

During Homecoming Weekend, the Alumni Association awarded **Dr. Beatrice Batson M.A. '47** the Wheaton College **2007 Alumna of the Year Award** for Distinguished Service to Alma Mater.

by *Karen Halvorsen Schreck '84*

## the quality of mercy

“Come!”

Her voice. I'd know it anywhere—majestic, yet gracious; authoritative, yet humble. Many years have passed since we last spoke, but still, Dr. Beatrice Batson utters a single word and calls me to my best self.

Now, turning from her computer, Beatrice welcomes me with open arms.

It is so good to see her again, to leave my hesitation at her office door and enter this sanctuary of her creation, where it's pretty much a given: Beatrice will affirm mind and imagination, rigorous scholarship and heartfelt creativity, as gifts from God.

Beatrice's office is located in Buswell Library, two floors up from the E. Beatrice Batson Shakespeare Collection (an expansive compilation of books and essays established in Beatrice's honor, and coordinated by her, which explores the Bard's *oeuvre* through the lens of the Christian tradition). This office is smaller than Beatrice's previous digs in the Old Blanchard, and I do miss the ivy, the grand windows that seemed the perfect backdrop for her rich academic life. But compelling images of Shakespeare illuminate these walls, too, and there's that familiar photograph of the rose-festooned Oxford door! An intricate tapestry, acquired during one of Beatrice's many travels, softens a metal filing cabinet. And, yes, we are flanked by her beloved books.

Here is the stuff that shapes legends, and fuels memories such as this: from an early age, Beatrice loved the feel of books and everything about them. At 12, she announced to her father that she was going to be a professor. They were sitting in front of a fireplace, talking, and what did this gentleman do, presented with his daughter's dream? He smiled and encouraged her. Beatrice deems this “a wonderful, prudent move on the part of a parent,” and remembers her childhood as consistently blessed. When she'd exhausted the library in her own home, for instance, she'd pay a visit to her grandmother, who kept stacks of books on tables just for Beatrice. “You'll want to read this one, and that one, but not that one,” Beatrice's grandmother would say.

And she would have at it.

Beatrice was brought up reading, in other words, which suited her just fine. “My parents encouraged each of their seven children (their eighth died in infancy) to be what they felt they should be,” she recalls. “We were given the great gift of expansiveness.”

This gift—an open mind—also carried an inevitable, if necessary, burden. As a student at Bryan College, Beatrice felt torn by certain questions and concerns: *How can I be a teacher of English and still be doing God's work? What is my ultimate purpose in life, given my faith and my passion for literature?* Hoping to reconcile these issues, Beatrice enrolled in the master's program at Wheaton College. Her degree was in Christian education, but Beatrice also took courses in philosophy, systematic theology, the Bible as literature, and other “mind-awakening” subjects.

By the time Beatrice graduated from Wheaton in 1947, she believed that God was the author of all truth and beauty; and she also believed that the teaching of literature was God's call for her life. Without reservation, she embraced literature as her field. Beatrice then taught intermittently at Bryan, while studying French and German and completing her doctorate at Vanderbilt. She would pursue post-doctoral work at Northwestern University and Oxford University—“all this for the pure joy of learning.”

In 1957, Beatrice began her 33-year tenure at Wheaton. She chose to work at the College because of its commitment to the mission of Christian higher education. “Beatrice was one of the superior teachers. Because of her, I became an English major,” Professor of English Dr. Roger Lundin '71 remembers. “She introduced me to works like *The Brother's Karamazov* and *King Lear* with a depth of understanding, sensitivity, and intelligence that was captivating.”

Roger also describes Beatrice's astute understanding of “the promise and perplexity of the modern age. She related faith in Christ to the whole range of literary and cultural activity.” Roger particularly benefited from Beatrice's capacity for empathy and wisdom during the spring of 1968, when Bobby Kennedy was assassinated and the world seemed tumultuous. “Beatrice took an hour to talk through this event

“That light we see is burning in my hall.  
How far that little candle throws his beams!”

—Portia, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act V, Scene 1



with me,” Roger recalls. “In essence, she said: I honor the intensity and uniqueness of your experience, but I’m also here to show you the larger context of your experience, and how it’s all under God’s sovereignty.”

Such were Beatrice’s pedagogical gifts, extended to generations of Wheaton students. Whether in the public domain of her classroom, in the privacy of her office, or on a much-cherished Wheaton-in-England trip, Beatrice presented great literature (she single-handedly introduced Russian literature into Wheaton’s curriculum, for example); she allowed this material to mystify and provoke; and she facilitated and nurtured meaningful, life-giving connections.

Beatrice also deeply influenced her colleagues, serving on numerous faculty committees, co-founding *SEVEN* (an annual journal designed to promote awareness of the seven authors of the Wade Center and to encourage critical assessment of these writers’ works), and acting as chair of the English department for 13 years. Dr. Jill Peláez Baumgaertner recalls her early years teaching under Beatrice’s leadership: “She was one of those prime forces at Wheaton involved in character formation—a model of commitment to the College, as well as to literature and its ability to contain truth and provide vision. Beatrice treated us with such respect, and had such high standards. She placed opportunities before me, for instance—whether it was delivering a paper, applying for a fellowship, or writing a book—and provided support for whatever I needed.”

Beatrice taught her last official class at Wheaton in 1991, but today, at work in her office—editing a collection of essays, writing a scholarly article, planning the next Shakespeare Institute—she continues to realize her childhood dream of an expansive and fulfilling academic life. “The best we can give is ourselves,” she once exhorted students in a memorable chapel address. “Let’s be sure that self is as strong and committed, as God-centered and human-hearted . . . as is humanly possible, a self that possesses a mind that is clear-cutting and richly stored.”

In Beatrice, such merciful qualities reign.