



A Man of Letters: David Terrell Shares His Love of English

"When we give students literature it's like giving a nine-year-old broccoli. 'I know you don't like it but it's good for you and here it comes.' Most of the time students don't get to pick what they read and they resent that. I know I did."

Perhaps one of the reasons **English Teacher David Terrell's** students like him so much is that he can relate to them. He remembers what it's like to be a disconnected student in a high school English class. And, after more than 30 years of teaching, 17 at MICDS, he knows how to reach them anyway. "I tell my students that until my junior year, I was a very indifferent student." Terrell entertained ideas about going to law school until a high school humanities and English teacher gave him

his first exposure to art and music history, philosophy and comparative religion. The teacher was "the first real intellectual" that Terrell ever knew, and he was intrigued. That relationship forms the basis for how he works with students today. As a result, even though his classes come with a hefty load of both reading and writing, they also come with a healthy respect for the role of student-teacher connections.

One of Terrell's former students, **Henry Coen '21**, said, "Mr. Terrell was the first teacher who truly treated me like an adult. He is funny and engaging while also bringing out the most analytical and deep parts of all his students."

After students submit their papers, Terrell returns them chock full of comments and without a grade. His door is always open for a more in-depth discussion of the notes. By meeting in person, he said, "I can see what they understand or don't understand, or sometimes it's something I misread. Those conferences are windows to see kids have breakthroughs." It's his favorite part of teaching.



His students learn that reading is an important part of the writing process. Terrell sometimes gives them the opportunity to choose their own book, in addition to traditional selections that offer a variety of life lessons. "They are often surprised by how relevant the works can be, even if they weren't written recently. *Antigone*, written over 2,400 years ago, forces students to make comparisons with our current political climate," he said. "They connect some dots they wouldn't otherwise." William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is his favorite book to teach. "Girls like it as much as boys, which surprised me at first because there are no girls in the story. The conflicts that come up are fascinating, about how, as a group of people, the characters develop myths without even thinking about it as a way to cope with their disastrous situation."

Terrell has picked up a few beloved MICDS traditions that fall beyond the scope of the classroom. He works closely with students auditioning for Prize Speaking, encouraging

David Terrell builds lasting relationships with his students.



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Sophia Taylor '20 and Elizabeth Schmidt '23 enjoy a game of Scrabble on a winter Wednesday afternoon.

them to select a work that their audience—primarily Upper School students—will respond to. There is value in students practicing the recitation of a piece over and over, turning it into an act of interpretation, so he makes it part of his coursework. “If they’re attentive to what’s going on they’ll recite it in a way that shows they really understand it,” he said. “For some, it’s just sound. For others, it’s an internalization. It becomes like a piece of music.”

Scrabble and Tea, another MICDS tradition, turns his classroom on dreary winter Wednesday afternoons into a safe haven filled with laughter, hot tea, animal crackers and music of Terrell’s choosing “I’m old. I get to pick the music,” he said. The club attracts a wide variety of students, some of whom might not interact otherwise. It’s a social event and he admits that he’s not the best Scrabble player. “When it’s my turn



I play quickly and then move on.” He smiled wryly. “It’s not hard to beat Mr. Terrell at Scrabble.” What began as a place for off-season athletes to hang out has turned

into a way for his former students to stay in touch. **Bonnie Sneider '21** said, “After freshman English class with Mr. Terrell, I knew that I had to find a way to still see him during the week. Scrabble and Tea gives me the opportunity to relax and vent to Mr. Terrell, whose presence is so calming. He is quite humorous and tells us about his many quirks, such as using his stovetop to store books. The animal crackers, which he claims he hand makes, are a plus, too.”

Perhaps Terrell’s Scrabble deficiencies can be chalked up to fatigue by the end of the school day. He rises before the sun to

have time to read. He admits this schedule results in “drinking coffee fluently.” He gets to campus early, and by 7:20, he’s ready for his favorite part of teaching: one-on-one meetings with his students. He’s working to change how students receive and use feedback. This feedback comes full circle as he consistently hears from his former students who return to visit. “So much of what they learn doesn’t become evident to them until years later. It’s nice that there are so many graduates who come back and say, ‘I get it now.’”



Even current students recognize the gifts Terrell offers. **Jonah Zacks '21** said, “He has consistently imparted a firm commitment to seeing students do something better. His goal is to see us move beyond the grade because that’s a few digits on a screen. Without having had Mr. Terrell, I would not be the scholar that I am today.”

Terrell holds the **Ethan A.H. Shepley '41 Chair of Distinguished Teaching in English and Composition** established and endowed by members of the Country Day School Class of 1941 as a memorial to their classmate Ethan Shepley, a distinguished public servant and former Board Chair. He’s exploring how the School can improve student experience while pursuing an interest in positive psychology and its relevance to education. “A significant obstacle for many of our students is how they tend to define success only in terms of grades. This is hardly surprising because students have always viewed grades as currency. However, grades don’t tell us nearly enough, and they are often counterproductive because they encourage students to frame learning as



Favorite books Terrell keeps rereading:

The World of Charles Addams
by Charles Addams

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte

The Liars' Club by Mary Karr

A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry

Skippy Dies by Paul Murray

The Human Stain by Philip Roth

Super Sad True Love Story
by Gary Shteyngart

White Teeth by Zadie Smith

All the King's Men by Robert
Penn Warren

Native Son by Richard Wright

a transactional experience (What’s my grade?) instead of transformational (What am I learning?).”

With a healthy understanding of what motivated him as a student and research into what drives students today, Terrell continues a tradition of building relationships that mirror the one that affected his life. “I was immature and I wasn’t that interested. I couldn’t make myself do what I needed to do. I couldn’t sit down and read a book when I was that age,” he said. “It was all about having that one teacher I really connected with.” Today, he’s using that connection to go beyond teaching the basics of grammar and literary analysis. He’s using it to help students foster a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Perhaps **Meredith Goldberg '20** says it best: “For Mr. Terrell, teaching is not merely a profession; it is a calling.”

