As I walk through the hallways at NRHS this spring, there is a definite air of bated breath. Some of us are seniors in the midst of committing to college, anticipating life outside of high school, and anxiously awaiting June 25th. Some of us are juniors who are in the process of SATs, ACTs and researching colleges. Others of us are freshmen and sophomores, who perhaps, are just starting to develop serious educational interests. Despite what stage in our lives we are in, we all seem to be preoccupied with the future. After all, wasn’t “what do you want to be when you grow up?” our most frequently asked question as young children? Well, here’s the story of a woman who, in high school, did, in fact, know what she wanted to do with her life.

As many of us already know, Lydia Adegbola became Chair of the English Department at New Rochelle High School at the start of the 2017-2018 school year. Whether you enjoy English or not, proficiency in the language is essential to success in every subject, and Ms. Adegbola is an important person to know in the building.

As a child, Ms. Adegbola was a reader. Her parents were Haitian immigrants who did not speak perfect English but always made sure that their children had the resources to learn. One such resource was the public library, which she frequently visited. Ms. Adegbola loved series books such as Nancy Drew. By the time she got to high school she knew that she wanted to become an English teacher to spread her love of literature. Post high school, Ms. Adegbola attended New York University where she majored in English Education and double minored in psychology and Africana studies.

After college, Ms. Adegbola got a job teaching English in New York City. Her favorite grade to teach was 9th grade because of the books taught at that level. For example, she loves teaching Of Mice and Men because the themes are timeless. The book’s content about racism, stigma against the disabled, friendship, and power structure elicit deep thought and debate from students.

Ms. Adegbola also worked as an assistant principal during her time in NYC schools, developing a liking for administration as well as teaching. “I’m living my dream,” Ms. Adegbola says, in reference to her work at NRHS. She enjoys working as English Department Chair because she is able to reach a great number of students through performing her administrative duties while also teaching one class, an Introduction to College Writing. Her overarching vision for English education at NRHS is to have more students “fall in love with reading and writing.” She has made a few changes so far in pursuit of this goal. For example, high performing students in English 10 Honors wishing to enroll in 11 Honors and students in AP Language and Composition who intend to take part in AP Literature and Composition need not take a qualifying exam. Instead, the application process involves submitting their grades in English, two writing pieces, and a teacher recommendation for review. Ms. Adegbola emphasizes that students will only have a good experience in English if they are challenged but not overwhelmed. Ms. Adegbola hopes that this new process makes advanced English classes more accessible and inclusive for students with strong foundations and a driven work ethic.

Ms. Adegbola values variety in literature. She says, “As much as I love teaching the classics, I also believe in the importance of contemporary literature.” She emphasizes that balancing the old with the new makes for a complete library of literary greats. Ms. Adegbola advises all students wishing to pursue English to read and write every single day and most of all, to persist.

Profiles Edition
English Department Spotlight
Lydia Adegbola – English Department Chair
Introducing Rachel McCain

By Lily Conroy

As a current New Rochelle High School student, it's difficult to imagine what it's like to be on the other side of the teacher's desk. Rachel McCain, one of the newer members of the English department, has been on both sides of the desk here. When Ms. McCain attended New Rochelle High School, she had aspirations of becoming a lawyer, and entered college on a pre-law track. However, she soon realized that she got more out of her English classes and switched to an English major.

Even after switching to English, Ms. McCain didn’t immediately know that she wanted to teach. She worked as a freelance journalist for several years and also served as the editor for a small local newspaper group, which may have informed her current advisory of the Huguenot Herald. She came to teaching ten years ago, when she was asked to teach art at a local summer camp. Though she doesn’t have a professional artistic background, Ms. McCain’s grandfather was an artist and she developed some knowledge from him, which led her to accept the position. That summer, she recognized that she wanted to teach, and adapted this experience into a career teaching English.

For several years, Ms. McCain has taught freshman writing at Purchase College. Last year, she began working as a substitute teacher at New Rochelle High School in addition to these classes. When Ms. Dembek went out on a maternity leave, Ms. McCain took over her classes. The content of her high school classes is fairly similar to that of her freshman writing courses, she says, but “students’ maturity levels vary” (though not always in the expected way). On the whole, though, she’s enjoyed teaching eleventh-grade Regents and Honors English as well as the senior World Literature elective, which surveys poems and short stories written by non-American authors.

Ms. McCain’s arrival at New Rochelle High School was unexpected, she says. As a current student, I can only imagine what it must feel like to work with former teachers as colleagues. “I never thought I would be on the other side,” she says, and she is frequently “bombarded by memories” as she moves through the building. Her current classroom sits right next to that of Mrs. Wallace and down the hall from Mr. MacKay’s, both of whom are her colleagues in the English department and her former English teachers.

In her role teaching English Honors, Ms. McCain works closely with Ms. Morelli, the longtime advisor of the Huguenot Herald. When Ms. Morelli looked to recruit a co-advisor at the beginning of this year, Ms. McCain seemed the natural choice. Her background in journalism has informed her interest in working on the Herald, which she describes as a fun experience. She has hopes for the publication’s future, and is helping initiate plans to expand the Herald’s digital platform. Though some of the Herald’s seniors might have graduated by the time these changes roll out, I’m sure that with Ms. McCain on board there are good things in store.

Alex Gonzalez: NRHS W.I.S.E. Senior and Future English Teacher

By Daviel Schulman

Among the NRHS students who devote their time to working on W.I.S.E. (Westchester Individualized Senior Experience) projects is future teacher Alex Gonzalez. After taking Ms. Kopstein’s English Honors class during his sophomore year, Alex was inspired to become a teacher himself. He saw the W.I.S.E. program as the perfect opportunity for him to work toward that goal. Alex said, “I arranged my schedule so that I had a free first period every day [to observe Ms. Kopstein’s class].” Alex has attended Ms. Kopstein’s class every morning since September of his senior year, with a different purpose than everyone else entering the room - to learn how to teach English. He explained, “It’s been an enlightening experience as I now see the classroom through the teacher’s perspective. I’m dissecting material to find what can be taught rather than when I was a student and read to find what I could learn.”

It is hard enough to manage a heavy course load and the stress of college applications during senior year, so participants in the W.I.S.E. program such as Alex must be extremely passionate about what they are doing. This commitment is evident in Alex’s mindset: “The most difficult aspect for me so far has been managing my time and getting the work I need to get done in a timely manner, because I can’t send Ms. Kopstein a draft of a DYRT [reading quiz] or lesson plan at 2:00 AM. So I work on that first before anything else at home, but homework still keeps me up far into the night on most days.” Alex is very active in the classroom and contributes his analytical insight to class discussions, helping to spark further thought in the students. Once a while, he teaches well-planned lessons that engage the students.

Alex has gotten a lot out of his experience in Ms. Kopstein’s class. “The most valuable thing I’ve learned working on my project has definitely been the reality of teaching,” he says, “which is a lesson that most of us learn at some point or another: things do not go as planned… It’s not necessarily a bad thing though; a teacher needs to be realistic, and so it’s good that I know this reality now so I can be more skilled in the future.”

Being part of the W.I.S.E. program has clearly prepared Alex for his future career in education. According to its website, Westchester Individualized Senior Experience (W.I.S.E.) is “a senior options program designed to allow seniors (with the guidance of faculty mentors) to create, implement, and complete a project based on their individual interests and/or career considerations.”
A Profile of Ellen Wallace

By Lily Conroy

Ellen Wallace’s AP English Language class is known among juniors for its frequent pop essays and well-choreographed lessons. Over her years of teaching eleventh-grade Regents and AP English, Mrs. Wallace has accumulated binders full of lesson plans designed for each book in the junior-year curriculum. Her teaching style appears seamless, as she can eliciting discussion and understanding of books in a way that many students haven’t experienced before. Teaching these books is not as fluid as it sounds, though; Mrs. Wallace says, “It takes me a few seasons with a book before I believe I really teach it well.”

Today, Mrs. Wallace is one of the most well-known teachers in the English department. She serves as a formal mentor to an English teacher who is new to the school this year, and invites other teachers to “come shopping” through her lesson plans. When she was new to New Rochelle High School, Mrs. Wallace benefited from a mentor herself. During her free periods, she visited her colleague Martha Weissberg’s classroom frequently, talking to Mrs. Weissberg about her classes and drawing inspiration from the questions she wrote on her board for students to consider. Today, Mrs. Wallace’s classes often start with discussion of various points that she’s written on her own board.

For many of her current students, it’s difficult to imagine Mrs. Wallace anywhere other than in command of her classroom. But when she was in her position, she didn’t picture herself there. In high school, she wanted to work in journalism. She applied to college with this goal in mind, and like many students, she had an imperfect experience. “I took a couple of thumps,” she says. “There were some Ivy Leagues that did not take me.” But she was sold on her alma mater, Tufts University, when she visited campus and saw students promoting her alma mater, Tufts did not take me.” But she was the some Ivy Leagues. “There were some Ivy Leagues,” she says. “There were some Ivy Leagues that did not take me.” But she was

Ache

By Nicole Reyes

There’s something so sweet in the sour, something so gentle in the pain. There is something so warm in the coldness, something so colorful in the grey. There is still a path between the trees, despite the trouble it is to weave through. There is a comfort in carrying a weight on your shoulders, as heavy as it is to hold on to. The ache starts slowly, and it seeps through your skin, until it hurts so bad it begs you to give in. But there is light in darkness, there is a beginning at the end. You just need to be reminded, sometimes it’s okay to be your own closest friend.

Below are student poems shared at the National English Honor Society’s recent Write Night event:

1 Brookdale Ave
By Susanna Procario-Foley

I am the splinterly edges of the wooden tree-house. I am the cherry pit replanted in the ground. I am the cellar door. I am the creaky swing that rocks precariously on the edge of the porch. You can find me in the tears of those who learned to let go. You can find me in the wood of the ballet barres. You can find me climbing up the paint-chipped poles in the musty basement. You can find me in the silence of a lost voice.

I became who I am here. So much of me will forever be ingrained here.

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Meet Michael Mackay (33 Years Later)

By Lily Conroy and Susanna Procario-Foley

Throughout high school and college, Michael Mackay loved to read and write short stories. But when he started at Stony Brook University, he planned to become an architect. After a short time in the major, though, he was turned off by the amount of math involved in creating buildings that were not only beautiful, but structurally sound. To avoid this, he switched to a fine arts major, where his creations wouldn’t be limited by the confines of physics. Soon after this, he felt as though he didn’t have enough skill to make it in the prestigious field of fine art. His favorite class at the time was an English class, and he pulled from this passion and his long-time love of writing to switch to an English major. Mr. Mackay hoped to apply these skills to an English major. Mr. Mackay has taught English at New Rochelle High School for 33 years. He started teaching under the assumption that writing would remain his main focus, but quickly realized that the work was far too time-consuming to allow intensive writing time, and also that he genuinely enjoyed it. He currently teaches Regents English to eleventh-graders and one section of AP English Literature to seniors. He also plans to launch a Comedy and Satire senior elective next year in honor of his last semester teaching at the high school. Over the last three decades, he’s noticed changes in educational expectations and also in students, who have become better behaved and now act more polite to each other. “This generation of parents are doing a hell of a job raising their kids,” he says. While his AP Literature class is his favorite to teach because he doesn’t have to adhere to the standards of the Regents curriculum, Mr. Mackay’s favorite books to teach are part of the junior-year course-load. He values The Catcher In The Rye and The Great Gatsby for their relative universality and timeless, saying that his students tend to relate to their themes and often begin to grasp symbolism and other literary devices through these books.

For the past nine years, Mr. Mackay has been writing his own memoir (which might be titled either The Invisible Event or Full Time) detailing the relationship between him and his brother who passed away several years ago. He describes himself as a Nick Carraway-type narrator, telling the story of siblings with seemingly opposite personalities. Out of all of the books he has read throughout his life, Shakespeare’s Hamlet has had the greatest effect on the development of his own writing. He compares himself to Hamlet, the thinker, and his brother to Fortinbras, the reckless adventurer. Early in his career, he tried to write a novel in three weeks and hated it. He decided to use the opposite approach this time. In order to do the story justice, Mr. Mackay is taking his writing process slowly, only working during the summers in order to partake in a writing class, devote his full attention to his book, and research his family’s past.

While we may be a little late on the uptake to ‘meet’ Mr. Mackay after 33 years, we appreciated the chance to learn more about his career. As Mr. Mackay’s current students, we’re excited to read his book when it comes out.

Sherry Llauger: Much More than an Athletic Trainer

By Alex Streinger

Sherry Llauger has been the athletic trainer of New Rochelle High School for three years. I recently had a chance to speak to her to find out a little more about her activities in the school, and I was amazed by how much she contributes to the sports teams here at NRHS.

Mrs. Llauger told me about her typical day at the school. She arrives between two and two thirty in the afternoon. She usually starts while the athletes are beginning their physical therapy exercises. Sherry works with the athletes to prepare them for practice and games. In her office, she sees a lot of athletes coming through the door and it makes her day very energetic. She is “...very busy now with spring sports; I have fourteen teams here at the high school”, she says. Sherry attends almost every game, an enormous undertaking considering the number of teams at NRHS.

I also asked Mrs. Llauger about her importance of her role in the New Rochelle High School community. She told me she feels as if students can count on her even with non-sport related matters. “There is a mutual trust that needs to be there for that relationship to be successful and I can honestly say I have it with my kids,” she says. In addition to the athletes, Sherry told me that her door is also open to other students, and wishes that everybody would come to her room to be comfortable and talk.

Athletic trainer was not Sherry’s first job. She worked as an EMT (emergency medical technician) for ten years, and with Disaster Relief with Red Cross during Katrina relief efforts. She was even present during The Miracle on the Hudson event. “I helped Captain Sullivan off the plane when he landed it on the Hudson River,” she says. She then decided to find work that exposed her to tragedy less often. After helping a friend’s daughter with an injured ankle during a basketball game, she decided that athletic training would be her career path.

Sherry wants the students in New Rochelle High School to know that they can come to her whenever they need. Even if it may feel initially intimidating to see the number of students in her office, she encourages students to come in, and she promises they will get her attention.

Ms. Llauger at work. Photo provided by Alex Streinger.