

# Nice Professors Conduct Nice Panel

by Joel MEGGS

Dr. Shannon Murray, recent winner of *The Cadre's* UPEI Faculty Colouring Contest, chaired a panel discussion on "Kindness in the Classroom" this past Friday, October 26th. The panel was meant to tie in with ACT's production of *Wit*, which wrapped up on Sunday. The play portrays a professor, Vivian Bearing, who is cold and distant towards her students and later encounters that same cold indifference from the medical community when she is diagnosed with cancer. The panel's purpose was to discuss the importance of the professor-student relationship and how kindness towards students affects their learning.

In addition to Dr. Murray, the moderator, the discussion was attended by Dr. Geoff Lindsay, Professor Marian MacKinnon, Dr. Anne Furlong, Professor Jeanne Henry (the director of *Wit*), Professor Ron Irving, Dr. Edward MacDonald, Professor Sharon Myers, Dr. Jane Magrath, Professor George Belliveau, and Dr. Barbara Horney. Take a good look at these names; you may want to take courses from them in the future, as they are professors that are mindful enough of these concerns to attend a one hour discussion surrounding them.

In fact, the first exercise Dr. Murray had everyone do was to write about an experience with an unkind professor. I wrote about a time a professor administered a quiz that had trick questions on it, one of which I got wrong. Apparently in the three years he had been administering it, I was the only one who'd ever gotten it wrong and he told me as much.

The example Dr. Murray gave us from the play was that of Dr. Bearing threatening to expel a student if he continued to arrive unprepared for class and then refusing to grant an extension to a student who claimed his grandmother had just died. Clearly some professors in the room were a little uneasy about the example, as they were unsure if this was really all that "unkind." After all, this was a



**Evil Sheriff of Nottingham Brent MacLaine unable to attend panel.**

room full of people who have probably heard the "my grandmother has died" excuse a thousand times and know that it isn't always true. As for threatening to expel an unprepared

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student, many in the room gleaned some sort of vicarious satisfaction at seeing Dr. Bearing deliver a threat that they, on occasion, would like to have given to some of their own students.

To start the discussion off, Dr. Murray recalled a student evaluation she had received a few years back that said that she was kind.

"I wasn't sure that was a good thing. In fact, my immediate response was, 'I must be getting soft.'"

This concern, of being mindful of students' needs without being over accommodating, was echoed by many in the room. Obviously professors have to walk a fine line, between being nice and becoming a doormat.

"To quote *Hamlet*, sometimes it is necessary to be cruel to be kind," Dr. Murray put it very succinctly. If

professors were to allow students to get away without doing their readings, to offer extensions at the drop of a hat, to praise work that is far below a student's potential, is a professor not doing more harm than good? Sure, the professor will win the popularity contest, but what benefit is the student getting from the professor's class as a result?

Barb MacKinnon astutely picked up on the theme running through the play *Wit* of the de-personalizing of patients and students. For Bearing, students were just bodies in chairs that were expected to submit work on time and conform to certain expectations and standards. When the tables are turned and she becomes the student, her doctors treat her in the same way - as a patient, an experiment, without ever being mindful of the fears and apprehensions the person might be suffering.

Dr. Lindsay then chimed in with a very good point that speaks to the "us versus them" mentality that is common to both student-professor relationships and doctor-patient relationships:

"When I think about the experiences I've had with the medical community, it would be very easy for me to put them all in columns of either

kind or unkind, and I don't think that's a reflection of the medical community; I think it's a reflection of the fact that I'm distant from that profession."

Dr. Lindsay pointed out that when we go to the doctor or are admitted into the hospital, we are totally within the power of the doctors and nurses. We have certain needs and fears, and it is up to the doctors and nurses to allay those fears because they are privy to information that we are not. They are in a position of authority. Such is the case for students, whose aspirations are tied up with the professors who have the ability to determine whether or not they will be a success, not just by the final grade, but by making the entire process more palatable.

Jeremy Livingston, a philosophy student, then made the important distinction between being firm and being kind:

"It is possible to be too extremely firm, but even if you say 'I can't give you an extension on this, but this is why and here are some other ways that you will be able to make [that mark] up' or 'this particular mark doesn't matter this much;' you know, put perspective on it. I think that a professor can be firm and kind at the same time."

Dr. Magrath then pointed out that the student-professor relationship is a two-way street. Not only do professors wield a certain amount of power over students, but students, too, are empowered by student evaluations. Magrath recalled a time when she "totally trashed" a professor on her student evaluation, only to realize years later her experience with this professor would be of immense benefit to her in her future studies.

Dr. Furlong further picked up on the reciprocal nature of the student-professor relationship by pointing out that students have ample opportunity to make the professor's life a living hell. She said the temptation is to grade the student on his or her personality, her kindness towards the professor. But in such instances, true kind-