COWETA'S HOMEGROWN TEACHERS

By Leigh Knight, Photos by Bob Fraley

Family, roots, opportunity, history and wonderful role models are reasons Coweta teachers cite for returning to their alma maters. Although there is no official record of teachers who were educated in Coweta, ask any of the area's 29 schools and you are sure to get quite a list.

"Off the top of my head, I know of 13 here," says Julie Raschen, principal of Elm Street Elementary School.

Others include Blake Bass, superintendent of the Coweta County School System, Frank Farmer, chairman of the Coweta County Board of Education, Mark Whitlock, CEO of Central Educational Center, Sally Millians, the school system's head nurse, and Alan Wood, Newnan High School's longest-serving principal (now retired but working for the school system part-time).

Several of Coweta's finest homegrown teachers/administrators shared who inspired them to educate Coweta's next crop of alumni.

Vince Bass, Principal Evans Middle School

Favorite time of day then: In elementary school, recess and physical education. I also enjoyed music, though if you would have asked me at the time, I would have strongly denied it. In high school, I always loved history class. To this day, I enjoy a good book on history and watching The History Channel on television.

Favorite time of day now: Any part of the day except 6 a.m. The only way my job could be better is if it started at 10 a.m.

Returning to Newnan to teach in 1990 was an easy choice, according to Vince Bass, a University of Alabama graduate.

"I grew up here, and it was home," says Bass, who looks forward to assuming his duties as principal of Evans Middle School. Bass is no stranger to the school system. He spent his junior high years at Evans and met his wife, Laura, while they were both teachers at Ruth Hill, a school he attended as a child. The couple has been married for 12 years and has two children, Callie, 7, and Wallace, 4.

Bass credits his parents, Nancy, a former educator, and Max Bass, Newnan High School's legendary athletic director, as a source of inspiration.

"Their push for me to be well rounded academically, socially and to have a strong work ethic definitely molded me as an individual," says Bass.

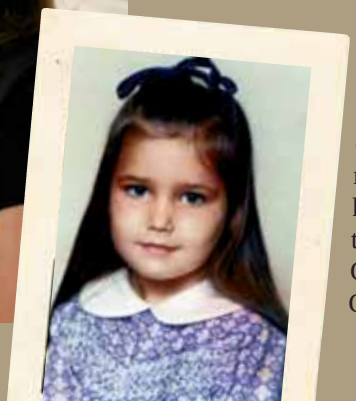
The teachers who inspired him — although he says he was unaware of it at the time — include Paul Bugg, Diane Washington and Cheryl Vickers.

"In sixth grade, Mrs. Jane Miles, my music teacher, taught me it was OK as a guy to sing and act. Although I was not very good, I will always remember her encouraging me in my performance as Bashful the Dwarf in our sixth grade operetta," laughs Bass. "My first year in teaching I owe a lot to Terrell Reed, who took me in unofficially as a mentoree. He taught me that as a first year teacher (that) if you want respect from students and peers, you have to work hard and earn it."

Bass admits that there have been times in his career when he and Laura looked to explore other educational opportunities.

"Our closest call came when Laura and I pursued teaching opportunities in Europe," says Bass. "We were prepared to interview with an organization out of New York, looking strongly at teaching positions at an American school in Northern Italy, when Laura became pregnant with our second child. Since that time, we have learned to not mess with a good thing. Newnan is the place we want to raise our kids."

Amy Sprayberry Dawson, Kindergarten teacher Elm Street Elementary



Favorite time of day then: Language Arts and Reading

Favorite time of day now: In my classroom, reading. I love teaching children the foundation for reading and being able to see many of them read before they leave my class to go to first grade.

As a young girl, Amy Dawson played school every day and tried to be like Mrs. Brenda Clifton and Mrs. Nelda Boren, her first grade teachers at Elm Street Elementary. Years later, in 1989, Boren would make Dawson's dream a reality by hiring her to teach in Coweta County.

"They are the reason I am a teacher today. They were both such wonderful teachers," says Dawson. "In 1991, when I came to Elm Street, I was able to have Brenda Clifton as a co-worker for several years. This year, I had Nelda Boren's grandson in my class. That is one of the great things about teaching in the county I grew up in."

Coweta was the only choice for Dawson, who graduated from Tift College of Mercer University.

"There was never a doubt in my mind that I wanted to come back home and teach in the same system I was educated in," said Dawson. She and husband Roger have two children, Bo, 13, and Laura Beth, 10, and she wanted them to be educated in Coweta County and attend the same schools she attended. She credits former Elm Street teacher Nancy Royal as her mentor.

Elm Street, which opened in 1956, celebrated its 50th anniversary this year with Dawson as the chairman of the 50th anniversary committee.

"It was a thrill for me to be able to plan this year-long celebration," says Dawson. "Because Elm Street is so dear to me, I wanted the 50th year to be special for this school and the community. Elm Street is such an important part of our community, and it has such a rich history. We enjoyed having many former principals, staff members and students being a part of this year's celebration."

Year-long activities included a sock hop, brick dedication for all Elm Street alumni, and the burial of a time capsule to be opened in 50 years, perhaps by one of Dawson's kindergarten students who, like Dawson, has returned to teach at the school she loved.

Dr. Walter Homer Drake III
Coordinator of Facilities
Coweta County School System

Favorite time of day then: P.E. and around lunch, when I could socialize and play sports.

Favorite time of day now: In the afternoon, when I go home and play with my kids. I enjoy taking my son Harrison, 6, to ballgames. [Drake is married to Tracie and has two other sons, Wesley, 3 and Wheeler, 1]

If you are a parent of a child who prefers shooting hoops to studying, Dr. Walter Drake can relate.

"All I wanted to do was play sports," recalls Drake. "However, sports can teach you a lot like it's okay to fail, but how many times do you get back up? Sports teach us when we get knocked down to get back up."

Drake's enthusiasm for sports lead to a basketball scholarship at North Georgia College and State University.

"My parents, Homer and Ruth, really helped by pressing me to go ahead with an education degree," says Drake. "In high school, I was all about sports. When I got to college, I really focused on getting my education. Luckily, I got the opportunity to do that."

After college, Drake returned to Newnan High School, his alma mater, as a teacher.

"It was interesting to come back and get to know the teachers as acquaintances," says Drake. "The opportunity to coach and teach was perfect. I have roots here and love this area."

In fact, Drake's grandfather, Walter Homer Drake Sr., was instrumental in moving Newnan High School to its current location on LaGrange Street. It was in 1952, during his tenure as superintendent of the Newnan School System (Drake served from 1941-1964). As a tribute, the stadium was named for him upon its completion in 1967.

In addition to his family, Drake cites several boyhood coaches as positive role models, including Terrell Reed, Glenn Connally and Steve Quesinberry. Dave Clemens and Alan Wood are other positive influences.

Drake maintains a play-hard, work-hard attitude on and off the courts, spending the majority of his summers earning advanced degrees, and his efforts have paid off. He served as assistant principal at Newnan High School and East Coweta High School and principal of Evans Middle School prior to his current position.

Whether he is coaching his son's little league, playing a Saturday morning pick-up game or in a classroom, Drake uses a positive attitude and sports to teach life's lessons. CL

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