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Medalists

Barbara Apstein
Bridgewater State College

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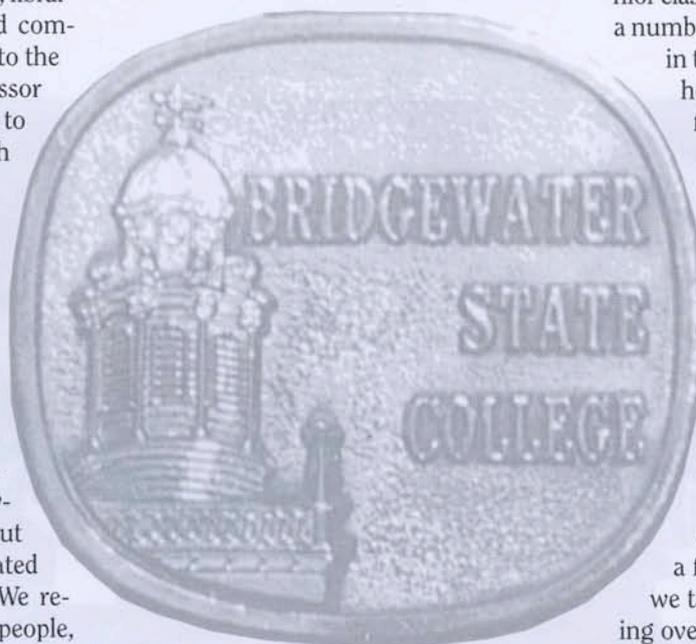
by Barbara Apstein

What was your time?" asked my son when I broke the news that I had been awarded a silver medal. The answer, in this case, was "twenty-five years." Clearly, I had not set a new record for the marathon.

At the beginning of the fall semester, President Adrian Tinsley announced her intention of honoring those faculty, librarians and administrators who had completed 25 or more years of service to the College. She commissioned Professor John Heller of the Art Department to design silver medallions, which were completed just in time for Fall Convocation. Professor Heller's design shows the Boyden Hall bell tower on one side and, engraved on the reverse side, the name of the recipient and the starting date of employment at Bridgewater.

My colleagues and I -- ninety-one of us all together, representing almost half the faculty -- discovered that we had mixed feelings about our medals. Naturally, we appreciated the President's thoughtfulness. We remembered years when, for many people, the words "state employee" seemed to connote laziness and mediocrity, years when we were exhorted to "increase productivity," as if the College were another kind of factory, while at the same time our budget was being cut. The policies which governed our professional lives had sometimes been created by men and women who didn't know us and who had never come to campus to see our work. So naturally we were happy to have our efforts recognized.

But that number: "Twenty five or more years" -- can it really have been that long? "I don't feel that old," one of my colleagues commented. And yet, undeniably, we were all a bit grayer and more wrinkled, and most of us a bit weightier, than we had been when we began our teaching careers at Bridgewater. As we lined up alphabetically, adjusting our academic robes and hoods, waiting for the academic procession into Horace Mann auditorium to begin, we exchanged sardonic jokes. We were to ascend the steps onto the stage one by one; President Tinsley would place the medals around our necks and shake our hands. We would then walk across the stage, shake hands with Board of Trustees Chairman Eugene Durgin, descend the steps, and return to our seats in the auditorium. We noticed two husky stu-



dents stationed at the foot of the stairs leading from the stage. Had they been placed there to catch us if we stumbled? Apparently, they had. Suppose we served the College for another five years? Would we receive colorful square stickers like those the Registry mails out for license plate renewals? We joked about forms of recognition we might have found more practical than the silver medals: assigned parking spaces, books, cash.

Once the Convocation ceremony began, however, the joking ceased. Looking around at our colleagues prompted reflections on the professional lives we had shared: with some, committee work; with others, discussions of research interests, of students, of campus politics. We had congratulated many of these colleagues on marriages and the birth of children. We had admired baby pictures, bought Girl Scout cookies, listened to descriptions of dance recitals and to accounts of goals and home runs. We had also, inevitably, shared stories of illness and loss.

The Convocation guest speaker, Dr. Franklin Wilbur of the class of 1969, told of the Bridgewater teachers who had made a difference in his life, men and women whom many of us had known. Then, senior class President Purvang Patel thanked a number of his professors, some of them in the audience, not only for offering help and encouragement, but also for setting high academic standards. President Tinsley quoted the words of the plaque at the entrance to Boyden Hall, inscribed to Arthur Clarke Boyden and Albert Gardner Boyden, who between them served the College for more than eighty years: "they gave their minds and their hearts and their lives to this school."

Twenty five years ago, many of the medalists were only a few years older than the students we taught. Some of us remember being overwhelmed, the first few times we entered the classroom, with the sudden conviction that we didn't know any more than the students did, that we had nothing to teach them -- and that they would quickly expose us as frauds. During those early years we were occasionally mistaken for undergraduates; we were asked to show our I. D.'s in the rathskeller and the library. Fresh from graduate school, we were eager to share our new knowledge with our classes. Our intellectual excitement would be infectious, we believed; the

students, too, would be fired with enthusiasm for the study of literature, or mathematics, or chemistry.

We've learned a lot since then -- and we're still learning. Our tenure at Bridgewater coincided with a period of enormous change, both in our fields of study and in American society as a whole. We haven't had the luxury of becoming smug and complacent in the certainty of our accumulated superior wisdom. Even before the PC's began to appear in our offices, we knew that computers were going to be important -- and we'd discovered that our Ph.D.'s gave us no advantage whatever in learning how to use them. We were starting from scratch, just like everybody else. We stared

uncomprehendingly at the cryptic messages -- "bad command;" "user authorization failure" -- which occasionally, inexplicably, appeared on our screens. We signed up for workshops offered by Information Services, and re-lived the student experience of confusion and of hope that it would all make sense after a while. We called the Help Desk and listened attentively while patient young people "walked us through" e-mail or helped us find our accessories window. Did they laugh after they put down the phone? Did they have a contest to determine which professor had come up with the stupidest question of the day? Finally, though, we learned to talk with confidence about "on-line" and "databases," modems and CD-ROMs, "http" and "html."

After the Convocation ceremony had ended, we filed out of the auditorium. It was a perfect fall day: the leaves were just beginning to change colors and the white Boyden Hall cupola stood out crisply against a bright blue sky. We greeted our students, friends and colleagues, shook hands, and inspected the medals. Like the speaker in Robert Frost's famous poem, we thought about the road, or several roads, not taken. There were other professions we might have followed, other places we might have chosen to teach. But at that moment, standing in the sunshine of that late September day, everyone seemed contented at having taken the road that led to Bridgewater. ■



Medal recipients on the steps of Boyden Hall