CYNNTHIA LYNN LEWIS

Exceptional teachers bring a rare combination of care, dedication, and craft to everyday tasks of the classroom and conference. Other fine teachers challenge ordinary and superior students alike to find and test unexpected talents and resources. Still others love their field as passionately as they love their students—and arrange a marriage between them. The individual we honor today is all of these teachers, using remarkable skill and a warm spirit to draw students in, building strong personal relationships and a lasting love of learning.

One student wrote that this year's Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching winner has an explanation style that is "centrifugal, clarifying complexities in a way that tends to expand concepts rather than narrow them." In the classroom, this professor balances criticism and encouragement, and can call everyone by name after the first meeting. One student wrote, "Class discussions were illuminating and truly electrifying; we were encouraged to take intellectual leaps!" And even with long lines outside her office, she takes time to address each student's needs with patience and enthusiasm. One wrote, "She always treated me with dignity, even when she bled red ink on a mediocre essay." But, much more.

Good writing fortifies the art of a liberal education. According to this professor's students, she teaches them to teach themselves how to write. She knows good writing demands clear thinking as well as beautiful English, and won't hesitate to add a class session simply to attack grammar, not satisfied to battle this monster piecemeal. Described as exacting but fair, her comments on papers are painstaking and extensive, sometimes running for pages. These remarks are remembered as "rich and perceptive . . . focusing precisely on what needs more work and what looks good." Harsh or laudatory, she tells the truth either way, sparking in her students the quest for true achievement. Loving the challenge of rhetoric, she seasons it with good humor: One student recalls the ultimate compliment, "She said my paper had been better than a Mars Bar."

It is this talent to inspire, to dare, to instill confidence in a beginner that sets great teachers above the commonplace and binds them to
students in the alchemy of learning. The teacher we honor today possesses an uncanny gift for compelling students to think and speak critically and originally. When your professor leans toward you with passionate intensity, locks your eyes to hers and engages your mind to explore an idea or a sentence, you know you are being challenged to perform exceptionally. One said, "She made me feel I could do anything."

Your love’s labour is found on the library shelf as well as the theater boards, lit by the midnight oil of writers who learn from you, steeped in the legacy of language you bring from Shakespeare and share so fruitfully with your young scholars, who say they "strive mightily" with you, but "eat and drink as friends." The affirmations you bestow so generously are returned today, measure for measure, as we celebrate our fortune in having you in this place, and name you, Cynthia Lynn Lewis, recipient of the Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching Award for 1998.