



One Year Out

Suzanne Weaver Goss, Class of 2003

Suzanne Weaver Goss drives to work every morning over a dirt road in central Vermont. When she arrives at the Twinfield School, she pulls up a long, paved driveway through a large field that has been carved out of a wooded hillside. High up on the hill sits a one story school that serves the villages of Plainfield and Marshfield, educating 500 students, grades pre-K through 12, under one roof. Suzanne teaches in the elementary wing, in grade 3.

While many rural schools are having trouble finding enough teachers, Suzanne is at Twinfield not because she was successfully recruited from far away, but because central Vermont is where she happens to live. The new national drive to “grow your own” teachers has been underway at UVTI for more than 30 years.

Suzanne is thoughtful, calm, and serene. Like most UVTI graduates, she did not come to teaching by the most obvious path—but rather through a long and deliberate process of personal growth. She recalls that when she was a girl, back in the 1950s and early '60s, careers for women seemed to be restricted to teacher, nurse, and flight attendant (we called them stewardesses back then). In response to these apparent restrictions, Suzanne chose “none of the above” and dropped out of college.

In the late seventies, just as other women of her generation were discovering a multitude of new careers, Suzanne was becoming a wife and stay-at-home mom. But when her own children reached school age, Suzanne began to create her own career: she decided to home school. This was a very large undertaking that required her to pursue her own education while teaching her children. As it turned out, she had a gift. Before long, the local superintendent was asking her to home school other children who were not doing well in the conventional classroom—first a sixth grader, then two ninth graders. She helped pilot a program that was eventually approved by the school district and is an ongoing alternative program today.

When her own children went into the public high school, Suzanne began working in local

elementary schools as an instructional assistant. Through the years of home schooling, she had come to appreciate the work being done in public schools, and she thought that she had something important to contribute to that work. During her years as a classroom assistant, she also came to appreciate and to be inspired by collaboration with professionals.



Eventually, about the time her son went off to college, Suzanne completed her own bachelor's degree. She was now ready to seek teacher certification. As she describes it, “I had moved from educating my own family to working in my community. As my own family has grown and entered the world, I have grown more interested in promoting social justice and democracy in my community through teaching.”

In class, Suzanne is soft-spoken and affectionate, yet firm. The third graders need continual reminders to pay attention and to keep their hands to themselves, and Suzanne delivers these reminders in a calm voice that nonetheless makes it clear that these particular points are not negotiable. Activities in the classroom flow smoothly, and children are free to move about as they need to.



One Year Out continued from page 3.

Like a happy home, the class atmosphere seems orderly without being regimented.

In preparation for reading a new “chapter book,” Suzanne leads a small group through an exploration of the book’s title, cover illustration, and back cover copy. She helps them relate the story to their own lives, talking about which of the students have a grandmother living with them, and who has a new baby brother. The book, *Canada Geese Quilt* by Natalie Kinsey-Warnock, is set in Vermont in the early spring, and Suzanne’s students are reading it in late March. When all of the reading groups have gathered back together in a circle, Suzanne gives several of the students an opportunity to tell the class about what they are reading.

During a math activity, the children learn about fractions by putting together pieces of colored plastic over a template that represents “one.” When some of the students have trouble manipulating the tiny stickers that are supposed to label the plastic pieces, Suzanne produces—out of nowhere—some larger labels, distributing them without any fanfare or interruption.

Adapting to the unexpected is clearly one of the requirements of the job. Like all good teachers, Suzanne continues to learn. She is currently taking a master’s level math course through Vermont College, she reads books on teaching, and she feels she is still on a steep learning curve when it comes to curriculum development.

Suzanne is also trying to learn, during this first year of full-time classroom teaching, to set some boundaries between her work and her personal time. A number of other teachers at Twinfield warned her that she would “burn out” if she kept up

the pace of her first few months in the job. She still takes work home, and still often goes into school on Saturday, but she claims to have eased up since the beginning of the year.

Asked what has been most difficult about this first year, Suzanne replies, “Having to learn as you do. I feel fortunate that I’m older than many beginning teachers, and that I’m well trained. Of course ‘learning while doing’ is also what makes it an exciting job. The kids are teaching you all the time.”

Learning the art of teaching by doing it is not only what Suzanne did during her years of home schooling. It is also one of the hallmarks of the UVTI program, which involves a ten-month practicum under the supervision of mentors and supervisors. Suzanne frequently reviews her UVTI training to make sure she applies it to her new experiences—and to help her through times of stress. When she feels pressure over standardized testing and the requirements of No Child Left Behind, Suzanne reminds herself of her favorite Jim Nourse maxim: “Keep your eye on the kids.”

The UVTI-ingrained habit of reflection also gets frequent exercise. During the commute home, as she drives over that dirt road, Suzanne often turns off the radio and reflects on the day’s problems, challenges, and successes. If rural Vermont must grow its own teachers, let us hope they find more who are as thoughtful and dedicated as Suzanne Weaver Goss.





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Bits 'n Briefs

- ☑ UVTI Mentor Teacher **Rebbie Carleton** of Randolph Elementary School has been named Vermont Art Teacher of the Year (2003-2004). She was also a finalist for Vermont Teacher of the Year, and was selected UVM District Teacher of the Year.
- ☑ Mentor Teacher **Wendy Wells**, Mentor Teacher **Louise Barreda**, and UVTI graduate **Nancy Boymer** were recognized at the annual Vermont Alliance for Arts Education Recognition Reception at the Vermont State House for their contributions to keeping “the arts a vital part of our schools and communities.”
- ☑ Mentor Teacher **Kate Mortimer** and her students are participating again this year in the Global Art Project for Peace, an art exchange program. Kate’s students at Plainfield School will be sending art work to Scotland and Taiwan, while Kate’s own work is going to Hong Kong. UVTI intern **Ellen Epworth** is also participating the the project.

