



alumni POWER

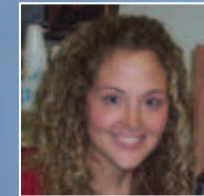
Coastal Carolina University alumni are doing important, innovative and exciting work in many fields of endeavor. This article profiles five of our graduates who are making use of the skills, experience and perspective they gained at the University.



Ben Bocian



Mike Jaruszewicz



Jenny Abbott Edwards



Michael J. Kelly



Teaching from the Heart

by Doug Bell

Jenny Abbott Edwards '04

Jenny Abbott Edwards enrolled at Coastal Carolina University in 2004 intending to play soccer. As a high school junior, the North Canton, Ohio, native had attended a soccer camp led by coach Shaun Docking and “fell in love with the campus,” she says. Before graduating from high school, however, she suffered from an ACL tear in both knees, injuries that prevented her from joining the team as a walk on. As a college freshman, she found herself alone in a new place, isolated from the sport that had been a major focus and anchor of her life since childhood. Not for the last time, Edwards would be compelled by circumstances to reorient her life.

“I felt lost,” she said. In order to regain her sense of purpose, she immersed herself in college life. An early childhood education major, she concentrated on her grades and volunteered to be a Student Alumni Ambassador (SAA). Serving as an ambassador brought her into contact with a different sort of team experience than she had known in sports. Working with other student volunteers and the Office of Alumni Relations staff, she helped facilitate the meetings and social functions that are a part of every university operation.

During her senior year, Edwards traveled to the Netherlands to study Dutch education methods, focusing particularly on at-risk children (those who show signs of becoming future drop-outs). The experience of being abroad for the first time, without friends and unfamiliar with the language and the culture, led her to another pivotal moment that would have momentous implications for her professional life.

“I was far removed from my comfort zone,” says Edwards. But soon after her arrival she befriended a secretary at the elementary school she was observing in the Dutch town of Nijmegen. The new friend invited Edwards into her home and offered advice and encouragement. Stimulated by this glimpse of simple family life, she soon recovered a sense of purpose and began to have a more meaningful educational experience. It was a life lesson about the relationship between environment and learning.

Edwards graduated in December 2004 and began teaching at North Myrtle Beach Elementary the following fall. “My experience abroad made me conscious of those children who are afraid to participate in class because they aren’t comfortable in their surroundings,” she says.



Jenny Abbott Edwards '04 (above) created “Hearts’ Stories,” a new teaching method designed to encourage interactive learning. Coastal Carolina University President David DeCenzo (right) was interviewed by the class last year.

Edwards felt compelled to give children the gift of experiencing different backgrounds and cultures through classroom activities. During her first year teaching, she began to gather ideas on ways to build community within the North Myrtle Beach schools. She arrived at the idea of interviewing as a way to help children connect with one another. With the support of colleagues and others, she developed an interviewing curriculum which she named “Hearts’ Stories.” Sally Hare, an education professor of Edwards’ at the University, helped her cultivate the plan and create a curriculum.

Edwards and fellow teacher Betsey Costner (wife of Coastal Carolina University education professor Richard Costner) revamped their classes’ morning writing block to include the new Hearts’ Stories curriculum starting with a class project called “interview in a bag.” This activity requires the students to bring five things (excluding toys) that make reference to their lives and shed light on their families, culture, hobbies, etc. For example, a child who loves to swim may bring goggles. Some children will bring a flag to represent where their family is from or a favorite book they love to read. Other children bring a special gift that has been given to them. Still others will bring things like their first lost tooth, a funny family picture, or an heirloom that has been passed down to them.

Students take turns being interviewed by their classmates about their chosen items, leading each student to share his or her life stories. The students take notes during the interview and then summarize them to create a biographical sketch from what they’ve learned about the classmate they’ve interviewed. The stories the students

write, which Edwards named “Hearts’ Stories,” are bound into a book that remains in the classroom.

These stories are the mere beginnings of the curriculum, according to Edwards, who now teaches at Forestbrook Elementary. Once they have all been interviewed, each student is allowed to invite one special guest—usually a parent, sibling or family friend—to be interviewed by the class on Friday mornings throughout the year. “This gives students a sense of the rich variety of family background and culture,” said Edwards, “especially regarding the variety of ways of making a living.” Guests have included pilots, janitors, lawyers, waitresses, artists, contractors, as well as Coastal Carolina University President David DeCenzo, Coach David Bennett and Will Garland, the University’s interim financial director and chairman of the Horry County Board of Education.

In the four years since Hearts’ Stories was initiated, the curriculum has taken off in ways that Edwards never anticipated. This past summer, with the pro bono assistance of attorney Thomas Stanley, Hearts’ Stories was incorporated as a nonprofit organization. More than 20 classrooms in Horry County Schools have implemented the Hearts’ Stories curriculum, as well as one school in Maryland and one in North Carolina. Recently, Hearts’ Stories received a grant from The Jackson Companies to help support the growing needs of the program.

“The main goal of the program is to reinforce the academic curriculum by concentrating on life skills that teach the students how to value who they are and who they were created to be,” says Edwards.

To read more about this growing curriculum and to view the students’ work, visit www.heartsstories.org. □