

Bright

*The professors,
students and
alumni who shine
in Madison's
constellation*



The back of one student's T-shirt says it all. Francis "Buck" Payne ('00) helps underrepresented students realize their dreams of college. Payne also teaches history at Falls Church High School.

Highlights

[Francis "Buck" Payne]

Fairfax County 2009 Teacher of the Year

BY COLLEEN DIXON

“All kids need is for someone to believe in them and to tell them they have a right to their dreams,” says Francis “Buck” Payne (’00), Fairfax County Public Schools’ 2009 Teacher of the Year. Payne has helped Falls Church High School students realize their dreams since 2001. His dedication to his students is readily apparent in his daily schedule — up at 3:30 a.m. to commute 75 miles to work.

After Payne completed Virginia teaching licensure requirements in 2001, Barbara Stern, program coordinator for the JMU Secondary Education Program, suggested that he visit FCHS. “I was sincerely impressed when I walked through the doors,” recalls Payne, an interdisciplinary social science major. “The building was immaculate, and students were engaged in their classrooms.”

Payne served in the Navy for 24 years and traveled to Egypt, England, Israel, Italy, Japan and Scotland. He saw firsthand that young people everywhere have much in common. “They all want to please, mostly their parents,” he says. “They’re curious about others, especially those they have never met. With all my travels and experiences, I’ve had something to share with my students.”

History — U.S. and Virginia — are the subjects Payne enjoys teaching the most. “History is fascinating,” he says. “History is all about ordinary people doing extraordinary things.” Payne also teaches an elective, Advancement Via Individual Determination. Developed in the early ’80s, AVID “identifies students in the middle, who without support may not otherwise have the opportunity to fulfill their dreams of college,” Payne explains. “AVID students are mostly from minority, low-income, single-parent families and are

‘They want to go to college, but they don’t know how to get there.’

the first generation in their families to go to college.” Other students are children of ambassadors, foreign business people and immigrants.

When Payne first arrived at FCHS, only

16 students were in his AVID class. Last year, he had 200 students, and nearly 98 percent will attend college. Because FCHS has students from all over the world, they are usually unfamiliar with the steps required to prepare for college. They don’t know how to apply to American universities. Payne explains, “These kids don’t know the language and terminology, or they don’t know it well enough to comprehend what they are reading. They want to go to college, but they don’t know how to get there.”

Payne helps them get there.

He has teamed up with 34 teachers from the English, history, math and science departments, along with the five AVID program tutors, who give up lunches and planning periods to give students extra assistance. This extra boost helps students pass core courses. Eleventh-graders create research portfolios on possible major and college choices along with college applications and sample essays. Part of the curriculum for 11th graders is preparation for the SAT and ACT. Payne requires his 12th graders to submit applications to five universities using materials from their portfolios.

In 2008, six of his 40 students chose to attend JMU. In 2009, the number was four of 43. This year, the first student from the FCHS AVID program will attend the Naval Academy.

“I have hundreds of stories,” Payne says about students who have succeeded despite numerous obstacles. One student, Yasmin, arrived from Ethiopia already lagging behind in academics. “She graduated from high school this year and is headed to college to fulfill her dream of becoming a nurse,” Payne says. “David, who is in this country on his own, is working 40 to 70 hours a week just to maintain and continue to go to school. He wants to become a doctor. Somehow, we will find a way for him to reach his dream.”

Payne’s connection to his students does not end with FCHS graduations. He has visited students’ homes for dinner and birthdays and attended college graduations. Being listed as one of the top five AVID programs in the nation has garnered FCHS and Payne attention. “I’ve been offered career moves,” he says, “but I came to Falls Church for the students. My place is here.” ■

