Baylor Arts & Sciences

Home Sweet Campus

When Baylor faculty members live next door to students, the benefits are mutual.

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Successful Graduate Education
A Round-the-World Mission Trip
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Fall 2017
SCOTT WILDE
BROOKS FLATS
SENIOR LECTURER, MATHEMATICS

MONA CHOUCAIR
SOUTH RUSSELL
SENIOR LECTURER, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION & ENGLISH

JENNIFER GOOD
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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, MODERN LANGUAGES & CULTURES (GERMAN) AND DIRECTOR OF UNIVERSITY SCHOLARS

BRIAN ELLIOTT
HERITAGE HOUSE
SENIOR LECTURER, FILM & DIGITAL MEDIA

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When Brian Elliott, a senior lecturer in film and digital media, joined the Baylor faculty in 1990 after finishing a master's degree at the University, he would typically end his day driving down Interstate 35 as he commuted back to his house in a Waco suburb. At that time, he had no way of knowing that one day his “drive” home would instead be a walk of just a few hundred feet to an on-campus residence hall.

Thanks to Baylor’s Faculty-in-Residence (FIR) program, Elliott and other faculty members are taking their desire to mentor students to a higher level, as they live and interact with them each day in campus residence halls.
THE “D” WORD

Don’t use the word “dorm” at Baylor. That four-letter word has been retired from official language because it’s no longer accurate. Many of today’s Baylor students live and learn in “residence halls” with students of similar academic aspirations. It’s the result of a mindset that sees residence halls as much more than a place for students to eat, sleep and study, and the Faculty-in-Residence program has become an important part of the mix.

“With faculty living with the students, our residence halls are extensions of a student’s academic life,” said Dr. Terri Garrett, Baylor’s associate director for academic initiatives.

The FIR program began in the fall of 2004 when Dr. Walter Bradley, distinguished professor of engineering, and his wife, Ann, volunteered to join 600 students living in the brand-new North Village Community, the first Baylor residence hall built since the 1960s.

“We quickly made an apartment for them and we’ve been running ever since in that direction,” Garrett said. “We targeted living-learning programs first as a way to intentionally engage faculty from that academic unit in the life of the community. It’s been so impactful that we said we need to do this in all of our residence halls.”

The program has evolved and grown in every possible way since that beginning, Garrett said. Because no previous residence halls had been designed with faculty apartments, they have been added as the older halls — including North and South Russell, Penland and Martin — have been renovated. There are now faculty-in-residence in 15 Baylor residence halls, with only 60-year-old Ruth Collins Hall left to be transformed.

The earliest faculty members in the program were recruited by word of mouth, but now the process has become competitive with numerous applicants vying for open positions.

“Back then at the beginning, there wasn’t a job description, faculty-in-residence training or a manual,” Garrett said. All of that is in place today, including guidelines for student engagement and when and how to contact other staff and resources when serious issues arise.

FIR candidates must be either senior lecturers or late tenure-track or tenured professors, and they’re asked to make a five-year commitment, after which there is an evaluation. The requirements keep newer faculty on track with their departmental obligations and ensure faculty continuity in the residence hall.

A telling measure of the success of the program is the response of the students who live next door to faculty.

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BRIAN ELLIOTT

LIGHTS, CAMERA, REAL LIFE

Unlike a film that Brian Elliott or one of his students might write and produce, real life never stays on script. There are plenty of twists and turns, and Elliott is using his role as a faculty-in-residence to help students resolve the plot changes.
“One of the things I get to communicate to students is that rather than having this thing perfectly planned out, our life is much more of an adventure where we’re having to learn to pivot and be flexible,” he said. “Helping them embrace that as a lifestyle is really important.”

Elliott is in his 27th year at Baylor and his fourth year as a faculty-in-residence. He began by living with 175 freshmen women at Texana House in North Village, when he and his wife, Susan, took up the faculty-in-residence challenge as their youngest son was leaving for college.

“I had a conversation with God and decided, ‘I can sit in this house by myself, or I can go do an adventure and let’s see what happens.’ My wife was all in. She loves doing this sort of thing,” he said.

After living at Texana House, the Elliots moved next door to Heritage House, which is the Fine Arts Living-Learning Center where 250 film, theatre, art and music majors live.

With students often maxed out with their studies and other activities, Elliott avoids creating too many new events and instead connects with what students are already doing. In his case that means concerts, plays, film screenings and art exhibits.

“We’re running pretty fast and hard,” he said.

On Tuesday nights Elliott sponsors “Lounge in the Lobby,” a study break with snacks, and on Sunday nights he invites small groups from different floors and wings for dinner in his apartment. Sometimes there’s a topic for the night, and sometimes there’s just random conversation.

And then there are field trips Elliott takes with students — to the Dallas Opera, the Austin Film Festival or to Chicago to see “Hamilton.” Sometimes he scores backstage tours and visits with successful Baylor alumni such as filmmaker John Lee Hancock. The North Village residence hall director and living-learning center program director help him plan these larger events.

Elliott appreciates the opportunity to interact with students at this critical time in their lives, but he also has learned to practice what he preaches.

“I think the greatest challenge is trying to juggle all the constituencies I’m invested in — my family, professional projects, teaching class and hopefully doing that effectively, and investing in students who aren’t necessarily part of the Fine Arts Living-Learning Center but are still people I care about,” Elliott said. “And one of the things that I care about is the students when they’re off and gone doing something else.”

The Elliots’ Heritage House apartment was adapted from an existing suite, and that’s okay with them.

“We’re fairly user-friendly. We don’t have high expectations in those regards,” Elliott said.

Besides, there are wonderful benefits just outside their door.

“There’s a symphony across the way, there’s an art gallery. Plus it’s a beautiful place to walk and it’s safe,” Elliott said. “The quality of life here can be really nurturing.”

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Dr. Jennifer Good has long believed there is more to teaching than standing at the front of a classroom, and the time she spent as a faculty-in-residence has expanded that notion.

“There is that little niggling thing called grades that makes students not necessarily see you in the same light as someone who is there to advocate for them,” Good said. “As I learned about the Faculty-in-Residence program, it seemed that it was a way I could remove the barrier that sometimes keeps students from engaging or believing I am there for them.”

Good is in her 15th year at Baylor, where she is an associate professor of German and serves as director of the
University Scholars Program. Good was a faculty-in-residence in Brooks Flats for two years before moving to North Russell to help launch the Baylor & Beyond Living-Learning Center. The LLC has 380 students with global interests in areas as broad as international studies, languages, history, pre-health and business.

Good’s background helped her prepare for the new challenge. She had a positive experience with a caring professor while an undergraduate at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and she leads the Baylor in Germany summer program, where she is with students all day, traveling and learning together.

“I really treasure being here for the experiences students have, and the fact is that they have to learn such hard lessons sometimes while other times they have moments of great joy,” Good said. “I get to be present for them and sometimes I’m just the person who happens to be there to empathize or celebrate with them.”

Good often makes those connections during activities she plans, ranging from small group dinners or game nights in her apartment to residence hall-wide come-and-go gatherings during finals. But the heart of the FIR experience for her is being there with students through the ebb and flow of college life.

“Sometimes it’s easy for professors to forget that the students haven’t done this before,” she said. “I think living in the residence hall has helped me be a better teacher, more able to see how to reach students. I don’t think it’s changed what I have to teach necessarily, but I don’t have any problem anymore sitting down with students, encouraging them and finding out what’s keeping them from being able to do their best work.”

Good shares the FIR experience with her husband, George, a career social worker in the mental health field, her nine-year-old daughter and a son who lived across the street in Penland Hall during his freshman year at Baylor. A bonus for students in North Russell has been George’s conversations with them as he completes a master’s degree in social work at Baylor.

“He showed them you don’t have to be in a rush because he went back to school 15-plus years after his bachelor’s degree,” Good said. “And he showed them it was still hard work but worth it, and he still had to stay up after midnight sometimes.”

The Goods are renting out their home near Lake Waco while they live on campus.

“When we are ready, I think we’ll go back to that house and our garden,” Good said. “That’s the main thing that we don’t have here that we spent a lot of time on.”

**Drinks with the Old Guy**

Dr. Scott Wilde is a faculty member who embodies several Baylor experiences. First and foremost he’s a senior lecturer in mathematics, but he’s also a non-degree-seeking German student trying to make the grade. Overlapping both of those responsibilities is his role as faculty-in-residence for 320 male and female students of all classifications and disciplines in Brooks Flats, including some students in Baylor’s Business & Innovation Living-Learning Center.

Wilde says the diverse population in Brooks Flats makes programming more challenging than in other halls, but so does the rhythm of student life.

“I realize how busy these kids are academically, and to do an academic program is not going to really appeal to very many students,” he said.

Instead, Wilde focuses on hosting informal gatherings, such as one he calls “Drinks With the Old Guy” on Thursday afternoons.

“It’s just a come-and-go chance for me to get to know a few students,” he said. “A lot of them will come grab a cookie, get a water or a soft drink and zip out. There’s no burden on them.”

During finals, Wilde will step things up a bit by providing coffee and donuts in the morning. And every other week he invites the hall’s community leaders — the student leaders assigned to each floor — to his apartment for breakfast.

“That’s been a major positive,” he said. “I’ve really enjoyed getting to know these students in a deeper way. You wish you could do that with all 320, but there’s just no way.”

**I Think Living in the Residence Hall Has Helped Me Be a Better Teacher, More Able to See How to Reach Students.**

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Wilde learned about the faculty-in-residence program during his orientation as a new Baylor faculty member in 2004. “It was very intriguing and I thought that’d be something I’d enjoy,” he said. “I started applying as soon as I became a senior lecturer. It took three or four years to be selected.”

Wilde traces some of his interest in the FIR program to when he taught and served as a campus minister at the University of Texas at Arlington before coming to Baylor. “I liked to spend time around college students,” he said. “It’s a neat age. They’re adults, they’re kids, they’re going through a lot of changes in those four years and I’ve always enjoyed being a part of it.”

Wilde shares his Brooks Flats apartment with his wife, Shari, who is a public school nurse with 800 students of her own, as well as a 15-year-old daughter and a 10-year-old son. While their high school-age daughter is not entirely thrilled with the arrangement, his son loves it. “He hangs out in the lobby and he’s my PR guy,” Wilde said. “He can remember everybody’s name, remember their class schedule and where they’re from.”

When the Wildes complete the FIR program they’ll have to decide what to do next because they don’t own a house in Waco. “This is home,” Wilde said.

MAMA MONA

“Mama Mona!” That greeting from students is not unusual as Dr. Mona Choucair walks from her office in the Carroll Science Building to her FIR apartment in South Russell. It’s also not unwanted. “Students can see me as a mama if they want. That’s beautiful — that’s what this job is for,” she said. “I’m their touchstone, somebody to talk to them and help them if there’s anything going on in their lives.”

Choucair is the faculty-in-residence for more than 300 students in South Russell’s Impact Living-Learning Center. A Baylor alumna who has been on faculty for 17 years, she divides her academic time by serving as a senior lecturer in English and teaching classes in the School of Education. But as faculty-in-residence, Choucair gives everyone her undivided attention.

“It can be exhausting, so you have to have quite a bit of energy,” she said. By living in her large faculty apartment, Choucair is able to host up to 40 students for dinner. “They’re called Mama Mona Dinners, and I’m not a mom, I’m not married, and so it’s wonderful to be called Mama,” she said. “I measure success not in the number who come to my dinner table but by those relationships that are forged over a meal that I can follow up on for months or a year later.”

Every now and then on Thursday mornings, Choucair will sit in the South Russell lobby and provide donuts and conversation to whomever might stop by. She’s thrown a dessert party for the entire hall, but she prefers to keep things small to promote personal relationships. “We see each other at our best and our worst because we live among one another, so it’s a very authentic relationship that’s forged,” she said.

Choucair said the FIR experience has taught her how to listen. “At first I thought, in this role I will have to ask how they’re doing. But now I know that if I am just present, they will talk,” she said. “I’m not saying I’m the answer, because they also have pastors, they have youth ministers, they have community leaders, they have our wonderful program director and hall director and they have our chaplain.”

Choucair said living next to students in the residence hall has also enhanced her teaching. “I’m a better teacher knowing where they’ve just come from. Knowing they’re having roommate problems. Or they’re sick of the food, or they didn’t make it to breakfast so they’re not in the best mood. Or they just failed three tests and feel like they’re not Baylor material anymore,” Choucair said. “It makes me realize there are so many things going on with those kids in that class.”

During her first year as faculty-in-residence, Choucair had a student in the hall whose parent died just before the beginning of the semester. A chance encounter with her across campus led to a yearlong conversation, during which Choucair shared the loss of her own father at age 16. “I remember talking to her and thinking — this is not an accident, I was supposed to talk to this girl,” she said. “Chance encounters are some of the coolest things that come from this job. One encounter might change that kid, and that’s a huge responsibility.”
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