

In a Class of Their Own

*Austin teachers who had something to say
and the students who got the message.*

Story By Helen Thompson

Photography By Jeff Stackton

Learning is a complicated process and sometimes veers along its own path, serendipitously detouring around what we like to think of as the basics—reading, writing and arithmetic. As teachers return to their classrooms this month, they know what they are supposed to teach, and they know how they want to do it. Students are more unpredictable, and sometimes they come away from a class with lessons that aren't part of the official curriculum. Maybe that's because some students are searching for something more, and some teachers are

poised to give more—and to give it in a way that ends up making a difference.

That's what we found out when we started asking successful Austinites about the teachers who most inspired them. If there's a common thread running through all of the students' stories, it's that the teachers took time to get to know and reach their students on an individual level instead of teaching a one-size-fits-all curriculum. For the teachers, the common thread is that they recognize teaching is a way to connect students to a larger reality, rather than focusing solely on specific skills.

Some of these former students were destined to make their mark, but who knows how much harder it would have been or how much longer it would have taken? A delay of a couple of years, and Eddie Wilson might not have been on hand to buy that run-down armory and turn it into the Armadillo World Headquarters. And where would Austin and its music scene be today if that hadn't happened? That's the impact a great teacher has. To try to open up the world to a student is wonderful in itself, but when those educators succeed, their work can benefit us all.

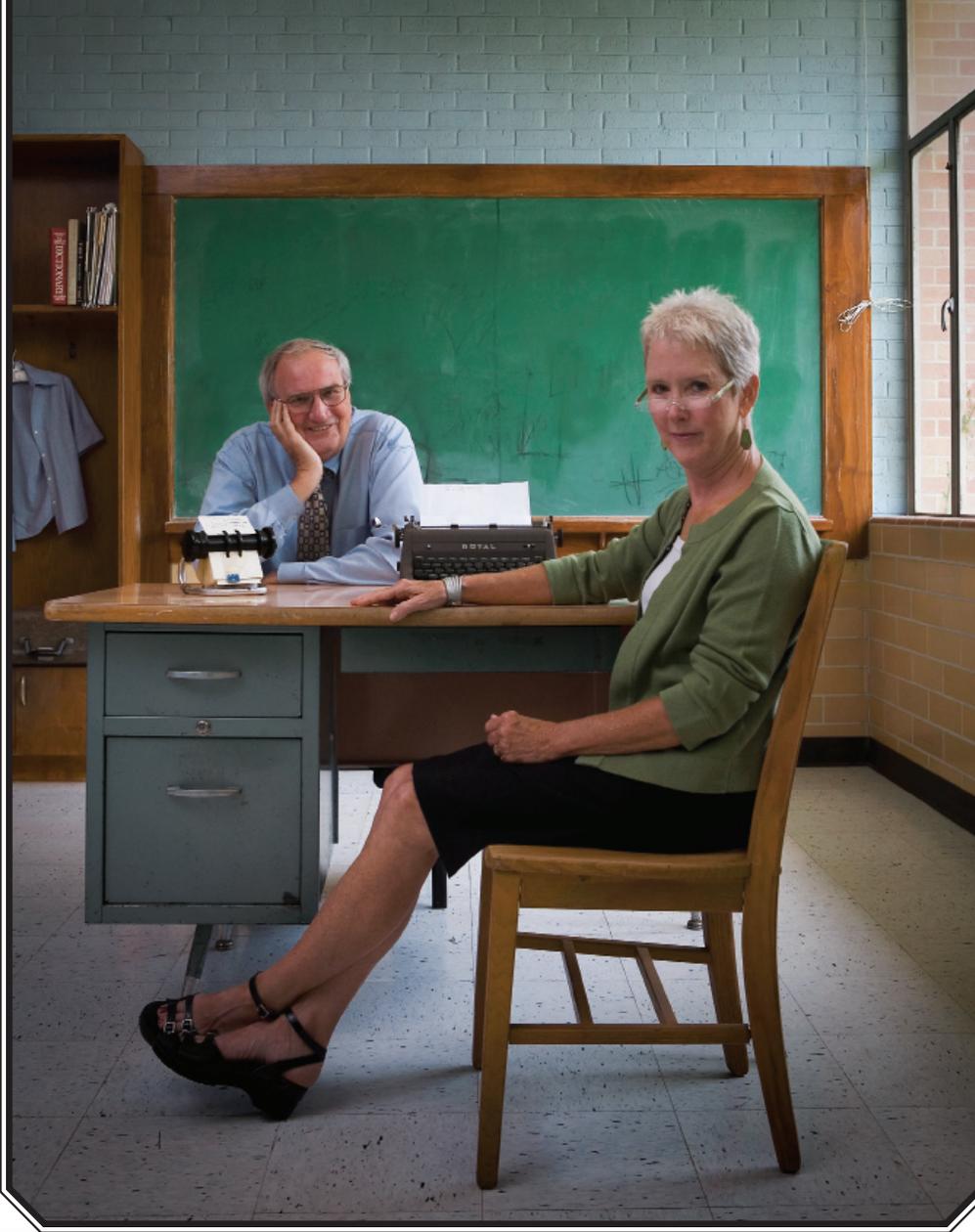


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fter Toni Inglis got her Master of Science degree in nursing in 1992, things just weren't as different for the long-time neonatal nurse as she had hoped they would be. "I felt all dressed up," she says, "with no place to go."

Inglis has been a nurse at Seton Hospital since 1979, but she decided in 1989 that she needed to pursue advanced study. Many of the problems she encountered working with families, such as finding ways to pay for surgeries not covered by insurance, resulted from failures in the system. "I wanted to make my patients better," Inglis says, "but I also wanted to make the situation better."

Enter David Warner, a professor whose classes in the LBJ School of Public Affairs were so popular, people would just sit in and listen. The topic—public health finance—seems dry, but decode that, and what Warner is talking about in his classes is who pays for what (for example, should hospitals accept uninsured patients?). People get very worked up over a question like that, but for Inglis, Warner's class was more than just an opportunity to debate policy; it offered her an entrée into a new world. "I could see that he was talking about smarter ways to make changes," she says.

Warner noticed a skill that set Inglis apart. "Nurses are not necessarily articulate," he says. "Toni had a lot to say about professional issues." Inglis knew how to make her point. And that's what Warner told her after she turned in the final paper of the semester. "This is a good paper," he said. "But why don't you make a real contribution?"

Warner advised her to write 600- to 700-word articles—not too long, so that the general public could understand—and send them to newspapers. "The minute he said it, I knew I could do it," says Inglis. "That would be my way to make a difference." Since 1993, Inglis' opinion pieces have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Austin American-Statesman*, *The Dallas Morning News* and many other publications. They address health care topics we can all relate to, such as whether patient safety should trump profits in the pharmaceutical industry and, whether you agree with Inglis or not, she always makes the issues crystal clear. "Toni has a unique ability," says Warner. "She can encapsulate the issues and then write about them in a way that everyone can understand."