

RIO GRANDE SUN



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Dec. 2, 2009

To Whom It May Concern:

Elizabeth Hanly was without question the most influential professor I met as an undergraduate student.

I took two classes with Prof. Hanly. The first was Writing Strategies, a basic grammar and writing course. Two semesters later, I was her student in an advanced Writing/Reporting course.

When I took my first course with Prof. Hanly, I had just returned to college from an involuntary hiatus due to medical and personal circumstances, which had shaken my confidence as a student. Prof. Hanly helped restore that confidence and also sparked a new confidence in myself, not just as a student, but as a writer.

It didn't take long to see that it wasn't just me. Other students were discovering in her class that they were capable of writing that was real, raw and often vulnerable. That Writing Strategies course I took with Prof. Hanly was a basic pre-requisite for all journalism students, and most professors teaching it required only that the first-person essay assignments be coherent and grammatically correct to hand out an easy "A." Not Prof. Hanly. Instead, students were choosing to tackle such profoundly personal topics as having witnessed an uncle shot in drug wars in NYC, or having chosen to run in the Pan-Am games for Haiti rather than the U.S. after that student's dad (a Haitian) was left to die in the Krome Detention Center in Miami. One student, a Cuban-Pakistani had not spoken to his father for ten years. After writing about that in Prof Hanly's class, reconciliation was initiated.

I found myself writing about my kidnapping in Guatemala at age 5. I had retold the incident countless times in the 18 years since it happened, but that essay was the first time ever I managed to truly put my experience into words.

Prof Hanly incisively edited our essays and often asked for multiple drafts and re-writes. She asked probing and demanded extra effort. She showed us just how good we could be.

It wasn't just Prof. Hanly's enthusiastic encouragement of good writing and hard work or her willingness to make herself available to students outside class. It was that she demanded excellence and knew how to provide students the tools to deliver that.

Years since I left Prof. Hanly's classroom, I still often return to one promise she asked me to make one afternoon after a long class. "Please, do me one favor?" she asked me. "Don't ever become a hack."

I am now a few years into my career as a journalist. I am the assistant news editor for the Rio Grande Sun newspaper in New Mexico. Earlier this year, I published a series of stories detailing conflicts of interest among public school administrators. The series received second place in the New Mexico Press Association's annual investigative reporting awards.

I tell you this because my best work still draws from habits that Prof. Hanly impressed upon me: to expect always the best writing and reporting from myself, through rigorous self-editing, and by injecting both heart and intellect into my work.

Lucky the student who has Professor Hanly as a mentor.

Sincerely -

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jose de Wit". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a vertical line extending downwards from the bottom of the signature.

Jose de Wit