2005 Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching Award Citation for Jeanne Neumann

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The teacher we honor today is praised by students as one full of passion, devotion, and engagement: passionate about the subject, devoted to the students, and engaged with the world through the refracting and magnifying lenses of history and culture, literature and language. This teacher's classes spill over into students' lives. It is not unusual for a student to receive several communications throughout the day: praise for a well-crafted essay, connections to readings or items in the news, a word of compassion or admonition, or a note of concern.

Students, texts in hand, meet regularly in small groups outside of class—often on the Union patio on Friday afternoons—to decipher ancient lessons of human nature under this scholar's expert tutelage. Most characterize this professor as intensely demanding, with the highest standards, and the ability to assign what one referred to as a "beastly workload." One student was advised by a sibling: "That's the thing about really great teachers. They can ask you to do things another teacher wouldn't, because they know they can, because they know you'll do it for them."

This professor's courses are legendarily challenging, yet always full. A colleague told an advisee "to run, not walk, to get into a course" taught by this teacher. One student reports foregoing a summer's vacation in Alaska for summer school—in order to be able to take two more of this professor's classes during the coming year. At the same time, charity characterizes this professor's relationships with students: tea and cakes at home, heartfelt warnings about what they should and should not do with their leisure time, little gestures like the bowl of candies on her desk, checking in years later to see how things are going—there is constant...
support and encouragement for all her students. She helped one pick out clothes for a job interview; another she counseled about overcoming the culture shock of being a Yankee in the South, having done this herself. Her intense gaze both challenges and affirms her charges. One student said: “She showed confidence in me that was lacking in myself.”

Yet it is the comic nature of everyday life that informs both her discipline and her method. Students talk about her “shining ability to laugh at herself” and note her contagious self-deprecating humor. “Et nunc agenda est comoedia Rufillana” (“and now get ready for the Rufilla show”) said one student, referring to her by her Latin name—Rufilla, because of her rufus-red hair—as he described what students call the spectacles of knowledge and erudition that are her culture lectures. Another recalled a profound experience with classical literature: “After a brief lecture on the Doric temple to Athena, she asked us to sit on the overturned slabs and stop taking notes. We did so, and as we sat, with the ancient columns turning rosy in the fading light, she read to us her favorite poems of Sappho, with the island of the poet’s birth a hazy blue smudge in the distance. The memory is so clear to me because there was such joy, such interest and passion” in her action, this art of connecting between then and now, between the ancients and the moderns.

While her field is the past, places distant and people long dead, she undoes any notion that the Latin language is dead or that the ancient world is behind us. Her beloved Horace tells us: “carpe diem,” and indeed, she demands that her students make everything of the time they have today. Her own life of passionate, disciplined, but lighthearted pursuit of knowledge is a worthy model for her students’ lives, both for today and for tomorrow.

For her gifted teaching, her selfless spirit, and the love she showers on her students and her discipline, Davidson honors Professor Jeanne Neumann with the Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching Award.