



Creating readers, one child at a time

Endowed professorship will honor UCCS professor who has a passion for literacy

By CAROL McGRAW

Barbara Swaby, Ph.D., says her life has been a series of "unexplained miracles." Local students might say she is their miracle.

For 31 years the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs professor has been rescuing the futures of children doing poorly in school because they can't read well. As director of the UCCS Graduate Reading Program and the Graduate

Reading Clinic, she teaches graduate students how to teach reading. Using their newfound skills, her students provide one-on-one help to children in free reading clinics, and most of them go on to teach reading in their communities.

"She has been changing lives one child at a time," says Jaime McMullen Garcia, associate director of development at the University of Colorado Foundation.

This year, the UCCS College of Education is establishing the Dr. Barbara Swaby Endowed Professorship. It is one of the highest honors a college professor can receive. A \$500,000 community fundraising effort is under way to create the endowed chair that will ensure that Swaby's invaluable work will continue after she retires, Garcia explains. This is the first endowed professorship for the College of Education.

Swaby provides 400 to 500 free reading evaluations for children each year. Unlike a typical professor's office, hers is filled with children's books, a child-size table and chairs. On the walls are colorfully drawn thank-you notes sent by children over the years.

"Everywhere I go, when people know I'm from UCCS, they say 'Oh, do you know Dr. Swaby?' And then they talk about how she helped them read, or helped their child or grandchildren to go to college," Garcia says. "I can't believe how many people whose lives have been touched by her."

Step by step - sometimes by sheer energy and will - she built at UCCS one of the finest reading programs in the country, educators say. Because of her scholarship, she holds the university's highest title of President's Teaching Scholar, Garcia says.

But Swaby does not promote her accomplishments. Instead, she says simply, "I've had good fortune."

Against all odds

Swaby was almost killed before she was even born. Her mother, Gwendolyn Swaby, and her father, the Rev. Herbert Swaby, a Presbyterian minister, were missionaries in their native Jamaica when Gwendolyn, nine months pregnant, was accosted in their home by thieves, kicked and beaten. She was taken to the hospital where a week later, Barbara was born. Gwendolyn went in and out of a coma for months.

"Neither one of us should have survived. My mother wasn't able to get to know me until I was a year old," Swaby says. Yet her parents' influence on her life is profound. As a tot, they took her with them to the church schools they founded in Tower Isle, Jamaica.

"I could not have avoided learning, even if I wanted to," Swaby says. She graduated from high school at age 14, and began helping her mother at school.

Forty-five years later, she still talks with wonderment about how the right people appeared at the right time to support and guide her.

One Sunday, while playing piano at church, a visitor complimented her on her music. Weeks later, her parents got a letter from that visitor - Raymond Rankin, president of Tusculum College in Greeneville, Tenn. - offering a four-year music scholarship to the Presbyterian-founded school.

She arrived on campus in 1964. "I still had girlish ribbons in my hair," she recalls. Being so much younger than the other students, she had few friends. But professor Arnold Thomas and his wife, Ruth, who had three children, took her in. "They became my family and still are."

When she and the Thomas kids, who were white, attended movies, they sat in the balcony where blacks were relegated, and on trips to Knoxville they stayed with her in segregated hotels. "They are my heroes," she says.

After graduating, Swaby went back to Jamaica to teach. She had been there three years when a motorist knocked on the family's door asking for help with a flat tire. "My father went out to help, and I held the flashlight," she recalls.

Her father had much in common with the motorist, the Rev. Calvin Didier, a pastor at House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul, Minn. Soon after, the House of Hope women's association offered Swaby a scholarship for graduate school. House of Hope congregants Charles and Mary Field became another of her surrogate families.

At the University of Minnesota she studied reading education. "Being from a Third World country, I saw that illiteracy was killing us there, like it is here in this country, too."

The church also helped Swaby get her doctorate in reading. When she graduated in 1977, UCCS was looking to hire.

Swaby's resume stood out to professor emeritus Jack Sherman, then associate dean of the College of Education, and professor Tom Giblin. They knew the University of Minnesota was a reading-education powerhouse and she was a top-notch student.

Swaby decided to take the UCCS job because the graduate reading program was new and she felt she could "create something."

Sherman says, "When I look back over my career, I would consider hiring her as one of my best successes. She has had such an impact on this region in reading, and has set such a high standard for the faculty."

It was not an easy time for Swaby. "I had taught reading classes, and had directed a peeradvisory program, so had an idea how the reading program should be done. But I was also the first black woman teaching at the university and I didn't have a mentor, and was thrown in to create this program. It was challenging."

She insisted on starting the free reading clinic. Sherman says, "It amazed me how she was able to establish a free reading clinic with essentially no help from the university. She said it needed to be done and she did it."

Swaby is a top reading diagnostician. "Without a huge battery of tests, within minutes she knows exactly where a child belongs and how to help them," says UCCS interim provost Peg Bacon.

She does it without first checking test results or quizzing a child's parents. "I prefer not to know. I want to make decisions based on what I find when they read for me," Swaby explains.

Children in the clinic are guaranteed six months' reading improvement during the three-week individualized clinics held in summer and fall.

Jan Ewing called for an appointment because she "felt like a failure because my son wasn't catching on to reading."

Three of her five mostly homeschooled children have been through the clinic.

"Oh, my gosh, it's amazing how she helps the kids help themselves," Ewing says. "They can read out loud publicly, which is huge, comprehension went up, spelling. Their self-esteem went through the ceiling. They adore Dr. Swaby."

Ewing's son Cody, 13, says, "She's like a friend. She believed I could do it. My reading level had been third level, and now it is ninth level."

Inspiration to all

Swaby's love of children and ability to inspire others holds true in her personal life, too.

Ten years after she came to UCCS, she decided to adopt a child. She believed raising a girl would be easier, but couldn't say no when she met a 2-year-old boy. It was a difficult transition. "I was a single mom and he had had a hard start in life. And we were new to each other. But he is the biggest miracle in my life."

David Swaby, now 25, is an instructor in the UCCS forensic sciences department, and working on his doctorate. "I have two heroes. One is my grandfather (Herbert Swaby), and the other is my mother," he says.

Teachers recall David as a tot, sitting quietly in the back of Swaby's classroom with his purple blanket and books, just as years ago she had attended her parents' classes.

Barbara Swaby is just as zealous in taking care of others. B.J. Campbell, assistant principal at Frontier Elementary School, recalls how Swaby changed her life. She was a secretary at Helen Hunt Elementary, where Swaby often gave workshops.

"One day she told me, 'You know, if you were a teacher I'd let you teach my (reading class) kids.'"

"I'm a black woman and I had never known a black woman like that, the way she talked, the way she carried herself and dressed and the respect she received. Her light showed from the beginning, and she made me feel like I could conquer anything," Campbell said. "I went to UCCS and got my graduate degree."

When Campbell had a baby, Swaby gave a year's supply of diapers and became his godmother. She is now godmother to 24 others.

"Of all the people in my life, she most closely emulates what Jesus wants us to do," Campbell says. "I keep wondering what can I do for her, but she doesn't want anything back."

Winfield Pate, a retired math teacher and computer professional, met Swaby at church. Divorced, he had two girls, Rachel and Dominique, who "always wanted to sit with this nice lady at church because she had candy in her purse," he recalls.

The two had much in common, including teaching and music. They married about 18 years ago.

"She lives to give," Pate says, whether it's feeding stray cats, babying her 80 rosebushes, keeping bird feeders full, or cooking stuffed Cornish game hens and Jamaican dishes for his football tailgate parties.

Undying passion

Swaby believes much of this country's reading problems come from "other priorities at home and inappropriate instruction at school."

She says, "Reading is often not a value in families where attention must be focused on survival. Do you choose books or food?" She believes reading is given short-shrift in other families, too. "It doesn't get one-fiftieth the attention that sports does."

Reading is not a natural, evolved process, she explains. Humans come hard-wired to listen and speak, but invented reading and writing. "It becomes more natural if the child, from an early age, is in an environment where they are exposed to words, and as they are read to it becomes a pattern."

Middle-class children hear 31 million more words by age 5 than those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, she says. Because of that, at age 5 they have a vocabulary of 10,000 words, compared with 5,000 for kids in lower-income homes.

"Not even teachers are panicked. And we should be in stark panic about what is happening."

It's evening at the end of a long week when Swaby, 59, walks to her psycholinguistics class. She's tired - too many early mornings and late nights. Yet she lights up in front of her students, energetically launching into a difficult lecture on how the brain organizes itself. She knows students like these will carry on her fight for literacy. The students hang on her every word.

How, in the twilight of her career, can Swaby remain so passionate?

Her work is payback, she says, for all the unexplained miracles of her life - from her survival at birth, to her son and husband, to the people who have helped her along the way.

"There's a phrase that 'service is the rent you pay to God for the space you occupy on Earth.' I'm in debt to God. And based upon that, also to the individuals he put in my life to provide me with service - my parents, Dr. Rankin, the Thomases, Calvin Didier, the Fields, the others."

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ENSURING A LEGACY

A \$500,000 community fundraising effort is under way to create the Dr. Barbara Swaby Endowed Professorship at University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. The endowed chair will ensure that Swaby's work continues after she retires.

Donations are being accepted from corporations and individuals. The fund will become the financial bedrock of the program to attract top-notch reading professors for the post in years to come.

Info: Jaime Mc-Mullen Garcia, associate director of development at University of Colorado Foundation, 536-4480.

ON HER NIGHTSTAND

Of course, Barbara Swaby loves to read. Her favorite books are Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre" and Maryanne Wolf's "Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain."

Among children's authors for elementary school-age kids, she recommends Diane Siebert's books, including "Sierra," which uses lyrical verse to tell the history of mountains - from the mountains' point of view.

http://www.uccs.edu/~ur/2006/view_article_mediawatch.php?y=mediawatch_articles&article_id=20925