Keeping the Dream Alive

O
ora Brown ’74, ’77, ’89 had barely unpacked her bags in Hartford when she started making a difference.

The year was 1969 and Brown was a new immigrant, living in Hartford and studying part time toward a degree in education at the University of Hartford. Already equipped with a certificate in education from a non-degree teacher’s college in her native Jamaica, Brown spent the rest of her time working in early childhood education within the Hartford school system. Her goal: to help build preschool education in Hartford.

“There was a Head Start program in Hartford at the time,” recalls Brown, “but there was nothing for parents who were poor but didn’t qualify for Head Start because they were a little bit above the poverty guideline.” Brown, together with a group of teachers, parents, and community workers, set out to change that situation.

“We had an idea that we wanted a preschool program for Hartford children. I had studied under [Associate Professor and Chair of the Education Division] Regina Miller at the university,” she says, “and we brought her into our program to coach us in writing what became the first preschool curriculum in Hartford. I also worked closely with Dr. Weinswig [now Professor Emeritus S. Edward Weinswig], who was my advisor.” From this grass-roots consortium of concerned professionals and community members arose Hartford’s first school readiness program. Today, similar programs exist in almost every public school in Hartford.

Eventually, Nora Brown earned not only her bachelor’s degree, but also her Master of Education and her Sixth-Year Certificate in administration and supervision from the University of Hartford. After teaching in the early childhood program at the Batchelder School for several years, she took a position at the Dr. James Naylor School, also in Hartford, where she has been a teacher for the past 24 years. During the course of her career, Brown has taught various grades. But, regardless of the classroom or grade level, her love for teaching has remained constant.

“I’ve wanted to be a teacher as far back as I can remember,” says Brown, who comes from a family of educators. “I’ve never done anything else in my life—and I’ve never wanted to.”

In light of her dedication, it is no wonder that Brown was among five education professionals recently honored by Hartford Public Schools Superintendent Robert Henry with the first Dream Keepers Award. Presented at the third annual Black History Month Awards program, the prestigious award recognizes educators who have worked to keep the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., alive within the classrooms of Hartford.

Brown lives in Manchester, Conn., with her husband, Dermoth, who is a member of the University of Hartford Associates. The Associates is a group of business owners and members of corporations who support the university and raise funds for its scholarship programs. The Browns have two daughters, one of whom has followed in the family footsteps and is also making “an outstanding contribution to the children of Hartford,” says her proud mother.

Brown’s contributions to education extend beyond Hartford. She is one of two educators from Connecticut who serve on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), the body that certifies teachers nationally.

As enthusiastic about teaching today as she was when she entered the field 34 years ago, Brown has words of advice for a younger generation entering the profession. “Teaching is a wonderful, fulfilling profession, and anyone who enters it must stay focused and stay the course. To be able to lead children to learning is so rewarding. It’s a tremendous feeling!”

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Learning from the Experts

When it came to selecting a college, the University of Hartford seemed like the perfect choice for Tracey Bahia ’04. It was both far enough away and close enough to home for the Beverly, Mass., native. And, the word on the street was that Hartford had superior business and education programs. Bahia was still undecided about which career track to pursue.

“I really didn’t know too much about the University of Hartford, but I had heard that it was good,” says Bahia, who chose business as her major but switched to education in her sophomore year when she found business “too cut and dried.” It was, for Bahia, an inspired decision.

“I absolutely adore kids, and I thought education would be a good fit,” she says. “From the start, it was perfect.”

Bahia credits the enthusiastic faculty, and especially her advisor, Regina Miller, with giving her the tools to become an excellent teacher. She describes Miller as “an incredible mentor and an inspiration.” Bahia had the opportunity to hone those skills as a student teacher at the University of Hartford Magnet School, the kindergarten through fifth grade public school on the university’s campus. In addition to stints as a student teacher, Bahia has worked at the school in the extended day program since her sophomore year.

“I really love the magnet school—it’s an amazing facility for education students to utilize. The observation rooms and the advanced technology make it a great learning environment.” As do the school’s teachers.

“I sat back and watched Patty Cassella teach,” says Bahia of her student teaching experience in Cassella’s kindergarten class. “She is amazing with the children. Even the smallest thing that she does teaches them something. I wanted to be a teacher before, but she has made me know for sure that this is what I want to do.”

Although Bahia graduated in May, she must complete one more term of student teaching in the fall. After that, she plans to return to her hometown, where she will seek a teaching position in early childhood education.

New Magnet High School Draws Students to Campus

A new public high school opens on the University of Hartford campus this fall with a challenging curriculum emphasizing science, mathematics, engineering, and technology. The University High School of Science and Engineering will utilize an early college model that will support the partnership with the University of Hartford.

The new high school will open with 100 freshmen in temporary quarters at the university’s Asylum Avenue campus. The permanent home, to be located on Mark Twain Drive Extension on the east side of campus, is expected to be ready in the fall of 2006. The high school received a construction grant of $34 million during the recently concluded session of the Connecticut General Assembly.

Ultimately, the school will serve 400 students, all chosen by lottery. Seventy percent will be from Hartford, and 30 percent from surrounding suburban communities.

The new high school has been planned by a partnership that includes the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), the Hartford Public Schools and the University of Hartford. The partnership was awarded a $400,000 planning grant from the Early College High School Initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York and administered by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation.

On hand to demonstrate science and engineering experiments during an informational open house for the University High School of Science and Engineering were, left to right, Aaron Amara ’04, Brian Gallant ’06, Rachel Bagby ’04, Amos Howard ’06, Greg Levasseur ’04, and Shaquana Lovell ’04.
Nora Brown ’74, ’77, ’89 in her classroom at the Dr. James Naylor School in Hartford.
Discovering the Virtues of Patience and Flexibility

Kate Dougherty ’01, ’03 learned many valuable lessons about teaching in the courses she took during her years as an education major at the University of Hartford. Then she became a teacher and found out that two of the most important skills she would need when she took her place at the head of the classroom couldn’t be taught at all. They would have to be within her already—innate attributes ready to be called into play at a moment’s notice. She had to have patience and flexibility.

“It is more than a challenge to work in an inner-city middle school,” says Dougherty, who earned a bachelor’s degree in Education/English in 2001 and a Master of Education in Educational Technology in 2003.

Having completed her first year in the classroom as a 7th and 8th grade English and Language Arts teacher at Thomas J. Quirk Middle School in Hartford, Dougherty reflects back on her initial time as a full-fledged teacher. “This is not a job I can walk away from at 2:40 or 5:40 or whenever my day ends,” she says.

“My students deal with a lot—poverty, lack of parental support. Mom and dad sometimes work three jobs and can never make a parent conference. But my students crave consistency more than anything. They look forward to seeing me each day. It’s the routine we’ve established that keeps us all focused.”

Inspired to become a teacher by a close family friend who teaches in her native New York, Dougherty believes that despite the challenges, “it’s important for me to be here. Since the first day of school, I knew this is what I was meant to do. I have the discipline, structure, imagination, and humor to be a teacher.” And though she claims to be still working on acquiring those all-important skills called “patience” and “flexibility,” it would seem that she has an abundance of both.

“No matter with which student population you are working, you must remember that despite a tough outer shell, kids are innately kids. They all want praise and attention,” says Dougherty.

And so she offers this advice for those considering a career in the inner-city classroom: “Forget about thinking outside the box. Think outside your world. Think beyond the classrooms you grew up in—and don’t forget to try and think like a kid.”