need to learn to edit, but once you learn, people are going to sit up and listen.' The kids they just..." she makes a whooshing noise, "Shoom... they get taller."

Like last November, when they went to UVa's Bayly Art Museum and looked at pictures to inspire words that they turned back into new pictures... telling stories based on what they saw in the art. Grymes kids have been participating in this 23-year-old writing contest since 1996. They have won 31 awards, and they are up against 1,200 other entries from regional public and private schools in four age group categories. Most recently, Daisy Collins garnered a second place, and her teacher, yes, Ms. Bost herself, an honorable mention.

The year before that, the Grymes kids won everything: Lizzie Collins, Daisy's older sister, first; John Irby, second; Haley Wilbanks third and, Megan Harris, honorable mention.

These kids are good. Reading their stuff, you have to remind yourself that they are seventh and eighth graders! Listen to these words by Wilson Hack written back in 1998 when she saw an abstract painting as a dance floor in a Tango joint.

*Red streaks of a man's suit slash the pink dress of a woman bending forward into her partner's open arms. Their hands are clasped, their fingers pressed tightly together. Onlookers are strips of drunken color, sparkling in a bold orange. Figures in suits straddle stools looking down at their glasses into bottomless pits. A large woman, puffed into pink squares of texture, carries shapeless food to the dance floor, balancing a bottle of black wine under her right arm. Waiters parade around like stuffed penguins, waddling across the open room to tables carrying drinks and a thin smile.*

And it's not just writing, it's acting too, which is basically reading and writing out loud. This past March, the Grymes kids strode the boards of the Folger Theatre in Washington, DC with their abbreviated production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"And there we were, the little tiny grammar school going to the high school festival," smiles Dana. They came away from it with three awards. "After that basically, I think the kids feel like they can do anything. I mean it's scary; go to Washington; being the youngest."

Dana Bost never really meant to be an English teacher; it just sort of happened that way. And she is supremely grateful that this private school gave her this opportunity. She came on board 15 years ago as a substitute, a parent filling in for someone who was ill. She had little to no experience as a teacher. But she knew people and she knew kids, and she knew good writing when she read it.

In the early 70s, she worked as a public health nurse in the hills and hollers of northwestern Albemarle

County. Toodling around in her VW bug, ("I had a little black bag, a little navy blue uniform"), she saw everything from a gun stuck in her face to rampant child abuse.

A few years ago, Dana volunteered to spend part of her summer at a school for the handicapped in Kenya. "I just didn't want to be afraid to go anywhere or do anything. So I decided to choose something difficult. And it was very difficult." Describing conditions as "horrible, just horrible," Dana came back from that trip with mental images that still haunt.

Asked if she sees in pictures or words, this former art photographer emphatically responds "Both! Because I'm very visual." Then she adds, "I love words now; I do love words."

Does she feel we're losing words to computers and videos and text messages and the like, all butchering and abbreviating our beloved language? "I think Shakespeare used 25,000 words and now we're down to like six (6,000)," she frowns. "Our vocabulary is terrible. As far as visuals taking over, children don't read as much at all. Reading is tiresome to them. They don't want to plough through all the details. They don't want to

read the long book that's well written. They want "Twilight." But she adds, smiling like the Cheshire Cat, "we still make them read."

And yes, "Alice In Wonderland" is still one of the stalwarts in seventh and eighth grade English class, along with such other recognizable titles as "Wind in the Willows," "To Kill a Mockingbird" and "Lord of the Flies." She laments, "I hunt around and try to find new stuff. You can't find new good literature that bridges this age and adults."

Still, the computer has helped more

than it has hindered. "Handwriting is not good anymore and spelling is bad, but writing is very good. That's why they sound so good. They're only in eighth grade. They can move paragraphs, sentences. You can add a whole part, take out a part, move a part down, look at it later...We're much better writers because of the computer."



PHOTO BY DANA BOST

Ever since 1997, Grymes kids have excelled at an annual Shakespeare festival at the Folger Theatre in Washington, DC. The class of 2006 performs a scene from "Twelfth Night." From left to right, Mark Sullivan, Paul Bernd, Tyler Houston, David Katz.