

{My Madison}

Finding my voice

JMU English 101 gave me confidence

BY CARRIE PRIDDY DUPRE ('02)

In the fall of 1998, as I headed off to the 'Burg for the first of my four years at JMU, I had no idea where my life would take me. I was more concerned with how I'd get along with my roommate and who I'd sit with at D-Hall than what I would do with my life. I figured my future might have something to do with writing. As a big fish in the small pond of high school, my writing, I had been told, had been pretty good. So I registered as an SCOMM major and hoped for the best.

I was just another lost freshman, with no clue where I was headed. I'm pretty sure, too, that even in my wildest dreams I never thought I'd be where I am now: living in Clemson, S.C., working as a full-time university writer and teaching freshman composition. Grad school brought me to the area, then corporate ambitions took me into public relations for several years in Greenville, S.C. But what really brought me to this unexpected career was something (or someone) even more unexpected — my JMU English 101 teacher.

Because the full impact of the class didn't hit until years later, I can't even tell you my teacher's name. But she changed my life.

I find myself thinking of her class often. My teacher was soft-spoken. Understated. She did not have a Ph.D. or an ego the size of the Potomac. But she had passion — and time for her students. She took us out to the Quad when she saw our imaginations waning. She gave us feedback on our writing before she collected it for final grading — she actually wanted us to learn and improve.

It was in her class that I found my voice. I learned to think, to analyze, to trust my inner writer. She taught me how to write from my gut and to

worry about fixing my grammar later. She gave me possibly the best gift a teacher can give a student — confidence.

Beyond helping me learn who I was as a writer, she also taught me how influential a teacher can be in the life of a student. That stuck with me; and when I grew tired and unfulfilled with my corporate life, it was this thought that drew me back to university life. Writing for the marketing team of a regional headquar-

ters kept the rent paid, but it left me wondering who I was really helping at the end of my long days. So, I took a job writing for Clemson University and polished up my vitae.

After I got my first teaching assignment taking on two freshman comp classes, I looked back through my JMU notebooks to find my teacher's old syllabus and my raw writings; but I couldn't find any proof of my taking that class. (I'm kicking myself now for throwing it all away.) As it turned out, though, I didn't need her syllabus to remember the key elements of her class that I now incorporate into mine.

Like her, I take a community writing approach to

my classes. We write together in class, we share our successes and our struggles; and, as a result, we grow as writers together. We use peer reviewers, like she did, to help us build confidence before turning in our final papers, and we embrace our unique backgrounds to make us better with pen and paper.

When I have rough days in the classroom and I wonder if I'm getting through to these fresh-faced "kids," I think about my freshman comp class. I think about how it affected me for the better and how I didn't have the confidence at 18 to tell my professor how much I liked her class, and how the full impact of her teaching didn't even hit me until years later. That gives me the hope that maybe I really am reaching at least one of these kids. Maybe, just maybe, I can be to one of them what my teacher was to me.



Writing professor Carrie Priddy DuPre ('02), in front of Sikes Hall at Clemson University, says she "found her voice" in her JMU English 101 writing course. Right: "Just another lost freshman" at JMU — Carrie Priddy at Garber Hall in 1998.



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