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English Department Chair, 40+ years at Villa

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English Teacher, 7 years at Villa

B Brianna Wisniewski
English Teacher, 10 years at Villa

OUR ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

If Villa polled our incoming freshmen about things they were most excited about, English class wouldn't top the list. However, those that have taken classes taught by our passionate teachers would think of English class as *anything but* "just a requirement." Innovative, enthusiastic, and creative are just a few words that come to mind when describing Villa's English department. The following interview with some of Villa's English teachers clearly reveals why current students and Alumnae alike say that English class is a key memory from their time at Villa that they'll remember forever.

Villa currently offers a selection of books with more "difficult" topics for our students to explore both together and on their own. When did this initiative begin, and why did your department think this was necessary?

L At the national conference for English teachers in Baltimore, we came up with this idea after attending a presentation about student stress bringing a pandemic in and of itself, and not just related to academic issues, but to students' personal/social concerns as well. We developed it and presented the program to Villa's administration for the following year and it's continued to grow since then.

Are there any staples within the standard English I, II, III, IV classes that have stood the test of time and are still relevant to our current students? Is there something to be said about teaching "the classics"?

L I believe that we need to see the connection between the past and present as much as our students need to see themselves perhaps reflected in current young adult literature. It is important not only to see where you are and where you're going, but to see where the human race has been through literature. Amazingly enough, a lot of literature that is considered classic contains ideas that are remarkably modern. It's always good to see that connection. I consider classic literature to be the history of the human spirit. Indeed, a famous critic, Harold Bloom, considered that Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Jane Austen defined just about every aspect of human nature. And so, these are writers we want the girls to read as well.

Is there one book in particular or one project that the students continue to love to cover in your classes?

L Of course, most students love projects that contain visual aspects, projects that contain a component that requires them to act a scene or even showcase a musical talent. I've discovered many talented students over the years who have unrecognized artistic, musical, or acting talent in the course of doing these projects. To me that is one of the exciting things about doing projects of this nature: what I discover about the girls, and, of course, what they discover about themselves.

Villa is proud to offer many elective classes for our students across all disciplines. Despite English already holding permanent spots on rosters each year, students continue to select additional English classes to add. That speaks strongly to the connection being made between the students and this department. Tell us about the popular English elective classes.

B Creative Expressions: This creative writing elective has blossomed this school year. The class explores writing the short story, poetry, a 10-minute play, and for the first time ever this year, the novel. In addition to analyzing model works of literature, students work closely in peer groups to critique each other's writing, offering support and praise for every individual's creativity. This class has allowed students to find space to edit and revise, explore the bounds of their own writing, and develop a deeper empathetic connection with one another by sharing their own unique authorial voice.

C Honors Reality vs. Fantasy: This course pairs fantasy fiction and nonfiction texts for fruitful discussion about the ways that fantastical worlds often depict real world issues and themes. The course focuses heavily on reading, writing, and discussion, and is run more similar to a seminar-style college course where students come to class prepared to discuss a certain reading each day.

SWORD: How did it start and how has it progressed?

C SWORD, the Student Workshop for Organization, Revision, and Drafting, is a place where students are encouraged to take ownership over their own writing process, to work collaboratively with peers, and to participate in creating a strong academic culture around writing. The writing center is meant to reframe writing as a continual process rather than a finished end goal, and to highlight how writing is an important cross-curricular life skill.

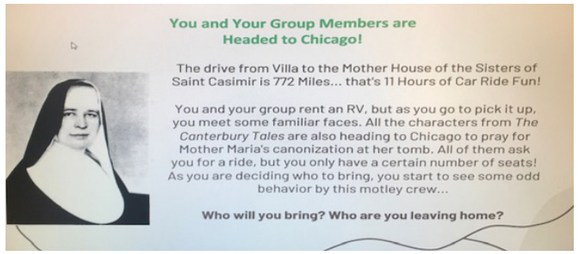
Students who work in the writing center are called peer readers, and are made up of sophomores, juniors, and seniors who volunteer their time to work with their peers! They are all trained by Ms. Chirico and work together to plan workshops and events centered on various writing-based topics. So far this year, peer readers have created and organized an Annotated Bibliography Workshop, have assisted with Midterm Prep Week, and have been open for sessions during Wednesday lunch periods and Tuesday Advisory periods. They look forward to planning more events for the second semester and beyond!

Not only does SWORD offer students the opportunity to have another set of eyes reviewing their writing projects, but it also provides peer readers who work in the Center a chance to mentor their friends and classmates in a low-stakes, student-focused environment.

What is the "Gamification" of learning and how has it shaped your English classes here at Villa?

B In November 2021, I attended the Pennsylvania Council of Teachers of English Language Arts Regional Conference. One of the keynote speakers, John Meehan from EMC² Learning Network, presented on a new classroom pedagogy known as Gamification — I was totally inspired. How many times have teachers seen this scenario: their students can go on and on about Animal Crossing, Pokemon Go, and the intricate details of The Bachelor and The Bachelorette, but seem bored and disengaged with the material in the classroom? Meehan explains it is because our students are craving to be *a part of the story*. The bustling worlds of Super Mario and The Legends of Zelda challenge students to try, fail, explore, and become champions of the story. English class is ripe with opportunities to apply these same concepts, where students can choose their own path, conquer obstacles along the way, and find new ways to develop and showcase their academic strengths. Some examples:

- All of the Honors English classes are battling each other to see how many times within a three-week period they can use their vocabulary words. The winner will be the class that uses their words the most in class conversations.
- Honors English 1 students became toy designers and worked together in groups to create bobble head dolls that epitomized the traits of the Greek Gods and Goddesses.
- Honors English 2 students entered the Champion's Arena Text Quest where each team engaged in two battles a day to win a first, second, or third place standing in analyzing the novel *A Room with a View*. Each team had a flag and gained points throughout the quest culminating in the reward of the Golden Cup.
- Honors 3/4 students took a "Road Trip" with the characters from *The Canterbury Tales*. Students had to decide who they were taking and who they left behind.



B As I continue my journey in exploring Gamification, it is my continued hope that students can engage with my content with joy, but also deeply intricate critical reflection on the content they have learned in my classroom.

As you might expect from our English gurus, they possessed the gift of gab during this interview; that stems directly from the passion and excitement they have for their classes. Are you interested in the full interview?
Visit www.vjmhs.org/english to read more!



NEHS: Started in the 2018 school year, The National English Honor Society has offered students the opportunity to develop their love of literacy and share that same passion with the community. This year, the group has implemented a "Take a Book, Leave a Book" Lending Mobile Library in the school, has invited fellow Alumnae authors to speak to the group, and even held a "Blind Date with a Book" Christmas Party *(photo above)*. With II members this school year, NEHS will again lead the school in its annual Book Drive in May, which has collected over 20,000 since its inception in 2016.

AN INTERVIEW WITH LAURIE McBRINN: 40+ YEARS AT VILLA

How old were you when you first knew you wanted to be a teacher?

When I was eight or nine, I conducted 'classes' down in the cellar of our house during the summer. My siblings, willingly or not, were my students, and I even had a chalkboard that was green. I even made little 'textbooks,' but I have absolutely no idea what I taught!

Why did you become a teacher?

Because I like to tell stories... From an early age, I loved to read, anything and everything: westerns, mythology, Arthurian legends, eventually science fiction/fantasy and, currently, Scandinavian murder mysteries. My mother is my primary influence here; I don't remember her without a book. Anyway, my family, then my friends, then my daughter and niece kept asking me to tell them stories. So I did, and so I was teaching in a rudimentary way. Eventually, these experiences translated to teaching high school.

What makes a "good day" at school?

When I know my students have learned and enjoyed the lesson at the same time. If my students don't laugh or smile in class at least once during a lesson, I feel I've failed that day.

How do you hope students remember you and your class?

That I treated them fairly and kindly, that they knew I always wanted what was best for them, that I will always be there for them. Just send an email. I may be slow answering, but I will eventually.