

# Wake Forest University English Department Newsletter

## Remembering Elizabeth Phillips

*“The most important gift that we can get from literature is life ... we learn about the uses of language, integrity, and the power of words that describe your feelings. By reading the words of another, we are helped to be good, thoughtful, sensitive human beings.”*

~ Elizabeth Phillips

By Kevin Cox

The last time I saw Elizabeth Phillips, she was walking with help from family and friends across Hearn Plaza, making her way slowly but cheerfully to Wait Chapel. The day was too warm and the walk too far for an 89-year-old woman with failing health, but she was determined to see friend Maya Angelou and political favorite Hillary Clinton carry on a conversation in front of a big chapel crowd. How many looked at her that day and saw a *professor emerita* of English, a Wake Forest Medallion of Merit recipient, I do not know. I saw all of that and a friend for life.

That moment tells much about Elizabeth, whose career as professor and department chair was history-making in the Department of English and at Wake Forest. Until her death last June, she lived life with joy and determination and optimism, surrounded by love. Elizabeth understood well that when you give love, you receive love. Generations of students knew that to be true. I was blessed to be one of them.

The last time I heard from Elizabeth was soon after the Wait Chapel event and only a month or so before her passing. She wrote to thank me for helping her to get into the chapel quickly, without waiting in lines slowed by security precautions. Elizabeth added that



Dr. Elizabeth Phillips is remembered fondly by former colleagues.

she should write a note to the nice police officer who took her inside, but, regrettably, she did not know his name. I should explain that when I saw her struggling across the plaza that day, I quickly enlisted an officer's assistance in moving her quickly into the air-conditioned chapel where she could find a seat without delay. Not long ago, I told that officer that Elizabeth had passed away recently, but she wanted him to know that she appreciated his kindness on a day when she needed a helping hand.

Her note last May was one of many I received throughout the years from Elizabeth. In every one, she thanked me for my service to Wake Forest and remarked that she was proud of me. Sometimes, she noted that she, too, had worked in a college news service when she was quite young. I appreciated each note as if it had come from a favorite family member,

written in the same familiar script that had been a challenge to read decades ago on tests and papers and was not getting any easier as the years passed.

Recently, I came across a holiday card she sent to me in December of 2006 reflecting faith traditions from around the world. I had written her earlier, sending along the contents of an e-mail I had received from one of her former students who asked that I pass it to Elizabeth. In the message, the former student expressed her gratitude for Elizabeth and the powerful, life-changing inspiration she received from her many years ago.

In her card to me, Elizabeth wrote: "I never cease to wonder about the 'mystery' of students' awakening to something—I never knew what?—in one of my classes. I wish it

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## A Word from the Department Chair



I hope this edition of the newsletter finds you well and enjoying the season. The tree outside my Tribble Hall window has shed its leaves, just in time for December!

Our fall semester got off to a sad but inspiring start when we held a Memorial Service on September 3<sup>rd</sup> for long-time professor Elizabeth Phillips. The service was a celebration of her life that had us smiling through our tears when friends such as Professors Ed Wilson and Mary DeShazer shared stories about Elizabeth's powerful teaching and legendary wit. The service, enriched with performances of Elizabeth's favorite musical pieces by Music faculty members, climaxed with a tape of Elizabeth reading late poems by Yeats, accompanied by slides of her career. The crowd, which nearly filled Brendle Hall, then adjourned to share stories and

memories of Elizabeth at a lively reception.

Since then, we are enjoying our usual busy round of classes and invited speakers. We've heard a fine reading by novelist Clint McCown and attended a reading by Irish poet Harry Clifton. Our English Student Association recently hosted a packed reception for prospective majors, and earlier this semester, Joe Biden regaled the campus community up on Hearn Plaza. Of course, we've also been enticed by a full roster of football, soccer, field hockey, Mainstage plays, departmental lectures, and a fall Convocation address by Art professor David Lubin, concluding in a picnic for students, faculty, and staff on the Hearn Plaza lawn! Suffice to say, the campus is hopping, and I hope you are either experiencing an equally rich season, or will be transported back to your

m e m o r i e s o f W i n s t o n - S a l e m .

All best wishes to you and yours,

Claudia Kairoff

*(Elizabeth Phillips:  
continued from page 1)*

happened to everyone within the sound of my voice!"

In that same letter, she thanked me for a recent news release announcing the Elizabeth Phillips Award, which is presented annually by the Women's and Gender Studies program. The program recognizes the best undergraduate or graduate student essay written in the subject of women's and gender studies throughout the academic year. I had the good fortune to be invited to a big gathering on commencement weekend in 2007 when Elizabeth was present to see the award presented, hear alumni and colleagues praise her contributions to the University, and accept the hugs and thanks of those gathered to share that day with her.

The honor was an appropriate recognition of a woman who served as a pioneer for women faculty at Wake Forest and an inspiration for countless women, including students, staff and faculty. After she had re-

tired, Elizabeth spent a year serving as acting coordinator of the Women's and Gender Studies program. Once on Hearn Plaza, during the time she held that post, she whispered to me that she had accepted the interim post although she did not have any real experience in the program. I laughed, thinking that she had "real" experience, gained from decades in the trenches in higher education as a woman making her way in a world that had been dominated by men.

I first came to know Elizabeth when I enrolled in her graduate seminar on poetry in the late 1970s, and I came to know her much better when she served as second reader on my master's thesis. I knew little about her early on. I did not know, for instance, that she had been the first woman to chair the Department of English, a tenure that ran from 1971 to 1975. I certainly was unaware that she was one of the first two women at Wake Forest to be granted tenure. She did mention in class one day

that when she joined the English faculty in 1957, there were some at the University who were unsure about the contributions a woman might make to the department long-term. Furthermore, Dean of the College William Archie had asked her what she could contribute to a "good Baptist college." As many know now, she replied, "Criticism."

While expectations might not have been high for a 30-something Elizabeth Phillips, they should have been. After earning a bachelor's degree in English from UNC-G, she had returned home to Spruce Pine to teach high school English for a year before returning to UNC-G to work in the news office for three years.

Afterward, she earned a master's in English at the University of Iowa and a doctorate in English at the University of Pennsylvania. She had been teaching for short stints at several schools, including Butler University in Indiana, a small woman's college in Milwaukee, and Lees-McRae College in western North Caro-

lina. She, indeed, came prepared to make her mark at Wake Forest.

Her former students understand why she came to be one of the finest faculty members in English and at Wake Forest. Elizabeth inspired us. We wanted to please her. In class, I would often tackle the most challenging Wallace Stevens poem, determined to make a presentation to my class that would earn her praise.

When she died last summer, I read a quote from former student Hayes McNeill in the *Winston-Salem Journal* that expresses well her relationship with students. He said, "She didn't demand so much as challenge folks. You wanted to rise to her expectations."

*Dr. Phillips, who died June 24th, 2008, was the first woman to chair the English department, where she taught from 1957 to 1989.*

*Kevin Cox received his Master of Arts in 1981 from Wake Forest and is currently the university's Director of Media Relations and the Asst. Vice President for University Advancement.*

# Exploring Both Sides: Champion Debater Explains his Passion

By Andrew Britt

At nearly two o'clock in the morning senior English major Seth Gannon smiled with excitement as he and his partner, Alex Lamballe, won the 2008 National Debate Championship.

Gannon and Lamballe, a political science major, debated four separate times on that victory day last March, defeating Dartmouth College in the final round.

"It was special," Gannon recounts with a satisfied and pensive grin. "Each year I looked up to the two people that won that championship. Now to be one of them—it is very special."

Though it has its roots in the art of rhetoric, modern collegiate debating is far from the worlds of Socrates or Cicero.

Gannon and his fellow debaters speak unbelievably fast—around 800 words per minute.

"It takes a couple of years to learn how to talk—and think, and listen—that fast," Gannon explains.

Gannon's body language is as frantic as the speed of his speech. He appears slightly mad in a video of the Dartmouth debate, swinging his arms fiercely back and forth with his head hunched over the podium, eyes rolling rapidly to and fro and speaking in what, to the untrained ear, can only be tongues.

To the judges, however, he relays persuasive and championship-winning arguments.

Each year Gannon and debaters throughout the country receive the annual prompt, which always begins with the phrase, "The United States should..."

Last season, the year of Gannon's championship, the prompt said that the United States should increase its "constructive engagement" with "rogue" nations such as Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria.

Preparation for such a prompt is equally as important, though much less intense, than debating itself. Gannon first checks out *every* book relating to the subject from Z. Smith Reynolds library. He then looks up *every* book *ever* written on his subject, and interlibrary-loans those. Finally, he finds *every* electronic article or resource available and copies those to his hard drive.

Gannon reads this body of research and becomes a repository of information. He must prioritize, pulling together the most persuasive evidence to support the most convincing arguments.

A few weeks before the debate he and Lamballe print out their thousands of pages of research and arguments, organize them into folders, and place them into six massive blue and white Rubbermaid bins, which they tote to every debate.

Their bins function as storage for their mass of information, but their size also serves to intimidate their opponents.

Gannon and Lamballe are a team noted for their preparedness. Their friendship began before coming to Wake Forest, as they debated against each other in high school, Gannon at Woodward Academy in Atlanta and Lamballe at Montgomery Bell Academy in Nashville.

Lamballe initiated their partnership, telling Gannon in the spring of 2005 they should debate together at Wake Forest.

Three years and one championship later, Gannon notes, "We have a very balanced partnership. It is great knowing that after three exhaustive debates in one day you know that your partner can bring it home."

Sometimes, however, even exhaustive preparation and sound teamwork can come up short.

Debaters must create extraordinarily



Senior English major Seth Gannon is a National Debate Champion.

convincing and, if possible, unexpected and irrefutable arguments. Gannon does not shy from playing defense against those arguments, but more often he finds himself on the offensive. He relishes the creative boldness of persuasion.

"A lot of it is seeing how much you can get away with," he describes with a sly smile.

How much he can get away with can introduce a tricky element of debating—morality. In last year's prompt—the one about engaging with "rogue" nations—Gannon and Lamballe had one fundamental argument: the United States is in a war on terrorism and should show strength no matter what the cost.

This argument did not emerge from the moral consciousness of the Wake Forest team—in fact, Gannon notes, it contradicted his own personal opinions.

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# Dr. Wilson's Melancholy from Wake Forest to *Today Show*

By Jennifer Beeler

We all strive for a trouble-free life. But really, that's not what we need. Eric G. Wilson, in his latest book *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*, delves into this paradox by stressing the need for melancholy in order to have a truly enriching life. By tracking melancholy throughout his own life and in literature, Wilson has found that melancholy can indeed be "self-revelatory and creative."

"I'm no psychiatrist or psychologist," Wilson emphasizes. "I'm not trying to play doctor here at all."

Instead, his work aims to shed some light on the common problem of what he terms "American happiness," or the need for a trouble-free life.

"Our addiction to happiness is very dangerous," Wilson said. Melancholy is an essential part of life. "It pushes us to discover truth that happiness does not encourage us to do."

In his book, Wilson, professor of English and former chair of the department, strongly distinguishes melancholy from depression.

According to Wilson, depression is "a terrible state to be in," alienating us from the world. Wilson believes that "depression divorces us from people and things," leading to a state of paralysis.

Melancholy, on the other hand, is more of an "active state" where one has "an active yearning for a deeper relation to life." This "dissatisfaction with the status quo" thus pushes us to "look within to find out who we really are."

Wilson's understanding of



Dr. Eric Wilson appears on *The Today Show* to promote his new book.

this difference comes mainly from his own experience with depression and his attempts to channel it into a state of melancholy.

"I felt real pressure from my society, family, friends, to be happy," he recalls. In writing this book, Wilson wanted to make an "effort to explain the idea that melancholy is not a bad thing, but an essential one."

Along with his own experience, his main inspiration was from John Keats. "Ode on Melancholy" in particular helped Wilson formulate his ideas on melancholy and how it can be an active state as opposed to a stagnant state of depression.

"It is the most important poem of my life," Wilson declares.

The difference between the real rose and the porcelain rose within "Ode on Melancholy" serves as a defining image of melancholy. It is only through sadness over the transience of that real rose that we appreciate the world's beauty and experience joy, he explains.

"Joy is the necessary polarity of melancholy," says Wilson. Although embarrassed about the cliché, Wilson describes the relationship as feeling so happy you could cry.

Other inspirations for his book came from Herman Melville, William Blake, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Jung. Wilson describes his book and his inspirations as "a long category of my literary heroes."

When starting this book three years ago, Wilson had a difficult time writing because *Against Happiness* would be his first commercial book to move beyond the academic audience.

"It was hard to find the right stylistic pitch," he recalls.

So far the style is working. *Against Happiness* is "kind of flying off the shelves," Wilson notes. In March, the book reached its fifth printing.

The book has received numerous good reviews, including praise from the *Wall Street Journal*, and has

been picked up by both the academic world and everyday people.

Appearing on *The Today Show* didn't hurt this acceptance either.

When first asked to appear on the show, Wilson thought, "No way...It runs counter to everything I stand for."

But after getting there, Wilson admits, the experience was valuable.

Wilson asserts that writing the book has "allowed me to be more comfortable in talking about my psychological condition" and has "put me out in the world."

Of the process, he simply explains, "It's been fruitful."

Although Wilson does not claim this book to be a cure-all for various forms of depression and sadness, he hopes that people can learn from his book as he did while writing it.

He closes his book with a clear message of what he wants his readers to take away from it: "To be against happiness [. . .] is to be close to joy."

# Discovery Through Food: You Are What You

By Michael Berkowitz

A piece of paper sits in front of students in Dr. Jamin Rowan's English writing seminar. On the page they read a simple sentence: Give your life history in food.

Rowan, a teaching fellow in the English department, wants his students to discover the importance of food along their gastronomic journey through the past. Rowan calls his prompt, the first of three, a "food memoir."

The English writing seminar, entitled "You are What You Eat," motivates students to examine the impact of their eating decisions. "I find it really interesting and somewhat bizarre," said Rowan, "that those who come to college are put in a situation where they don't have to think about food deliberately."

The subject works well for a writing seminar, he said. "It's a really relevant topic right now. [It] cuts across lots of disciplinary boundaries."

The reading list for the course reflects those varied approaches, featuring former biologist Barbara Kingsolver, environmental journalist Michael Pollan, and muckraker Eric Schlosser.

Rowan, in his first year at Wake, doesn't shy away from messy subjects, having taught about the sometimes cruel treatment animals receive before slaughter. The student response, he said, was surprising.

"Some of them had no problem with animals being treated inhumanely," he

said. He made sure not to judge those students with different views, though. "The goal was to make them aware of the situation, then let them decide."

The students receive a portion of their grade for "intellectual engagement" rather than attendance. In his syllabus for the course, Rowan explains, "You can say really smart things and be apathetic at the same time. However, an education is not about you turning up to class, making brilliant comments to impress me and others, and then going on to your next class. An education is instead about cultivating an intellectual curiosity and bringing that curiosity to the texts you read (including your peers' writing) and class discussions."

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**"I certainly envision this course as a baby-step to changing the Wake Forest food chain."**

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Dr. Jamin Rowan

Rowan also questions his students on the effects of consumption

on people in the food service industry. "What price do people have to pay for us to eat fast food?" he asks.

He also offers a defense of the sustainability movement, something he personally subscribes to, calling critiques of elitism within the movement "potshots." "Lots of inner city farm products using a sustainable method are cheaper," he said.

Even without access to such cheap meat, Rowan said, "Buying [sustainable beef] is more expensive, but what I'm suggesting, and what writers we've read have suggested, is that it is worth it."

The class culminates with group investigations of various food-topics.

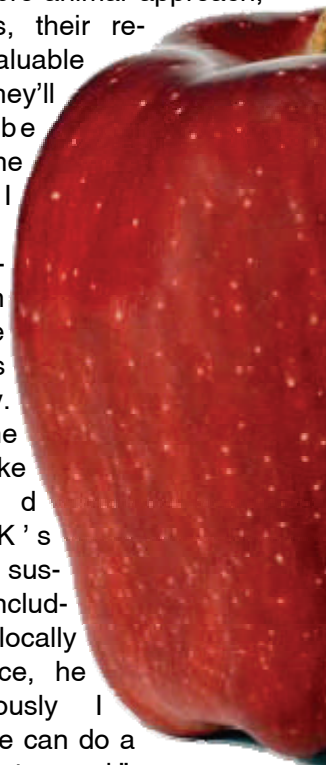
While each student writes his or her own paper, Rowan divides them into groups which focus on larger issues titled "food footprints" or "will work for food."

"I love [the course]," he said. Although not all students buy into the eco-friendly, pro-animal approach, Rowan notes, their research is valuable to him. "They'll literally be teaching me something I don't know."

In the projects, Rowan tries to make the students think locally. Although he applauds Wake and A R A M A R K 's steps toward sustainability, including buying locally grown produce, he said, "Obviously I think everyone can do a lot better in that regard."

"The Wake Forest food chain could be organized more sustainably. It would be great if that were the outcome of this course."

He knows that some of his students signed up for the seminar because they already cared deeply about food issues, and hopes that they will be voices for change. "I certainly envision this course as a baby-step to changing the Wake Forest food chain."



*(Seth Gannon: continued from page 4)*

The team used it, nevertheless, because it was the most consistently winnable thesis.

Gannon justifies the moral shadiness of arguing something you do not personally believe in—and winning a national championship in the process—by describing what he feels to be the "great virtue" in debate.

"It is about switching sides and learning the arguments of both sides. How else can you know that you disagree unless you evaluate your opponent's beliefs?"

Debate also has the power to expose weak arguments.

For instance, Gannon said that suggesting man has not caused global warming cannot win a debate. "The competitive incentive drives you to do so much research and find any winnable argument possible that their failure exposes some arguments [like the global warming example] as simply not the case."

Gannon continues to search for and find "any winnable argument possible" in the 2009 season.

He and Lamballe have aspirations for back-to-back championships.

"Debating is a fast and pressure-filled community of competition," Gannon concludes. "It is fun, anxious—triumphant."

# Alumni Updates

## Life After Wake

**Cammie Wilson** ('00) just graduated from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a Master of Arts in Speech-Language Pathology. She plans to move to western NC with her fiancé, Billy Sweeny, to complete her clinical fellowship.

**Ed Southern** ('94) is the Executive Director of the North Carolina Writers' Network. He has two books scheduled for publication in 2009: a nonfiction book about the American Revolution in the Carolinas, and a collection of short stories called *Parlous Angels*. He has also just finished his first novel, *Hellcat*.

**Lawson White** (English '04) and **Sean Jenkins** (English '01) were married on May 3rd, 2008, in Charleston, South Carolina. Lawson received a Master's degree in Communication Disorders from the University of Virginia and works for the University of Virginia Children's Hospital. Sean received a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration from the University of Virginia and serves as an assistant to the president of the University of Virginia.

**Dr. J. Michael Kirby** ('86) graduated *summa cum laude* before going on to medical school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and internal medicine training at Duke. Kirby finished his subspecialty fellowship training in Infectious Diseases at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He has remained at UAB for the past 15 years helping to run an AIDS primary care and research program. Kirby has authored over sixty textbook chapters, reviews, and peer-reviewed papers related to AIDS treatment and pathogenesis research for journals including *Natural Medicine Science* and *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

**Kyle Thomas R. Cutts** ('02) graduated first in his class and *summa cum laude* from Case Western Reserve University School of Law of May 18th, 2008. He was inducted into Order of the Coif, a national law school honor society, and awarded "Cum Studiis Turn Moribus Principles." Cutts also won the Outstanding Scholastic Achievement Book Award, Student of the Year, Case School of Law Leadership Award, the Diane Ethics Award, and a Certificate of Concentration in International Law with Honors.

**Bethany Chafin** ('08) is working as an Intern for *Talk of the Nation* at National Public Radio in Washington, D.C. Bethany's duties are varied, as she works to book guests, write for the show, and brainstorm on show topics. She loves the internship and has gotten to meet acclaimed authors, such as Junot Diaz and John Updike.

## Dr. McNally Describes New Novel

By Taryn Ricciardelli

John McNally, associate professor of English and author of the critically acclaimed *Troublemakers*, a collection of stories, and two novels, *The Book of Ralph* and *America's Report Card*, has a new collection of stories, *Ghosts of Chicago*. Just released October 1st, critics have already acknowledged the collection for its poignant handling of dark themes such as death, loss, and longing.

These aren't the type of ghost stories one reads around a campfire, however.

"The overall tone is darker [than *Troublemakers*], but I would say there's a comic sensibility." McNally explains, "[*Ghosts of Chicago*] reaches a deeper, more troubling psychology with its characters."

But the local Chicagoan legends, writers, and national icons (like John Belushi) that make up the stories' cast are exactly what formulate a personal connection between audience and story.

Narratives such as "The Something Something" explores the most intimate moments of pop culture icons like Walter Payton and William Perry.

Frazier Thomas, a Chicagoan television host from the 1950s to the 1980s, influenced McNally's story "The Goose."

"[The Goose] pushed me in a new direction," McNally said. "Because there was such a broad amount of research involved, the stories became personal. One bit of research would lead me down into other areas. And I think that's what makes them so idiosyncratic."

Thomas, who hosted local children's television shows, became a lost legend, according to McNally, representing an era in culture that has slowly disappeared.

"They just don't have those types of shows anymore," McNally continues. "And in thinking about dead [ideas] in pop culture, I was able to start exploring all these other possibilities with characters. Some of them are celebrities, but their types are recognizable. All of [the characters] are universal."

For example, in the story "Creature Features," a little boy uses his own forms of pop culture to escape uncomfortable situations like his mother's pregnancy. The desire to escape is both moving and relatable, and other thematic features of the collection continue this pattern of personal relevancy.

Such moments of loneliness, confusion, and desire are personally relevant and highlight a much more universal feeling of "ghostliness."

"Everyone sort of has this idea of a traditional ghost story," McNally said, "but I think that what [*Ghosts of Chicago*] really does is capture characters who are being haunted by their pasts or by just their own ideas of haunting. They haunt themselves."

And while the collection focuses on ghostly aspects of a dead culture, haunted characters, and a deep association with loss, McNally creates a new, in-depth world that compels readers to explore their own drifting, haunted experiences. *Ghosts of Chicago* is almost unsentimental in its ability to render those most haunted cultural and emotional deadzones, though something significantly touching still characterizes the collection.

