

# The Joy of Learning

## Fellowship Honorees Inspire and Are Inspired by Their Students

INTERVIEWED BY MELISSA V. PINARD

**G**reat teachers encourage their students to learn and to think independently. Below, the 2006 Alumni Fellowship Award recipients answer several questions about their passion for teaching. The general consensus among these professors is that they seek to engage students' minds by allowing them to formulate their own ideas and express their opinions. This sage advice was probably first given to the world by Confucius and is the answer Professor Ram Ganeshan gave to the question "What do you hope students take from your class?" "*To learn without thinking is labor in vain. To think without learning is desolation.*" — Confucius.

On Sept. 21, 2006, the William and Mary Alumni Association presented Alumni Fellowship Awards to five professors whose classroom work has already achieved recognition among students, colleagues and staff: Alison I. Beach, Rachel DiNitto, Mark H. Forsyth, Ram Ganeshan and Robert L. Hicks. Each professor received a \$1,000 honorarium, provided through an endowment established in 1993 by the Class of 1968. Every year, the provost and the deans forward the Alumni Association a list of five professors who exemplify excellence in teaching.



**ALISON I. BEACH**

*Associate Professor of Religious Studies*

**Q:**

**Why do you like to teach?**

**A:** Because it is never boring — each semester is different, each course, each student, each day. I enjoy the challenge that this presents. I always learn something new from my students, and this keeps teaching interesting. Teaching is a great career for an extrovert.

**Q: Who is the person who had the most influence in your life?**

**A:** My mother! I grew up as the child of a working mother, something of an anomaly in the 1960s and 1970s in the upscale suburbs of New York City. Watching my mother so deeply engaged in her work while balancing the needs of our family taught me that having a family and career is possible. She also struggled to forge and to preserve her own identity in the face of pressure from her wider family to conform to a set of roles that were not right for her.

**Q: Why do you love your subject matter?**

**A:** I love my subject matter because I feel a strong connection to the medieval women I study. It pleases me to be their modern voice. I don't think that any student could take one of my courses on medieval Christianity and not experience my enthusiasm for my nuns. I have been interested in medieval people since I was a child, so the deeper why has been somewhat lost in time.

**Q: What do you hope students take from your class?**

**A:** I hope that all of my students come away from my courses with a good feel for the rigorous academic study of religion, particularly with improved critical thinking skills. I also hope that they take away a love (or at least a deep interest) in at least one of the texts or figures that we have studied together.

**Q: What is your favorite band?**

**A:** The Beethoven Orchester Bonn.

**Q: What are you currently reading?**

**A:** The Robert Fagels translation of the *Odyssey* — to my children.

**Q: Describe your most embarrassing moment in the classroom.**

**A:** Last spring, in my Introduction to Christianity Course, I got all excited, wrote a term on the board, underlined it four or five times for emphasis, and then had absolutely no idea what it had to do with the discussion. No idea. None.

**Q: What's the most unusual thing I would find in your office?**

**A:** An unopened bottle of Colt 45 and a plastic goat.

**Q: What do you consider your most valuable contribution to academia?**

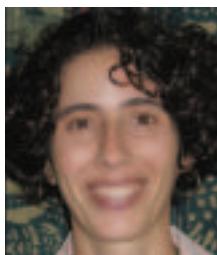
**A:** My most important contribution to the field of medieval history is the development of a method for identifying and analyzing the work of female scribes in medieval manuscripts. Before this, the conventional wisdom was that only men (monks) copied books. This is an

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important correction to our understanding of women’s contributions to the preservation of texts in the Middle Ages.

**Q:** What does your family think of your area of expertise?

**A:** My family has always been very supportive of my academic pursuits and interests. My husband is my biggest career supporter. He has a lot of respect for the work I do and has been my informal “editor” for years. My children, for their part, think that it is completely normal to travel around Germany and Austria visiting monasteries and churches.



RACHEL DiNITTO

*Associate Professor of Modern Languages  
and Literatures*



**Q:** Why do you like to teach?

**A:** I like working with students who are interested in and excited about the material.

I enjoy talking about and analyzing books and films together and hearing the students’ opinions. I had the opportunity to work with a student on an honors thesis that we are turning into a jointly authored article. I’ve really enjoyed working together; sharing ideas and learning from this student. An opportunity like this, for faculty to work closely with a student, is one of the best things about teaching at William and Mary and I hope I have the chance to do it again.

**Q:** Who is the person who had the most influence in your life?

**A:** My father instilled a love for learning in me and was the driving force behind my going to college and pursuing an advanced degree. He was the first person in his family to get a college degree and I was the first in my extended family to get a Ph.D. I regret that my father is not alive to see me get this award, since I know he would have been truly excited about it. As for Japanese, my first-year Japanese teacher was so great that he got me interested in continuing a language I’d started on a whim. I still see him at academic conferences and blame him for getting me into this.

**Q:** Why do you love your subject matter?

**A:** At times I ask myself the same question, and I wonder if I could have been as happy if I’d chosen to study another language/culture. My initial draw to Japan was the language, and there is something about it that keeps me going. Even though I’ve been studying it for 20 years, it never fails to challenge me, and the more I study it, the more I find deeper and deeper layers that motivate me to keep working at it. The culture also continues to fascinate me. It is such a strange mix of East/West, modern/traditional.

**Q:** What do you hope students take from your class?

**A:** More than memorizing facts, I hope students leave my classes with a sense that the process of learning to think is what it’s really

all about. I find it frustrating when all the focus is on grades and not on learning to think and enjoying yourself. College is a time to experiment and find your interests, but there is too much pressure and focus on grades these days that I think it interferes with the joy of learning.

**Q:** What are you currently reading?

**A:** Just finished *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. It was really moving, especially in light of the current tragedy in Lebanon.

**Q:** What’s the most unusual thing I would find in your office?

**A:** It used to be the “Yo ❤ Segovia” bumper sticker I inherited on my file cabinet, but these days it would have to be diapers.

**Q:** If you weren’t teaching what would you do?

**A:** Open a bakery. I love to bake and would like to learn how to make artisanal breads like the kinds I used to buy on the West Coast.

**Q:** What do you like to do in your off time?

**A:** Cook, read, refinish furniture, hike. But these days all my time is spent playing with and taking care of my 3-month-old son. I thought getting tenure was hard, but raising him has been the biggest challenge yet, but also the most fun.



MARK H. FORSYTH

*Associate Professor of Biology*



**Q:** Why do you like to teach?

**A:** The short answer is that teaching makes me a better scientist and researcher.

**Q:** Who is the person who had the most influence in your life?

**A:** Tough question! There have been several. (Perhaps I’m easily influenced!) Perhaps it’s not that difficult, though. One of my older brothers, Peter, suffered from cystic fibrosis (CF). Although he influenced me in myriad personal ways, it was the progression of his disease that most affected the direction of my scientific interests. In particular, it was his long-term battle with chronic bacterial pneumonia as a result of CF that directed what area of science I ultimately pursued.

**Q:** What do you hope students take from your class?

**A:** I want my students to have total recall of the biochemistry of the synthesis and assembly of bacterial peptidoglycan and the process of reverse transcription. Just kidding about that one! Actually I don’t want students coming away with a memorized list of facts or processes. Instead, I want them to have an appreciation for the complexity of biological organisms that are often described as “simple,” “lower” or “less evolved.”