BEHIND EVERY FACE IS A STORY

What would happen if we stopped to notice students, ask questions, and actually listen to their responses? We might learn a lot, says the author.

By Lee Burdette Williams

On a Post-it note near my desk is a scribbled reminder to myself. It is a quote from Robert Kegan, the developmental theorist: "Greater than the inequality of social class or achievement test scores is the unequal capacity of students to interest others in them."

It is a prompt, a blinking cursor, that helps me keep my place in my day-to-day interactions with students. I work on a campus full of "traditional" students—most between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, most white, most middle-class, upper-middle-class, or upper-class. On the surface, they are the faces of what researchers in higher education say is a shrinking population. They are not the students for whom new programs are being developed, new strategies devised. Some are what Clark and Trow back in 1966 referred to as "collegiate" types: students who feel a close affiliation to their institution's heart, if not necessarily its mind. Some are more like Clark and Trow's nonconformists: students looking in from the margins, finding their social fulfillment away from the institution's offerings. In fact, many here look the nonconformist part, regardless of what their politics and preferences may be. I watch them with awe, wondering just how many variations of hairstyle and hair color exist on earth, how many pieces of jewelry a single face can hold.

I like the students here. They are an interesting assortment, drawn to this state institution by its beautiful surroundings as often as by its academic offerings. They are hikers and cyclists, skiers and paddlers. Some are very, very intelligent. Some probably struggle with the university's bus route schedule.

Their lives are complicated. That is my mantra—the words I say to myself that help me be patient, curious, compassionate. I cannot possibly know the struggles they deal with every day, or the stories they bring with them to this mountaintop campus. Recently I was on a retreat with a group of students. We did a familiar exercise: "Lifelines." Each student illustrated the important points of his or her life on a piece of newsprint, and then narrated it for the others. As I have so many times, I listened with amazement. One student spent the first seven years of her

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life in Vietnamese refugee camps, waiting for church sponsorship to bring her and her family to the United States. Another student was raped at the age of twelve and told the group, "To hide myself from it, I joined a gang." Her involvement in drugs and violence pervaded her teen years.

A third student had repeatedly been designated a model youth—"Youth of the Year"—in his fundamentalist church and even garnered the award on a national level one year. At the age of nineteen, however, his sexual orientation, which was not exactly in keeping with fundamentalist teachings, was discovered by church members. He was forced to write letters of explanation to various groups and then was dismissed from the church that had "nurtured" him since he was a toddler.

Yet another student has been pursued by the forty-year-old father of a friend who insists that he loves her and wants to marry her. His pursuit began when she was sixteen and has yet to cease, despite a restraining order.

In her recent book, *Bright College Years,* Ann Matthews writes that "college students today seem immature in some ways, very old in others." What I find so interesting is that often those adjectives describe the same student. The historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz observes that "young people have come to college from widely divergent backgrounds and with very different life histories . . . [and] bring to their higher education a great deal of baggage from their short pasts."

It is this baggage that is easy for us to lose sight of amid the complexities of our own lives. It is too easy, sometimes, to overlook their baggage as we struggle with our own, to remain unaware of the delicate balances they maintain, the frustrations and heartaches and incredibly complicated responsibilities and burdens some of them shoulder.

Three recent conversations with three different students provided me with just that: a glimpse into the multiple layers of their lives and dreams. Each is a student one might pass by in a hallway, sit beside in the campus coffeehouse, buy a book from in the campus store. There is nothing about any of them that demands attention from the busy faculty member or administrator. They're just here, going about their lives and their education with minimal fanfare.

Lydia

LYDIA AND I sat across from the white, goateed student named Greg. We were interviewing him for a spot on our team of "Diversity Advocates," a group of students who do diversity-focused presentations around campus. I say, "I noticed on your application that you said you used to 'dislike people of different races.' But here you are, wanting to be a Diversity Advocate. What's up with that?"

He looked at the floor, then up at Lydia, and smiled. He turned back to me. "I met Lydia." I looked over at the tall, black, gregarious woman on my right. I knew they were acquainted, but how had she so affected this white, southern man that he went from disliking people of other races to wanting to educate his peers about the destructive power of racism and the benefits of multiculturalism? As I have come to know Lydia better, it is easier to understand.

We recently sat and talked over a hot drink in the campus coffeehouse, and I asked her about her life here. Lydia is a senior, on schedule to graduate in May. Her major is music industry studies, with a concentration in studio production and management. It is a difficult degree to earn here, full of long hours of rehearsals, recital recordings, and concerts that need to be managed.

I was surprised when I learned that Lydia has already completed a college degree, begun at the age of fifteen at a small western Carolina college. She said, "My mother really pushed me early on." She had skipped several grades. "I was going to be a doctor. Studied all

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the time, subscribed to medical journals. But I got tired of it, and realized I didn't want to go to school for eight more years after getting my degree."

After graduating with a chemistry degree at the ripe old age of nineteen, Lydia left on a year-long sojourn through Europe, working once she got there to pay her expenses. She decided during her academic hiatus that music was what she loved and wanted to study. "I've studied classical guitar now for sixteen years. Now I also study percussion and voice."

Her arrival here coincided with, or perhaps induced, an examination of her life and feelings. "I got here and it hit me," she said. Her realization: that she is a lesbian—more specifically, an African American Jewish lesbian, a rare find here in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Lydia's racial and ethnic identity is complex. Her mother is black, her father was white, Jewish, and Belgian. Her stepfather is black, and Lydia learned only a few years ago that he is not her natural father. One grandmother is Cherokee. She calls herself, with good reason, "multiracial," rather than "biracial." Her father's religion got her interested in Judaism, leading her to attend a synagogue, though she has never officially converted. "My beliefs follow Judaism." She wears around her neck a Star of David, an inevitable source of puzzlement to this area's mostly white, mostly Baptist residents.

There is an affable charisma in Lydia, one that undoubtedly serves her well in her role as a resident assistant for thirty-five women. "I wanted to be an RA because when I got here my RA was never here. It was obvious she was doing it for the money, not because she enjoyed it. When I went to her about a problem, actually, about coming out, her response was like, 'So?' She didn't offer any suggestions or referrals. She could have been a lot more helpful."

Other responsibilities during the week include various recording and studio responsibilities, working lights and sound at concerts, Diversity Advocates (a weekly meeting plus presentations), and attending meetings of BGLAD, the university's gay, lesbian, and bisexual student group. She also serves on the national boards of two students-in-music organizations.

Through it all she appears regularly on the dean's list and maintains a 3.6 grade point average. She is, she said, the only black student in her music classes, and one of only eight to ten black music majors, not unusual here on this campus of eleven thousand students, only three hundred of whom are people of color.

After a summer internship in London following graduation, Lydia will move to New York and accept one of several job offers she has already received. Her carefully thought-out "career map" reveals a plan to work on her own music on the side. "I write music and would like to experiment with my own stuff. Ultimately I'd like to do side stuff working for film companies, doing sound design for movies and cartoons."

Lydia departed from our table as breathlessly as she had come in, off to meet someone for lunch before returning to the music building for the afternoon. I sat and thought about her for a few moments. She will undoubtedly be this university's first black Jewish lesbian with a B.S. in chemistry to earn a degree in music industry studies, a certain claim to some sort of fame. She has marched to a different percussionist all along, and an equally unique path awaits her.

Eric

ERIC IS THE kind of student a professor is most likely to see sitting in the middle of the classroom—attentive but not too eager. He is likely to be noticed by the other students because of his looks—large, dark eyes; dark hair carefully coiffed; fashionably dressed; an engaging smile. In fact, that is what I first noticed about Eric when I met him at an early meeting of a student organization I advise. There is, however, not a hint of conceit, and when he is teased about his hair by his friends in the group, he laughs along.

I've liked Eric from the start, finding him conscientious and patient in his tasks with the group. He is well regarded by the others, and most likely by his fraternity brothers as well. We talked one day about his life both here in Boone and down the mountain with his family. His story is absolutely unique in that it is his alone, but it no doubt bears similarities to the stories of those around him.

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Eric is ready to sacrifice study time for friends in need, which might frustrate some instructors but satisfies Eric's need to be needed. "There's a lot that goes on that professors don't see—like students trying to find someone to feel comfortable with, dealing with drug and alcohol addiction, low self-esteem."

Eric's family has moved a lot, settling about four hours from here. His father has twice been downsized, recently remaining unemployed for more than a year. Eric's relationship with his father is complex. "I can do ninety-nine things out of a hundred right, and he'll always find the one thing I did wrong." His father, he says, is an alcoholic who has met with limited success in treatment programs. "He's just a discipline kind of guy. Our relationship is more of a business transaction."

Eric escaped the frustrations of his home life through involvement in high school drama and sports. "People looked at me like I had this perfect life, but it was a pretty shitty life, actually. Mom was a saint to put up with him all this time."

Eric's academic life has not been stellar. He has been an average student, maintaining a 2.7 grade point average, though he describes himself as "anal" when it comes to schoolwork. "I feel like my personality and experience will get me a job over someone with better grades." He wants to go into marketing or sales, and one can clearly see the possibilities that exist for him there. He talks about waiting tables at the Olive Garden, selling more desserts than the other servers, in part because he understands his customers and knows how to talk to them.

He's also adept at talking with women, who "tend to see me as a kind of long-term relationship kind of guy, not a weekend fling. I listen to them. Most guys—they listen to a girl's problems and want to fix things. But sometimes girls just want to be heard."

Eric's most time-consuming extracurricular activity is his fraternity, which he said drew him into its "web" in his freshman year. "It gave me a family away from home. I'm the kind of guy who always has more girl friends than guy friends. I thought this would be a good way to meet more guys." He believes, though, that he is not the stereotypical fraternity member. He doesn't drink often, and says he's only been drunk four times, twice on his recent twenty-first birthday. "I never drink when I'm upset or worried. I think people worry about me, that I'll turn out like my father."

Eric's younger sister followed him here a year after Eric came, and plays on the university's soccer team. "We've always been really close, but we're very different. She just had her second knee operation, and her coach isn't playing her. She's always been a starter, so this is her first time on the bench, which is hard. She has no self-confidence, and has incredible mood swings. She can be nice, but can go from zero to bitch in seconds." His sister depends on Eric for moral support, especially recently, as both have been dealing with their father's extended stay in a hospital for diabetes-related problems.

Eric looks out for a lot of people, it seems. He is ready to sacrifice study time for friends in need, which might frustrate some instructors but satisfies Eric's need to be needed. "There's a lot that goes on that professors don't see—like students trying to find someone to feel comfortable with, dealing with drug and alcohol addiction, low self-esteem. I have a lot of things on my mind. Is Dad going to continue working? Is alcohol going to take over his life? Who's going to support him?"

My guess is that Eric, who has logged a lot of miles both physically and emotionally, is just barely at the beginning of a long journey, and the questions he ponders now will have decidedly different answers a few years down that road.

Ellen

I'D MET FULL-TIME students who were single mothers. I'd met women married to men who were full-time students. I'd never, however, met a mother (of five) who is both a full-time student and the wife of a full-time student. This is Ellen's life, and after hearing about it I have vowed to never complain about being too busy.

Ellen's five children range in age from seven to fourteen, and while some of their friends have occasionally

commented that having both parents enrolled in college full-time is "weird," the children have adjusted. "They're good kids, and they were all pretty independent to start with." They will, however, be relieved when both mom and dad graduate in May.

Ellen and her husband have known each other since they were children. They went to college together for a year, but then both dropped out to get married and work. Her husband is a craftsman—a maker of musical instruments—as well as a musician. "He had wanted to go back for a long time, and the plan was that I would work and support him. But the opportunities for me weren't there. I was working two part-time jobs that were basically minimum wage, and after paying child care, putting gas in the car, and buying a gallon of milk, there was no money left over." So it became clear to both of them that returning to school for degrees would offer the best financial future for their family.

"It was kind of a romantic image at first. We'd walk around campus and talk about returning. But it's not like that." Instead of late night chats in the coffeehouse, or a party, or even a quiet night in the library, there is a schedule that most people could manage only with the help of a scheduling secretary.

"The alarm goes off at 5:30, and then I start waking the kids up one at a time and getting them ready for school. The bus comes at 6:50. We're the first ones on the route because we live so far out in the country. When they're gone, I leave for school, which is a forty-five-minute drive. Usually we don't drive together, because one of the kids might need to be picked up at 5:00, and I have class till then, so we take separate cars. Two of the kids play soccer, and one is a cheerleader, and their practices and games are in two different places in the county, though of course they have to be picked up at the same time. We make a lot of 'arrangements.'"

Study time gets worked around other responsibilities. "I try and carry things with me, and do them whenever I have a few minutes. The night before last I came home, saw the kids, put in a load of laundry, then finally opened a book for a quiz the next morning. I was catatonic in five minutes."

Ellen can look back on the first weeks of student life with a measure of pride at her determination. "I remember my first class. My knees were literally shaking. I wondered, 'What am I doing here?' I had no idea if I could do it, because I'd been out of school a long time. These kids were fresh out of high school and could remember things more easily. I had no idea if I could hold my own."

But now she is an honor student and a scholarship winner, and she will finish this year with a degree in human resource management and production operations management.

Sometimes Ellen finds herself looking around at her classmates and thinking about their lives. At thirty-eight she is twenty years older than many of them. "I used to think they were slackers and partiers. Some are. But I see people with brains and drive, and I'm impressed."

A professor who has Ellen in class isn't likely to know much about the other parts of her life. "I hate excuses. I hate to hear 'the dog ate my homework' sort of thing. I can't tell you the number of times I've been on the road with a screwdriver sticking in the carburetor to make it run. But I don't like to tell the teacher about it. I wonder sometimes if they think I don't care when I haven't done the reading. But I don't like to say, 'Hey, I have five kids, etcetera.'"

Ellen's children have asked her when she will finish school, and it is finally close enough to imagine what life will be like for them with parents not consumed by an academic life. "Our lives have never been 'normal' anyway," she said, "and after two and a half years of this, it's become 'normal' at least as far as they know."

Conclusion

AT THE BEGINNING of each semester I look out at a sea of mostly unfamiliar faces, trying to match name and body, hoping they remain in the same seat long enough for me to memorize their names. I have,

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at that moment, a hundred things on my mind—the details of my syllabus, the unregistered students seeking a seat, the reading packet's availability at the print shop. I have no time, I think, to ponder their existence as individuals, to consider my responses to their inevitable requests ("I work until 5:00 and can't get here till about 5:30," "I'm going to have to miss three classes because of family commitments," "I have a learning disability and need extra time on my exams.")

And yet behind each face in this room is a story, a life whose complexities I can barely begin to understand at this point. Beneath their baseball caps, dressed in their college sweatshirts, shod in their Birkenstocks and hiking boots, they are plugging away, just like I am, trying to make their way in the world. In some ways they offer me more than I'll offer them. I am mindful of what Parker Palmer says in his thoughtful treatise *To Know as We Are Known,* that educators must have humility—that "humility is the virtue that allows us to pay attention to 'the other'—be it student or subject—whose integrity and voice are central to knowing and teaching in truth."

I try to find that humility as I stand in front of them. It's not all that hard, really. These students teach me. They instruct me about a summer spent working in Poland, training for and just missing a spot on an Olympic team, raising a disabled child as a single mother, losing a sibling to suicide. They teach me also about my colleagues, because I try and ask them, when they stop by my office, to tell me what they are learning in their other classes. I learn about DNA experiments, recently uncovered scrolls, new methods of earthquake prediction.

They teach me and they remind me: that I am one link in the chain of their education, and this means I am linked to all others in this community of educators. Here we are, held together by the lives of our students—lives incredibly fragile, remarkably hardy, complicated, and challenging—ours to know and understand for the asking.

NOTES

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