



*Award-winning, inspiring, personal*

*tributes honor memorable teachers*

# PROFESSORS YOU LOVE CELEBRATES 10 YEARS

BY BILL GOODYKOONTZ ('85)

Most of us show up as freshmen filled with big plans and little idea of how to harness them.

Particularly for new students, a college campus can be a disorienting place, even James Madison University's. It's a closed universe, one that seems to have existed forever when you're dropped down into it, and it's almost impossible to navigate without a guide.

For many, a favorite professor is that guide. For a luckier few, a professor is someone to help direct a student, not just in the classroom, but in life, someone to put dreams in reach. That may sound trite, but in the best cases it's true.

Yet how do we thank them? Grow up, get a good job, do our best to put together a successful career, that kind of thing. Certainly there is satisfaction in that. But isn't there more?

There is. Professors You Love, the longest-running column in *Madison* magazine's history, offers students a way to publicly say thanks — and to say so much more. It began 10 years ago, when David Hillgrove ('79) wrote a tribute to Eileen Nelson, a psychology professor.

"I am personally responsible for Eileen Nelson's retirement, and I feel terrible," Hillgrove began. That set the proper tone for the feature moving forward — light but intimate, fueled by inspiration.

In the 10 years since the first Professors You Love column appeared, it's won six writing and editing awards from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. It's proved so popular that it's inspired a spin-off, Students Who Rock. And it is still going strong.

Why?

"It is the culture of the JMU faculty — very approachable, placing importance on one-on-one attention with students, placing enormous importance on teaching and including undergraduates in academic research — that makes a column like this so successful and popular," says Michelle Hite ('88), managing editor of *Madison*.

Perhaps more than anyone else, she would know.

Hite and her team edit the Professors You Love submissions — the magazine has received 55 since the feature started. And Hite also has the happy task of breaking the news to the lucky professor who is to be featured in the next issue.

"I get to read all of the submissions, and as soon as we get

**My freshman year I walked into Principles of Sociology, where I met a professor who disproved all I had been told. College was much more than books, papers and grades. Dr. Elmer Smith taught me that college was about life.**

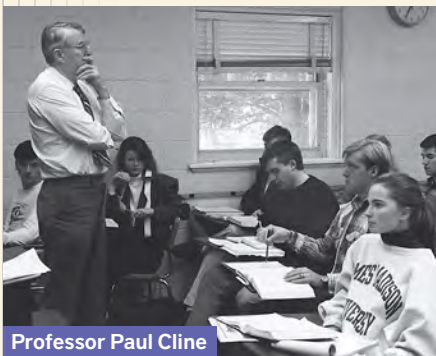
— JANE GARRETT MARSHALL ('61)  
From *Montpelier*, Summer 2004,  
on Elmer Smith

ProfessorsYouLove/ — you'll quickly pick up on inspiration that goes far beyond JMU's classroom walls or the boundaries of campus.

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**The take-home test had only one question — an essay — in Professor Cline's handwriting it read, "Tuition fees notwithstanding — write 1,000 words on what choosing a \$20 music show over a scheduled class says about my teaching ability."**

— MICHELLE HITE ('88)  
From *Montpelier*, Spring 2002,  
on Paul Cline



Professor Paul Cline

**I am personally responsible for Eileen Nelson's retirement, and I feel terrible.**

— DAVID HILLGROVE ('79)  
From *Montpelier*, Fall 2000,  
on Eileen Nelson

.....  
**He was tough and famous for sarcastic comments. He was also an amazing musician and director of the highly acclaimed JMU Jazz Ensemble. I was scared to death, and to make things worse, I was a voice major. Rumor was he didn't care for those.**

— LISA LUTHER SHAW ('87)  
From *Montpelier*, Fall 2001,  
on George West



Professor Eileen Nelson

**I owe it all to Dr. Taalman for planting that seed in me. She is an integral part of my Madison Experience and my life. ... She has played an extremely important role in shaping my education as well as guiding many of the important decisions I have made.**

— KRISTIN McNAMARA ('09)  
From *Madison*, Winter 2010,  
on Laura Taalman

# The one who started it all

EILEEN NELSON, THE FIRST PROFESSORS YOU LOVE SUBJECT, IS STILL INVOLVED IN JMU BY JAMIE MARSH

A decade after retiring, psychology professor Eileen Nelson doesn't really miss JMU. "No, I don't," she says with a chuckle. "Because all of the people who were close to me, still are."

Sitting in her favorite chair, Nelson is literally surrounded with love from Madison admirers. There is a scrapbook on the coffee table, three more at the fireplace and dozens more on bookshelves — all filled with letters and greeting cards from past students. In 1996, a group of students gave her a "risky but beloved" gift: a Persian cat that is still a constant companion.

"I hear from former students constantly," she says. "A day does not go by that I don't have e-mail and phone calls from students. One of my former students called yesterday: Her daughter is getting married, and I'll go to the wedding." Nelson calls this her "JMU family," and it includes former colleagues. "One of the psychology professors brings me dinner on a regular basis because I don't enjoy cooking. Isn't that lovely? Pretty familial, wouldn't you say?"

Even amidst this outpouring of affection, Nelson is still "awed" by each call or letter, including David Hillgrove's ('79) words in *Madison* magazine's first "Professors You Love" column in fall 2000.

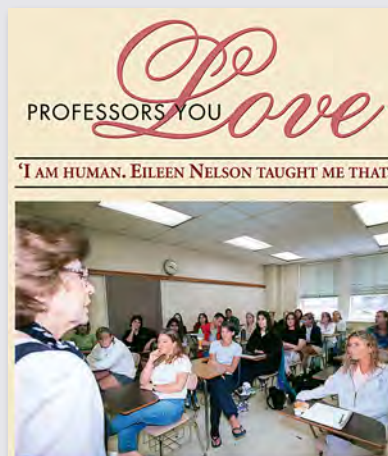
Here are some of Nelson's thoughts:

**MADISON:** What did you think when you first read David Hillgrove's article?

**NELSON:** It's so exciting anytime someone shares with you that they have these thoughts. I'm awed each time someone has taken the time to tell me this and expressed it so beautifully and, sincerely, I am just so humbled by the words that they write. I remember my students, I never forget them, and I remembered the first time I met David. This is when I first started teaching Human Growth and Development, and David had a student job with audiovisuals where he would bring the projector for the movie. This was an important thing, and he would be so kind to set them up for me, but then he would stay and listen to the class. He did this for two or three semesters, and then he finally took the class. He decided he wanted to hear all the lectures!

**MADISON:** What was the best part of being on the JMU faculty?

**NELSON:** The ability to create new programs, to fill voids that existed, and to be creative. It wasn't just doing the same thing every day. There were new courses; Psychology of the Young Adult was a favorite because



Eileen Nelson leads a discussion during one of her final classes.

Story by David Hillgrove ('79)

I am personally responsible for Eileen Nelson's retirement, and I feel terrible. No one should be expected to run as hard or do as much as I have asked of her, and yet she continues to give. And I suppose I have sucked all the energy out of her heaven-sent life. Let me explain. I am a public school teacher. Much to the dismay and confusion of children who've encountered me in public, I shop for groceries on my own, am married with children, and I even go to the bathroom when given the opportunity. I am human. Eileen Nelson taught me that. Because of an unusually good stroke of luck, I have taught at all three levels of

education. In high schools, I've felt complete joy when the proverbial light bulb comes on in that stubborn learner's head. I've seen success stories, and I've been a part of fantastic comebacks. Conversely, I've endured bad plays, poor song contests, notoriously skill-less athletic contests and other nameless gatherings. I've pushed constitutional amendments, governmental concepts and philosophical differences harder than any insurance salesman I've met. I've been thunderstruck by the emotional roller coasters of teen pregnancies, broken romances, failed college admissions and alcoholic parents. And I've hugged entire families, tear-filled with joy that their son was the first family graduate.

Eileen Nelson has been there with me for every one of them. In middle schools, I've dealt with the mixed emotions of the adolescent female. I've put up with the giggling, the anger turned to laughter turned to tears, and the paralyzing indifference. I've restrained feelings of revenge when 115-pound boys threaten full-grown adults with their attitude. I've watched nerds grow into real people. Eileen Nelson served as an unpaid consultant throughout much of that purgatory on Earth. In elementary schools, I've wiped tears away, hugged fears away and given enough high-fives to earn an NBA title. I have seen the sad-eyed, the wide-eyed and the blind-eyed.


**EILEEN NELSON STOOD PROUDLY IN THE CORNER OF MY HEART AS I EXTENDED HER LEGACY ACROSS THE COMMONWEALTH.**

Eileen (which I never dared to call her as an undergrad) made it into the high school hallways with me. She was role model, confidante, friend and mentor. She was hero, she was star. She showed me why; she told me why, and she made me want to.

I took every class she offered (five I believe), so I knew her

I created it, and I loved to teach Counseling Psychology. And I've enjoyed seeing so many of my students become tremendously successful. So many of them are in business, clinical psychology and counseling, of course. There are the Charles Haleys, who have achieved such fame. They are all such beautiful people.

**MADISON:** How are you still involved with JMU?

**NELSON:** I helped found the JMU Emeriti group, and it's a big part of my life. We have various activities, take trips, hear speakers. It's a lot of fun, and we help the university. We just donated a Monet print to the new performing arts center. 

\* View the entire Q&A with Eileen Nelson at [www.jmu.edu/ProfessorsYouLove/](http://www.jmu.edu/ProfessorsYouLove/)

“When I saw that there was a chance to write about my favorite JMU professor, it was a no-brainer,” says Lisa Luther Shaw ('87), who wrote about George West, professor emeritus of music. “He was a huge presence in the halls of Duke Fine Arts back in my day. He was both respected and admired, and at the same time feared, at least by voice majors like me. ... He’s an extremely talented person and was a huge influence to not just me, but many Madison music majors.”

For Scott Suter ('85), writing about Cameron Nickels, a retired English professor, was a way to thank his mentor, who helped get him started in his career. Suter is now an associate professor of English at Bridgewater College.

“For me it was a way to actually give something back to Cameron at the end of his career that acknowledged his career,” Suter says. “It wasn’t like I was a recent student at that point. I felt that he needed to get some recognition beyond just the academic things he had been acknowledged for.”

For Nickels’ part, he was, he says, “truly at a loss for words. The ones that one might say seemed inadequate for the occasion — trite, conventional. And yet I was so surprised that I couldn’t formulate something more appropriate, what I really felt.”

**Dr. Bruce taught me the most important thing I can do for any child is just be there when they need you, be attentive to what they are saying and do it all with a sincere smile.**

— JOYCE PLAUGHER FAIRBANKS ('69)  
From *Madison*, Winter 2007,  
on Pat Bruce



Professor Pat Bruce

Clearly, Nickels was moved. So, too, was David Wendelken, a communication professor. Pat Butters ('83), a former student, wrote about Wendelken and fellow journalism advisers Alan Neckowitz and the late Flip DeLuca. Yet just before the column was published — a hilariously detailed story that perfectly captures the harrowing experience of trying to learn how to write feature stories, among other things — Butters died unexpectedly.

“His having so openly shared his love of JMU and our work helped us deal with that tragedy in some ways,” Wendelken recalls. Wendelken then wrote an essay about Butters.

Like all the best Professors You Love columns, this was a personal tribute — almost a letter to an old friend — yet something more, a capturing of the essence of what the professor-student relationship should be.

“It was,” as Suter says of his story about Nickels, “kind of a personal thing between him and me.”

One wonders, then, if publishing something so personal for anyone who picks up a copy of *Madison* to read isn’t putting it in too public a forum. Happily, most people don’t seem to think so. It wasn’t for Ginjer Clarke ('94), who wrote about theater professor Pamela Johnson.

“I think my main motivation for writing the article about Pam was to thank her publicly, so I didn’t have any hesitation about the forum,” says Clarke. “I have maintained a close relationship with her since graduating and thanked her in small ways, but she is pretty humble and keeps a low profile, so I thought more people should know what an important influence she has been and continues to be on many students’ educations.”

That sums up the Professors You Love feature pretty well — a personal thank you to someone who helped you navigate the choppy waters of college and life beyond it, that also serves as an illustration of inspiration for the rest of us, as well. ❧

## Turnabout *is fair play*

STUDENTS WHO ROCK TO LAUNCH IN FALL

Kristen McNamara ('09) wrote about Laura Taalman, an associate professor of mathematics, in the Winter 2010 issue’s Professors You Love feature. Taalman, naturally, was flattered; the story was titled “The smartest person I ever met,” after all.

But rather than just blush or send flowers, Taalman got an idea.

“A colleague of mine often says that there should be a RateMyStudents.com Web site as an antidote to the outrageous comments that some students leave on RateMyProfessors.com,” Taalman says. “In a more positive vein, when Kristin wrote that [story] about me for Professors You Love, my first thought was that she was such a wonderful student that, really, I should be writing ... about *her*.”

Done. *Madison* is introducing a new feature, Students Who Rock, giving Taalman and others their chance to recognize exceptional students.

“There are some students who work so hard, and have such good attitudes about learning, that they really deserve to be held up as examples,” Taalman says.

This doesn’t mean paying tribute to the “best” students — at least not best in the traditional sense.

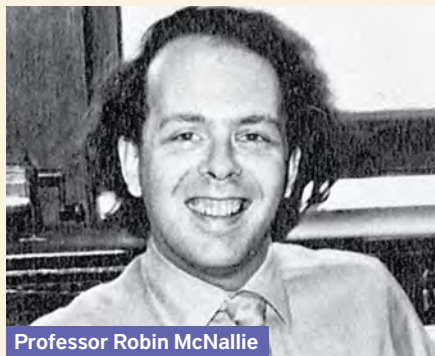
“I’d say definitely not the ‘A’ crowd,” Taalman says of the type of students who deserve notice in the feature. “In fact, that kind of points out one possible reason for Students Who Rock. The ‘A’ students already get recognition with their GPAs and transcripts. But more impressive is the student who comes in at a D or F level and leaves with a solid ‘B’ in the course.”

Now *that* rocks.

“I’d say rocking is more about work ethic, attitude and curiosity about learning,” Taalman explains, “and that can happen at a lot of different grade levels.”

Was this teacher demanding I hand over the contraband? Instead he shook my hand and sputtered, "Let me congratulate you. The only other woman I know who smoked a cigar was my wife on our wedding night. And I'm her biggest fan."

— DONNA PLEASANTS ISAAC ('76)  
From *Montpelier*, Winter 2001,  
on Robin McNallie



Professor Robin McNallie

"Come in my office, Clary!" My heart sank through my toenails as I wondered what I had done to warrant a summons into the office of "J.J."

— GAIL CLARY ('81)  
From *Madison*, Spring 2009,  
on James "J.J." Leary

.....

When he arrived, he immediately began lecturing – even as he removed his black buckle-up rubber boots, scarf, knit hat and gloves – and picking up where he had left off from the previous class.

— ANITA HILL SPAIN ('76)  
From *Madison*, Summer 2008,  
on Raymond Dingledine Jr.



Professor David Wendelken

One day after the feature writing class started, Wendelken called me into his office. "You know, Butters, you should set aside those pens and pencils and think about becoming a writer," he said. I couldn't believe it. Direction. Nirvana!

— PATRICK BUTTERS ('83)  
From *Madison*, Summer 2006,  
on David Wendelken

\* Find out who is this issue's Professor You Love on Page 48.

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