



They work in some of the poorest, neediest school districts in the state, but for members of the Mississippi Teacher Corps, it's not a hardship assignment. It's

# Calling <sup>A</sup>

By Tobie Baker



Photographs by Robert Jordan

**J**ust past the bayou that runs through the center of town in Sumner, Miss., stands the North Delta Alternative School. Built in 1920, it's a grand old building that you might call down on its luck, struggling to fulfill the potential of its shining hardwood floors, great expanses of windows and auditorium with fringed velvet curtain. Ironically, the building could be a metaphor for the teen-age students who arrive at the school each day struggling against their own "bad luck" of suspensions and more serious problems to—hopefully—grab this last chance to fulfill their own potential.

It is here that the Mississippi Teacher Corps' Clint Blacker determinedly works against the fear his students seem to have of getting an education and the indifference of their parents. Thousands of miles away from his home in Oregon, he teaches math to seventh- and eighth-grade students, many of whom already have close ties to the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, which is a mere 10-minute drive from the school.

"I have students who look for their uncles at Parchman on the Department of Corrections Web site," says Blacker. "The social problems these kids face are overwhelming."

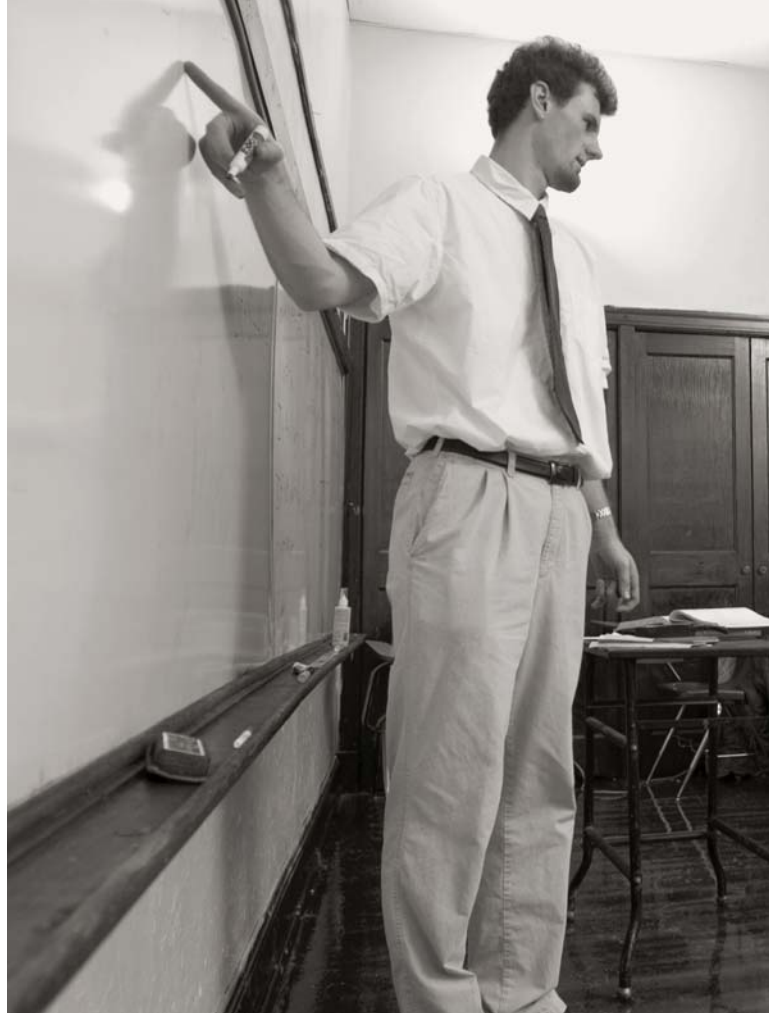
A Burns, Ore., native, Blacker grew up surrounded by the logging industry. He connects to the agriculture-based economy of the Mississippi Delta, but the poverty levels of eastern Oregon are less than those in Tallahatchie County.

"You have to be tough," says the 25-year-old. "It's frustrating when you don't see improvements in your students, but I'm still teaching. I haven't quit."

After six years of effort toward bachelor's degrees in computer science and history at Oregon State University, Blacker was eager to experience life on the other side of the desk. He wanted to teach immediately, and the Mississippi Teacher Corps (MTC) made that possible.

Blacker spent two months in a summer program at Ole Miss and passed standardized tests for the subject area he wanted to teach, earning him a three-year teaching license that qualifies him to fill a spot in a teacher-shortage area school. In return for his two-year commitment to teach in the state, Blacker—and all his Teacher Corps colleagues—can earn a master's degree at Ole Miss with most expenses paid, including tuition, housing and a stipend during the summer. Anyone who has at least a bachelor's degree in any area except education is eligible.

Nearly a third of Mississippi's 82 counties, most within the Mississippi Delta, don't have enough teachers. Without nontraditional forms of teacher-placement programs, such as the MTC, public school students in these areas would not receive a quality education. Reggie Barnes, superintendent of the Cleveland Public School District, has 28 years of experience as an educator in the Mississippi Delta. He's thankful he discovered the MTC program.



"It's so much better when someone tells you that you can make it. The people who encouraged me made a difference."

—Denise Bridges



"I could give praise for days to the MTC program Ole Miss provides," says Barnes. "MTC provides caring teachers, and those teachers help improve our students."

Prior to the MTC, Barnes sometimes relied on uncertified instructors to occupy classrooms. Now he receives highly qualified teachers. "I've supervised about 20 MTC instructors," he says. "At one point, we were averaging four to six



*(Above) Oregon native Clint Blacker teaches math to 7th and 8th grade student in Summer as part of UM's Mississippi Teacher Corp program. Richard Campbell (left) teaches in Holly Springs as part of the same program.*

MTC instructors a year. The program brought us immediate relief.”

Teacher shortages became a serious problem when the federal government forced the integration of public education, Barnes believes. A majority of Delta towns resisted the order, leading to white flight.

“The white people turned to churches and other organizations to educate their children until private academies could be established,” says Barnes. “Those academies were designed to create barriers.”

In addition to the removal of white students from public education, Barnes says white flight also decreased the number of trained administrators to lead the public school systems. That power structure was and still is detrimental to public education, he adds.

According to Mississippi Department of Education enrollment figures for the 2003-04 academic year, 40,294 middle and high school students attend public schools in critical teaching-shortage areas. Despite the statistics, Barnes says the Mississippi Teacher Corps often makes the difference between impossible and bearable. “If it weren’t for the MTC program, God only knows where some of our schools would be today.”

Unaccustomed to the cultural differences and living thousands of miles away from his family, Blacker’s first year as a

teacher has not been without difficulty. Yet he remains committed. His future includes teaching.

“God gives us different talents, and teaching is one of mine,” Blacker says. “I didn’t know what I was getting myself into by coming down here, but it’s been a good experience for me. I’m happy as a teacher.”

Richard Campbell, a Mississippi native, better understands the societal hurdles his students face at Holly Springs High School. As a child in Winona, Campbell recalls that both the water and electricity at his home were shut off on occasion. The poverty he endured was the result of his mother’s battle with drug addiction.

“It was one of the most difficult times in my life,” says the 30-year-old. “Now, I find my experiences growing up help me relate to the problems my students face.”

Campbell prevailed. With a ROTC scholarship at UM, he earned a bachelor’s degree in biology before serving six years as an officer in the Marine Corps. While stationed in Okinawa, Japan, Campbell discovered his love for teaching when asked to direct a children’s church program.

“I enjoyed leading the children’s services,” Campbell says. “I found my true calling.”

After returning from military duty, Campbell set out to teach in his native state. He soon discovered the Mississippi Teacher Corps, and, today, he’s a first-year science teacher. “To be a teacher, you know you are called or destined to do it. Teaching brings me joy.”

Motivating students is a grand task for Campbell, but disciplining them is easier for the ex-marine. More than halfway through the academic year, his students’ behavior has improved, but their grades remain steady.

“Taking personal interest in students can be disheartening,” Campbell says, “but I can’t give up. I have to push on and affect those I can reach.”

About 70 percent of all applicants to the Teacher Corps are from out of state, but actual placement is about 50 percent Mississippians, said Ben Guest, a 2000 MTC alumnus and now MTC program coordinator. Currently, 39 MTC teachers are in classrooms throughout the state; the program has placed approximately 300 teachers in critical shortage areas since its creation in 1989. Over the past 15 years, those teachers have challenged, inspired and motivated thousands of at-risk students. And records show that about 70 percent of MTC teachers sign up for a third year after their commitment is fulfilled.

While Blacker and Campbell wait to witness improvements in their students, there is evidence that Teacher Corps teachers make a difference with students. Several MTC teachers inspired Denise Bridges, a native of Hollandale, Miss. With their assistance, Bridges, the youngest of nine children, graduated from Simmons High School with a 3.6 grade-point average.

“It’s so much better when someone tells you that you can make it,” says Bridges, now a freshman English major at Ole Miss. “The people who encouraged me made a difference.”

One of the MTC teachers who boosted Bridges was Ben Guest.

“Mr. Guest was amazing,” says Bridges. “He was a wonder-

ful teacher. He was compassionate. He cared about us.”

Bridges shared classes in the public school at Hollandale with only a handful of white students. The community is literally divided by the railroad with a white café on one side of the tracks and a black café on the other side.

“I never had one-on-one contact with white kids growing up,” says Bridges. “Sadly, the situation remains the same back home.”

Within the small, predominantly black Mississippi Delta town, teen pregnancy is a problem. Prior to graduating high school, Bridges recalls 10 of her girlfriends already had children. Drug abuse, high unemployment and poverty are other social ills common to Hollandale, Bridges says.

“A lot of young people there don’t have the personal mind-set to better themselves,” says the 18-year-old. “They get sucked in and are never encouraged to improve their lives.”

The MTC program also promotes diversity by sending white teachers into predominantly black schools. Although her exposure to whites was limited, Bridges now accepts that she can’t pass judgment on others. “People, no matter what color, are still people,” she says.

Although its effects are subtle, MTC does address the ills of racism, Guest believes. Like himself, a majority of MTC instructors have never seen the Mississippi Delta before arriving at their assignments.

“Segregation still exists in our schools,” he says. “In the Delta, most of the white kids attend private academies, and

the black kids are left to fend for themselves in underachieving public schools.”

While the white and black communities in Hollandale seldom interacted with each other, Guest remained focused on teaching. “I soon realized the students and myself were a lot alike despite the color of our skin, so I used Maya Angelou’s quote ‘I see myself in you. I hope you see yourself in me’ as inspiration,” he says. “I learned much more than I ever taught. It was an incredible journey.”

Sarah Alford, a first-year English teacher in Humphreys County, joins Campbell and Blacker where Guest left off. The 26-year-old MTC teacher from Madison is also working to improve race relations by getting her students out of the classroom on field trips like the one they recently took to the Ole Miss campus. Some of her students had never before crossed the county line.

“Their reaction to seeing where James Meredith stood waiting to be admitted into Ole Miss was somewhat delayed,” Alford says. “At the time, they were more interested in seeing the bullet holes in the Lyceum columns.”

The reaction is typical for teen-agers, but Alford hopes the adventure will be inspirational. “I believe the reality of seeing where James Meredith once stood will impact some of my students later.

“It’s all about providing the experience,” Alford continues. “That’s what’s lacking in my school and with my students. I may never know if it mattered to them or not, but I know I showed them where history was made.” *AR*

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