



# To Challenge & Inspire

## Carolyn Beard Whitlow's Dynamic Classroom

By Sheridan Hill

Photos by  
Lenny Cohen

Carolyn Beard Whitlow makes a poem with her body and the rhythm of her speech as she moves within a crescent of students at their desks. The skin of their freshman faces is alive with anticipation. She whirls on red open-toed pumps, the fringe of her navy velour shawl trembling, and it is impossible not to give her one's full attention.

Stopping before them one by one, she inquires with a friendly intimacy: "Are you okay? Do you have any questions?" Each smiles, clearly enjoying the attention, and affirms their understanding. When one student pauses thoughtfully before answering, Whitlow offers protectively, "Now you all give her a moment." The student reaches a silent, independent conclusion and nods, "I'm okay. No questions."

"All right! Then let's play academic jeopardy!" In the game, students compete against

each other, speak freely, think out loud and help each other along. Whitlow writes and draws on the green chalkboard. Students approach the board and use the chalk to illustrate and explain. Throughout the classroom, there is an intensity in each pair of eyes.

"Michelle! Are you raising your hand? Please, speak."

"Well, I'm getting an idea, I'm getting kind of excited," the student begins, and then presents her thoughts as her classmates listen attentively.

Together, the students push and pull at their teacher's prodding and draw out a stream of ideas from the history they have studied. By class end, they have — surprise! — created on the chalkboard a sketch of how to create a formal research paper, and moved transparently and logically from topic to thesis.



It is the kind of classroom experience that continues the tradition of teaching excellence at Guilford, yielding individuals who understand social reform, are well versed in the liberal arts and can think on their feet.

Teaching assistant Cesar Weston '05 says the discussions are exciting. "We're coached: everybody gets involved. You're led to a point, and once you get the point, it moves on from there."

Sara Blanchette '06 says Whitlow's Black Women's History and Literature course, which moves historically from slavery to the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, has improved her writing skills and inspired her to study further.

"Her class is demanding: there is a lot of outside research, and we have weekly questions on what we read. The class has opened my eyes and helped me see the U.S. in a whole different way. We've talked about personal experiences and even shed some tears."

Whitlow chaired the English Department for the past three years, teaches African American studies and women's studies and is faculty clerk. The college has recognized her exemplary record of teaching by awarding her the Ed Lowe Teaching Excellence Award in 2001 and Board of Visitors Excellence in Teaching award in 1998.

"I don't tell them how to think," she said. "I teach them how to think and I teach them that they can think. In my class, students have to invest. Those who do reap great rewards, and that's what's gratifying for me. In my class, they don't sleep, they don't chat. They are with me. I can whip around and call on anybody in the class, and even if they didn't have the answer they are following along."

Socrates held that teaching involves leading the student to the door of knowledge. Zen master Shunryu Suzuki says that in the expert's mind there are few possibilities; in the beginner's mind there are many. Whitlow's style is to teach through the body of her experience while keeping in mind the fresh perspective of a beginner.

"I don't come in as an authority. I come in as a student of my students. We re-vision everything.

## Brick House

*"... a Brick House,  
She's mighty, mighty ..."*  
—The Commodores

**I make no claims to the universe—**

**I own not even this space,  
This skeleton of wood and brick,  
But its heart pulse—mine—  
Womb-warm rooms  
Stretch marks of books lined against  
Paint-skinned walls  
Blemishes of art gilded and framed  
Its rugs' napped, woven hair  
Head flushed, body eclectic,  
Vain with long-necked lamps  
Flat-stomached tables  
A muscular sink, sinewy stove**

**—Butt palmed in a sweaty armchair—  
I chew glass, crush mortar, spit stones.**

— Carolyn Beard Whitlow



Every idea can be challenged.”

A Michigan native, she earned a master of fine arts degree from Brown University, with an emphasis on poetry, and a master of science in adult education and social policy planning from Cornell University. She earned a bachelor’s degree in secondary English education in 1969 from Wayne State University.

Whitlow’s poetry has received the distinction of being published in the *Kenyon Review*, *African American Review*, three volumes of *Obsidian* and a number of anthologies. Her first volume of poetry, *Wild Meat*, was published by Lost Roads in 1986, and she has just completed a second book of poetry, *Vanished*.

Jeff Jeske, English professor and chairman of the English Department, coordinates the historical perspectives program at Guilford and has reviewed the syllabus and student evaluations from Whitlow’s signature course, Black Women’s History and Literature.

“Clearly it’s a powerful course,” Jeske said. “Students say it is life-changing. Discussions are deep and insightful, and it creates a venue for a truly emphatic transition from high school work to the caliber of work and intellectual wrestling

that we expect at Guilford.”

Although it is not uncommon for teachers and college professors to spend entire careers trying to strike the balance between challenging students and nurturing them, for Whitlow, the two are intertwined.

“She has raised the bar since she came here in 1993,” Jeske says. “New faculty have her as a clear and concrete coordinate when they ask themselves,

“I don’t come in as an authority. I come in as a student of my students. We re-vision everything. Every idea can be challenged.”

‘How tough should my classes be here?’ She will not accept from a student less than his or her best.”

History professor and interim vice president and academic dean Adrienne Israel has a 20-year history at Guilford and has worked with Whitlow since she arrived 10 years ago.

“Carolyn is devoted to the Socratic

method and discussions. At Guilford we believe that the more involved students are in the classroom, the more they learn. It is the direct application of knowledge. You must promote reflection and engage students in applying this to their own lives,” she said.

As early as the 1970s, Whitlow’s interest in teaching was afire as she wrote her first paper on the subject, “Have You Learned How to Learn?”

At Guilford, where students are not homogenous but rather a cross-section from across all spectrums, Whitlow draws on the breadth of her teaching experience, from Ivy League to state schools and community college. Before coming to Guilford, she taught simultaneously at three institutions: part-time at the University of Rhode Island and Brown University, and full time at Bristol Community College in Fall River, Mass.

She likes to challenge concepts, create doubt and prod students to defend their perspective. Responding, they become more articulate, more practiced in their ability to reason. “I try not to judge, only to encourage,” she says. Not surprisingly, her students become courageous and comfortable learners.



Chabotar

## The Need for Critical Thinkers has not Changed

Twelfth century students studied logic, grammar and rhetoric to hone their thinking and speech. Nine hundred years later, the liberal arts remain the best path to cultivate habits of mind and abilities that foster individual freedom and full

participation in the world at large. The need for critical thinkers has not changed and is uniquely addressed at Guilford.

President Kent Chabotar looks back on his three decades of experience in higher education, including nine years at Harvard, and happily extols Guilford’s unique commitment to teaching. It is a particular source of pride for Chabotar, whose own love of teaching earned him two teaching awards, one at Michigan State and the other at Harvard.

“Guilford College is probably one of the few colleges in the country which really does put teaching as the top priority for faculty recruitment and evaluation,” Chabotar said. “Many universities aspire to emphasize teaching but the reality is that research dominates. Students sit in oversized classes taught by teaching assistants because the faculty are conducting research.”

The intimate classroom experience at Guilford enhances the learning environment in a way not possible with larger classes. Chabotar recalls a freshman psychology class at Harvard that averages a thousand students.

“Anyone who comes to Guilford expecting to sit in class in front of a professor who drones on day after day will certainly be challenged,” Chabotar said. “At Guilford you’ll be engaged, you’ll debate, you’ll role play and participate in a variety of techniques to help you get the material. Lectures

are only one way.” In addition to his administrative duties, next year Chabotar plans to return to the classroom as a professor of political science to teach a course in public policy and administration.

Guilford defines liberal arts with a broader brush than many liberal arts schools; economics and statistics courses are offered along with the more esoteric study of philosophy and rhetoric.

“To me, that is a true liberal arts education: to learn Plato and Aristotle in the morning and in the afternoon interpret a balance sheet,” Chabotar said.

An inclusive, rather than restrictive, perspective of applied liberal arts is a natural outcome of its Quaker heritage of service, learning, and engagement in life outside the college in the community.

“There is a palpable sense of community and social justice stemming from the priceless Quaker heritage. It is indeed special.”

— Sheridan Hill