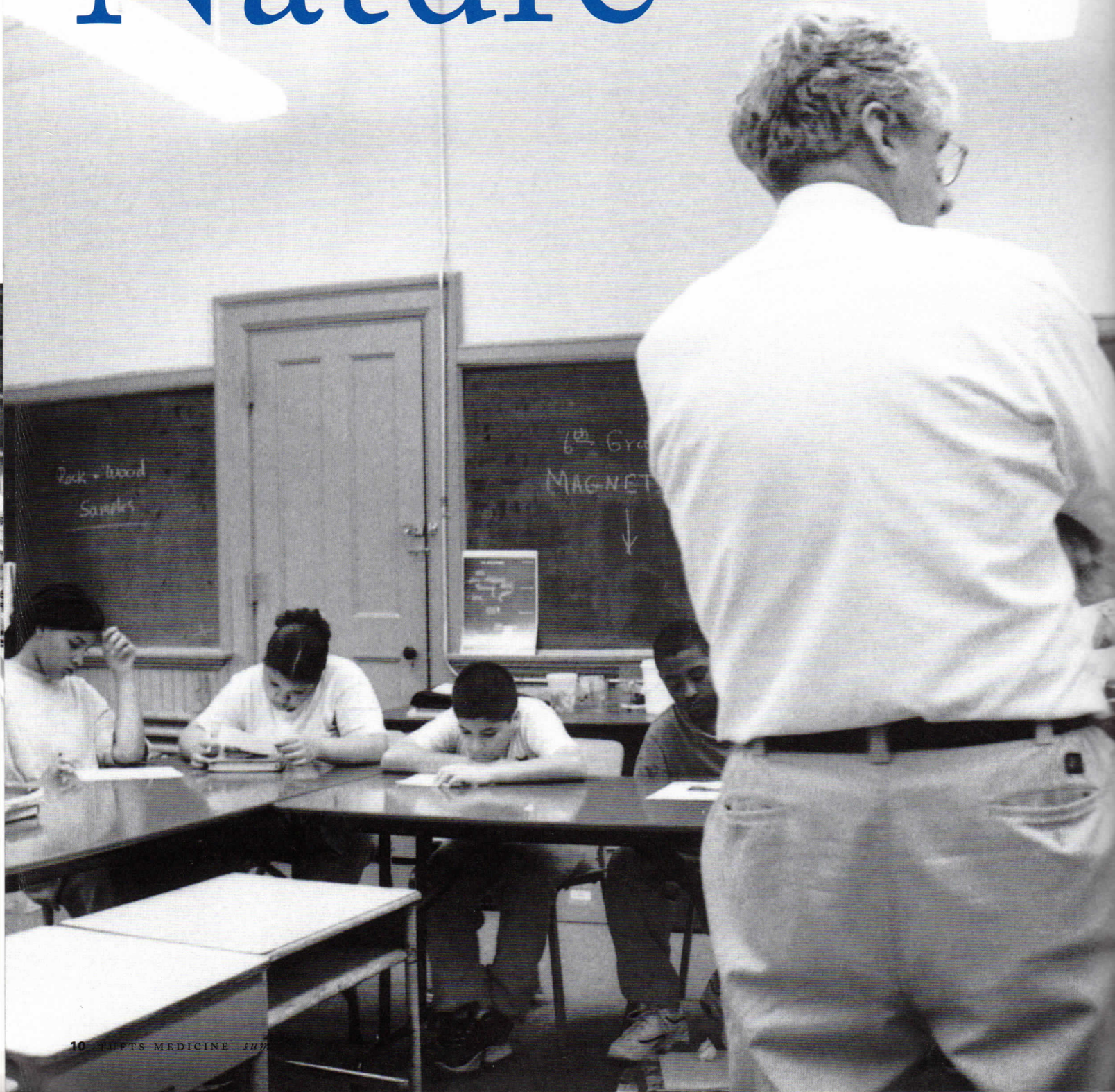


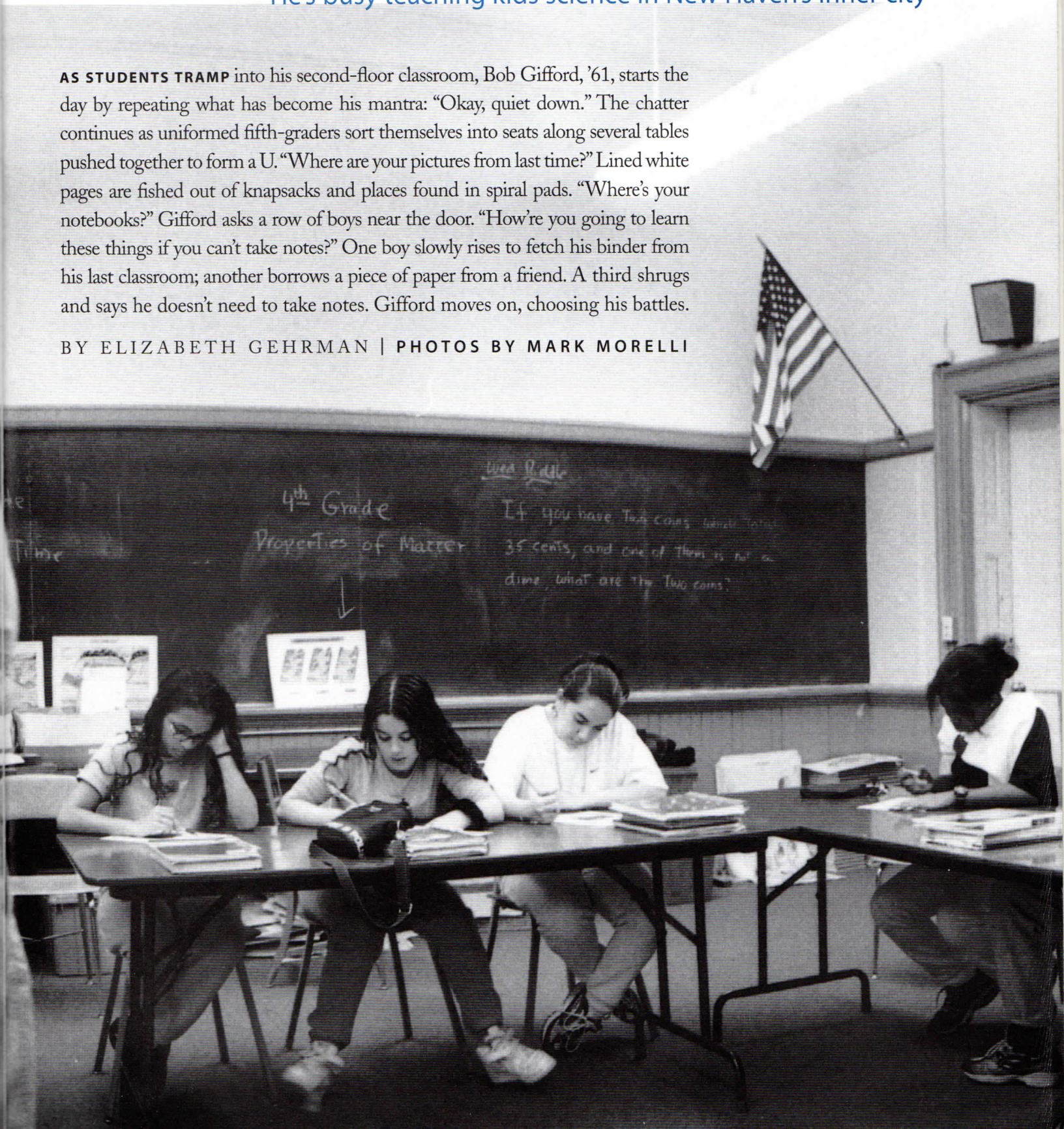
N Second Nature



This former dean at Yale Medical School retired recently after 33 years on the job. But he's not fly-fishing or traveling to the Caribbean for fun. He's busy teaching kids science in New Haven's inner city

AS STUDENTS TRAMP into his second-floor classroom, Bob Gifford, '61, starts the day by repeating what has become his mantra: "Okay, quiet down." The chatter continues as uniformed fifth-graders sort themselves into seats along several tables pushed together to form a U. "Where are your pictures from last time?" Lined white pages are fished out of knapsacks and places found in spiral pads. "Where's your notebooks?" Gifford asks a row of boys near the door. "How're you going to learn these things if you can't take notes?" One boy slowly rises to fetch his binder from his last classroom; another borrows a piece of paper from a friend. A third shrugs and says he doesn't need to take notes. Gifford moves on, choosing his battles.

BY ELIZABETH GEHRMAN | PHOTOS BY MARK MORELLI





In the shadow of the crisp white spires and manicured lawns of Yale University, the neighborhood known as the Hill has struggled for years. Separated from the rest of New Haven by Route 34 in the mid-1960s, it is one of the poorest areas in town and has not quite shaken the parasites of poverty: drugs, crime and prostitution. The 19th-century wood-framed houses in the area of Howard Avenue have potential and little else; a few are boarded up and maculated with graffiti, and several sit beside vacant lots or corner stores that peddle milk, toilet tissue, lottery tickets, Twinkies.

The Sacred Heart/St. Peter School, a brick building on the northern border of the Hill and directly across from Yale's School of Nursing, has been serving the community for more than a century, through influxes of Irish, Jewish and Italian immigrants. Today's population, according to the principal, is approximately 70 percent African American, 25 percent Hispanic and 5 percent multiracial. About half the children come from single-parent homes or live with their grandparents, and almost two-thirds qualify for free school lunches. A few years ago, after the merger of the two neighborhood parochial schools

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resulted in lowered expectations, enrollment and morale, Sacred Heart/St. Peter barely avoided closing. But you'd never know that from the lively chatter that fills its halls—and classrooms—today.

"Okay, be quiet!" Gifford says again, tapping his desk with a pointer. "Quiet. Alyssa, quiet. Chance, quiet." Two mouths hold still for a few seconds, but the decibel level in the room remains essentially unchanged. Gif-

ford, the science teacher at Sacred Heart/St. Peter since last fall, clicks the mouse of the iMac that gleams incongruously near a table piled with textbooks he calls "castoffs from another school" and mounds of wood, rocks and other fragments of nature he has collected over the past few months to illustrate his lessons. The labeled line drawing of a flower is projected from the computer onto a white screen in the front of the room.

"Now, what are the petals for?" he asks.

A barrage of creative hypotheses comes flying at him amid the din. "I want your hands up!" he says. "Don't everybody talk at once. Quiet, please! Quiet! Who...is...talking? Rolando!" The static skips a beat, then resumes. Gifford takes the high road. "What do petals have that might attract bees?"

"I know!" shouts Jawan, a handsome, thin boy with large brown eyes and a certain way with the ladies. He takes a few stabs at it but doesn't quite hit the mark.

"Why would we want bugs?" Gifford asks. Jawan's raised hand frenetically cuts the air. "Somebody else besides Jawan. Sonetta? Sonetta, what are you talking about? Let's not talk during the science class, please. Now, why in the world would nature want bugs?"

"Oh, I know why!" Jawan says, nearly crawling over his desk with enthusiasm. "I know why they want bugs! *I know I know I know!*"

"Anybody else? What is this talking going on over here? Okay, Jawan?"

"To make seeds?" asks Jawan.

"Yeah, the pollen," Gifford begins. "There's...talking...going...on! Stop it!" He slaps the desk with his pointer and tries again. "Who knows what the bugs do with the pollen? Hold it! Listen to me! Listen...to...me! There is *still* talking going on!"

A Nap Before Dinner

DR. ROBERT H. GIFFORD IS A TALL MAN with a quietly confident presence and a deep, resonant voice. You get the sense that he's not used to being ignored and that dealing with the garrulous packs of fourth-through eighth-graders he's been charged with educating is an entirely alien kind of challenge for him. But you also get the sense that challenges are his oxygen. It seems only logical that he would take on a new one at 68, in his first year of retirement from his post as a wildly popular professor of medicine and deputy dean of education at Yale.

"I've felt for a long time that one of the hugest problems we have as a country is education, particularly for underserved students," he says. "And I felt that if I were going to do anything else after I left Yale, that teaching in such a school might be a good thing to do because that's where the tremendous need was."

It isn't the first time in his life Gifford has sought to fill a need. Growing up in the Boston suburbs of Cambridge and Newton, he decided at age six to become a doctor to help keep others from the agony he watched his parents endure as his younger brother died of meningitis. After receiving his B.A. from Ohio Wesleyan University and serving three years as a lieutenant in the Air Force, he returned to Boston for medical school. He left Tufts with a *cum laude* degree and a new wife, the former Karlee Smith, whom he had met on a blind date.

"We were married around the year Kennedy was elected," he says, "and being from Massachusetts, I was very emotionally involved in that." When the president reminded young Americans of their obligation to serve, the Giffords packed up their six-week-old baby and his two-year-old brother and headed for Colombia, South America, with the second Peace Corps mission in 1964. With two years of residency in internal medicine and one in pediatrics, Gifford directed the medical program and cared for hundreds of volunteers. He and Karlee—who had their third child during the two-year stint and a fourth shortly after they returned to the States—also opened their home to many of the volunteers.

"Being in the Peace Corps did change my life in many ways," Gifford says. "Right from the start I saw what it's like to have absolutely nothing. I mean the poverty in urban South America is so tremendous there was just no way, no hope that these people could ever get out of it, ever. There was no education. There were no jobs. There must have been a lot of smart people in those *barrios*, and yet it's virtually hopeless for them."

Seeing the poverty in Colombia, he says, made him more aware of the problems in his own country when he returned. (Gifford moved to New Haven in 1966 to complete his residency training.) "Early on when I became dean of students at Yale," he says, "we started tons of programs in the city of New Haven. Because in this coun-

try, it's less hopeless. I mean, it is possible for people to escape from areas that have nothing. But it doesn't happen very often."

It was while working alongside medical students as they taught science in an inner-city high school and saw patients in a Hill homeless shelter that Gifford became aware of Sacred Heart/St. Peter.

"When I met the people there I was really impressed with what they were trying to do," he says, referring to efforts to upgrade the curriculum, increase test scores, introduce the concept of peaceful conflict resolution, and, perhaps most important, provide a safe, nurturing envi-

Gifford began every school year at Yale by rounding up members of the entering class and driving them through New Haven on a bus, narrating like a professional tour guide.

ronment. "And the need was great. They had no science at all. They wanted someone to come in and not only teach science but develop a curriculum for the whole school. And the kids were all inner-city, underprivileged kids. And those are the kids I wanted to teach."

Principal Jeri Giaimo tells the same story, but with a postscript. According to Giaimo, after Gifford phoned to tell her and Jay Bowes, director of the school's nonviolence initiative, that he was interested in the position, "Jay and I were both in tears. To think that we had a person with Bob's expertise and his caliber who would be willing to work for us. He's a gift. He truly is a gift."

Such a gift, in fact, that he worked the first six months without pay while on sabbatical from Yale—and this is not a job one dabbles in. Teaching five classes a day and designing an entire curriculum for each grade doesn't allow much time for the usual pursuits of retirement, such as long afternoons on the golf course or romantic cruises to some tropical paradise.

"He has to be there at 7:30 in the morning," says Karlee, "and he gets home around five in the afternoon. When he first



started, he would make a beeline from the door to the couch and collapse there for a nap before dinner. But right after dinner he's upstairs on the Internet."

"The curriculum is built through the Internet in a huge way," Gifford says. "I found what the national standards for grades four through eight should be, and I borrow very heavily from sites that illustrate the things I'm trying to teach." Rather than using precious funds on books, Gifford told school officials before he started that he could not teach without a computer, an Internet connection and a projector: "It's like having a million textbooks at your fingertips." The setup, which cost about \$5,000, was paid for by a group of businesspeople who have been the school's guardian angels for the past four years.

Gifford recently did a workshop to show the other teachers how to integrate technology into their classes, and the response was enthusiastic. "He is the most up-to-date teacher we have," says Giaimo. "He's exposing the children to the Internet, and they're not getting that anywhere else. It's a wonderful experience for them."

Basing lessons on an affordable, constantly updated medium is only half of Gifford's dynamic approach to learning; the other half, using hands-on experiments, has been common in prep schools and the better public school districts for years, but was new to Sacred Heart/St. Peter. With kits from the National Science Foundation, specimens he gathers constantly on neighborhood walks with Karlee and donated microscopes and other equipment, Gifford has the children studying everything from electromagnetism to vehicle propulsion to the care and feeding of snails, fiddler crabs and frogs—this last being the most popular so far.

Out of Control

THE TECHNIQUE IS HELPING HIM START to crack a conundrum he never had to face at Yale, where he is now professor *emeritus*: how to motivate his students. As a dean, Gifford was, by all accounts, extraordinarily inspiring, largely because of the personal interest he took in students' lives. "He was a piper of a kind that very few institutions have," says Leon Rosenberg, who as dean of the Yale School of Medicine recruited Gifford to be deputy dean of student affairs in 1985. "Students loved him

because he loved them. There was nothing he wouldn't do for them. It was the most successful appointment I ever made."

Gifford began every school year by rounding up members of the entering class and driving them through New Haven on a bus, narrating like a professional tour guide. He played ice hockey with his students and regularly performed in student shows; he owns his own Santa suit, which he donned whenever the occasion called. He counseled students, worked beside them for charitable causes, mentored them professionally and acted as surrogate father,

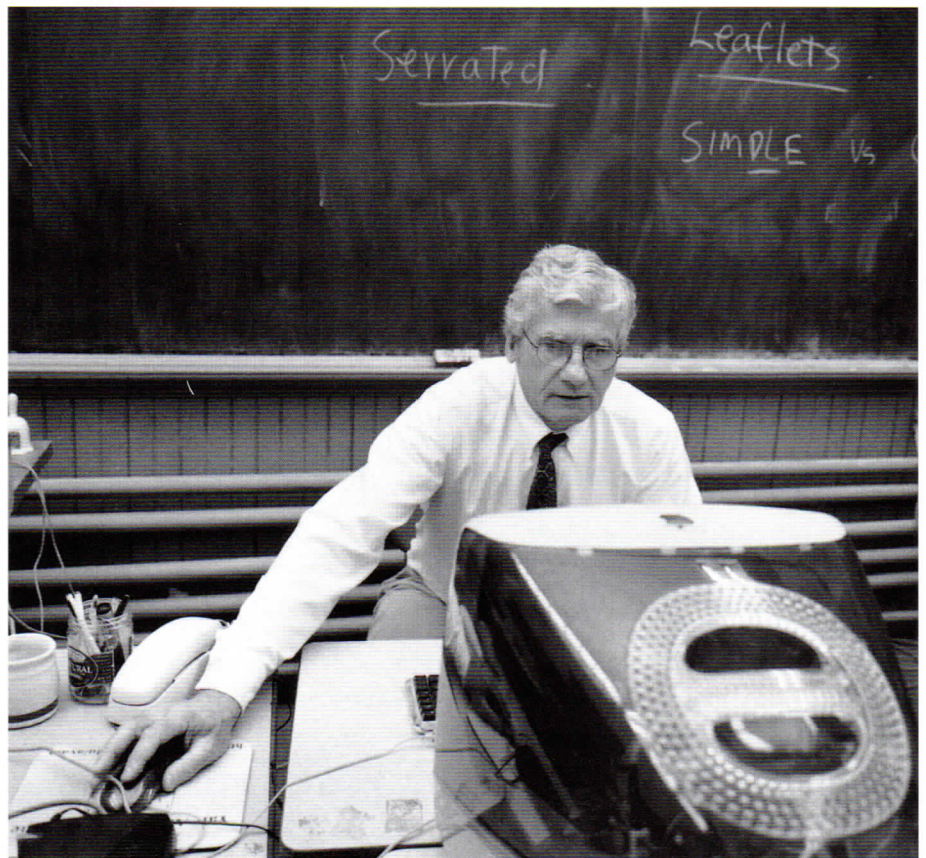
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going so far as to give one away at her wedding. He was, it seems, so universally well liked it almost strains credibility.

"He is one of the heroes in my life," says Dr. Leo Cooney, chief of general internal medicine at Yale and a former student of Gifford's. "He made me feel good about myself in an honest, in-depth way. There are hundreds of people with some connection to Yale who see Bob as one of the major, if not *the* major, influences on their career. When Bob asked me to come back to Yale to teach, I said to my wife, 'Honey, it's like Ted Williams saying, 'Kid, I like your swing.' ' He leaves an impact that is hard to quantify."

Of course, when every student you teach was class valedictorian, *summa cum laude*, Phi Beta Kappa, captain of the debating team and senior class president, the results of such personal attention are at once immediate and immense. Disadvantaged 12-year-olds do not provide precisely the same kind of feedback.

"This is, quite frankly," Gifford says, "the most difficult job I have ever had." Last summer, before he'd even started, one of his own children, a teacher in Florida,



asked him about his discipline plan. "Having never heard that term," Gifford says, "I said, 'What are you talking about?' I mean, you tell them to be quiet. And she was rolling around laughing. It didn't take me too long to learn what she meant. All the time they talk, talk, talk. We have kids who simply *cannot* shut up. Doesn't matter what you do—yell, bang on tables, threaten, send 'em out in the hall, send 'em to the principal's office. It seems that it would be possible to get them to be quiet. Every day I say to myself, 'There must be a way.'"

"He had quite an adjustment," Jeri Giaimo admits. "He had to learn to pace himself. Thank goodness we had the scores to show him that they are learning." Gifford is part of a team of new teachers that has raised the expectancy level at the school. "The first report cards were miserable," says Giaimo. "Oh, absolutely. Children who had never received an F in their life had F's on their report card. But as a result, our Iowa test scores for those grades have gone up. The seventh grade, for example, showed a year-and-a-half's growth in science this year."

Gifford finds it "hard to believe" he has made much difference, perhaps in part because although good grades are nice, his ultimate goal is a little more abstract. "I want to see these kids solving problems," he says. "For some reason, they're just so concrete. Science is so huge, and we only teach a relatively few things. They need to think outside of the obvious, consider the possibilities." He says he has found this "frustratingly slow in coming," but when pressed, concedes he may have had an impact on individual children.

Jawan, for instance. "Jawan's one of these hyperactive kids," Gifford says. "He's reasonably smart, but he just cannot sit still; he cannot maintain quiet. Early in the year, he was out of control. But he's gotten interested in science, and that helped. He got a good grade on a test, and that bucked him up a lot." Another fifth-grader, Olga, has made a complete turnaround, going from failing grades in the fall to A's by winter break. "That has made a huge difference in her self-image," says Gifford. "She's suddenly become an extremely serious student. She wants to learn. She prepares; she takes notes; she studies. It's very positive, because I think she may carry these traits on into high school."

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more Jawans and Olgas lurking among them than Gifford is quite ready to acknowledge. They crowd around, eager to discuss experiments they've done and science contests they've entered ("We won first place at Yale!" says Lania of a bridge-building competition the eighth grade took part in at the school of engineering). Nearly all mention, unbidden, the classroom projects as vastly preferable to textbooks, and several announce aspirations to practice medicine or law.

Backwards Poetry

GIFFORD SEEMS TO APPROACH INNER-CITY education as he would a flawed science experiment: If he just thinks about the problem long enough, he will figure out a way to fix it.

"One of the things I worry about is the kids who are not doing well," he says. "I can remember when I first came to this school, I used to say if I can make a difference in one or two lives—but now I realize that's not enough. I mean, how can you say that? That's wrong. What about these other kids, the kids who are not able? Do you just keep failing them? What is the alternative? Is the alternative to pass them? Why can't we do better for them? I feel so bad about that."

Though he admits that pondering such unanswerable questions can be depressing, he says that for the most part he gets "a tremendous amount of energy" out of teaching at Sacred Heart/St. Peter. "He's a people person," says his wife, Karlee. "I've been married to him for—how many years? 40?—and it's still fun. He's interested in the world and the people in it. And he's such an optimist. He's always saying, 'Sure, we can do that.'" It is partly this attitude that put him in the trenches on the losing side of this country's class warfare, despite his long tenure fraternizing with the enemy.

Though Gifford maintains that Yale,

which in recent years has become very active in the community around it, is no longer the ivory tower of reputation, his colleagues at both the university and the grammar school see it a little differently. "The words 'ivory tower' and 'Bob Gifford' just don't fit at all," says Leo Cooney. "He happens to be at a wonderful institution called Yale, but he has never had a sense of inflated ego about his position."

Gifford certainly seems comfortable breaking the mold of academic physician. For 25 years he owned a parrot named Rebecca, celebrated for her vocabulary and discriminating taste. He has been a beekeeper, does woodworking, writes poetry and limericks and has traced his family history back 15 generations to one Stephen Hopkins, a passenger on the *Mayflower*. The summer place he and Karlee have owned for 30 years is no designer bungalow, but rather an unfinished cottage with an outhouse on Littlejohn Island, Maine.

Despite his remarkable employment history, Gifford seems to have fit in at Sacred Heart/St. Peter right from the start. In a matter of days, he'd become de facto school doctor, asked to advise on everything from fleeting backaches to major, life-changing illnesses. Not surprisingly, he has thrown himself into school activities, participating in the students' weekly field day, conducting a faculty workshop on medical emergencies, reading the morning prayer in Spanish and amusing fellow teachers with the sort of performances he was known for at Yale, such as standing on a chair at the staff Christmas party to recite a poem backwards. Nearly everyone at the school describes him as a "regular guy."

"He respects everybody," says Peggy Fehm, whose third-grade classroom is across the hall from Gifford's. "It doesn't matter what your status is, your economic level, your education level. He's just a very giving person."

Several Yale colleagues say they believe Gifford, the son and grandson of Methodist ministers, might have been a missionary if he hadn't become a doctor. "This for him is not just spitting in the wind," says Dr. Sherwin Nuland, a clinical professor of surgery at Yale. "He's a fellow who has found his calling in life. And his calling may have seemed to be internal medicine, but his real calling was the care and feeding of the young." **TM**

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