

Lecturer Rhonda Bondie, Director of Professional Learning

Starting out as a professional dancer, Rhonda Bondie began teaching as an artist-in-residence in New York City, and then spent more than 20 years in urban public schools as a special and general educator and assistant principal before coming to the Ed School. This past year, Bondie took on a new role as director of professional learning. She spoke to *Ed.* about her early memories, inclusive teaching, and Tombstone Pizza.

Where did you grow up?

I was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and grew up in a rural area south-east of there, where my extended family lived on farms and worked at Ford Motor Company.

Any childhood memories have a lasting impact on whom you become as an educator?

At home, my sister and I had lessons with family members every day to learn how to make things. I fondly remember waking up at 5 a.m. to pick vegetables or fruit to make pickles, jelly, and tomato sauce. We would make enough jars for the entire extended family by noon. From this experience, I learned the importance of modeling and mentoring. I also remember how my aunts and grandmas would adjust instruction based on the age and skills of my cousins and me. I was the youngest, so I would get just a little ball of bread dough to knead and to make into a tiny loaf until I became strong enough to work with a whole loaf. To this day, I enjoy the differences of my students and tailor instruction to ensure everyone feels valued and stretched. My teaching is also very hands on and active. I think these characteristics are rooted deeply in my favorite moments of active learning in my childhood.

Another: My ballet teacher was an artist and master of observation and feedback. Even today, I think about how she would walk down the line of dancers and offer an image to help us envision what our bodies should look like or say one word that helped us improve our dancing. She also would make us redo an exercise or a step many times correctly for every one mistake. She wasn't afraid to stop, fix things, practice,

and then go forward. She knew that rushing learners to the finish wasn't effective. I have worked very hard to be like her when I observe teachers in the classroom. I like to be on my feet with the teachers and students, giving feedback in the moment and using metaphors to help educators envision the end goal of the teaching strategies that I am explaining.

What did you want to be as a kid “when you grew up”?

A ballet dancer. I achieved that goal by dancing professionally with the Minnesota Dance Theatre and performing in commercials such as Tombstone Pizza, where I played a cheerleader. Through a variety of unique and serendipitous experiences — including starting my degrees at New York University by following an advertisement on a bus that said, “Find yourself at the Gallatin Division” — I learned that I could take skills I used as a dancer to create innovative ways to help people learn by being an artist-in-residence in the New York City Public Schools. This discovery launched my career in teaching.

What did it mean to be an artist-in-residence in schools?

I collaborated with educators to teach curriculum through drama in the public schools. I committed to a “career in teaching” when we received a three-year grant to teach immigration through drama with fifth-grade students in Brooklyn. Although the funds only included three classes, I stayed beyond the lunch period to teach an additional fourth class because I wanted to make sure that all fifth-grade students were included. On the day of the final production, I found out that the fifth-grade students who were deaf and hard of hearing had been left out. I felt terrible and asked the principal why he didn't tell me about the students in the special education class. He said that because I wasn't a certified

teacher and didn't know how to teach students with disabilities that it was better not to include students who were deaf and hard of hearing. I couldn't have been more upset, so I became certified in special education and learned sign language. The next school year, when I returned for year two of the grant, all students, with and without disabilities, learned together and performed in the play as a community.

What prompted you to start your new class at the Ed School on inclusive teaching?

Teaching is a central part of the future careers of all Ed School students, no matter whether the current career goal is to become a teacher, a reading specialist, instructional coach, administrator, or educational entrepreneur. I wanted to provide a course on instructional decision-making, the “art of inclusive teaching.” I hope to enable educators to make daily, deliberate instructional adjustments to increase equitable learning opportunities for students with a wide range of learning needs. I am excited about this course because we will use a variety of simulations, such as paper-based games, role-playing, and new technologies, including mixed reality and 360-degree videos, to develop skills and reflect on our instructional decisions.

Finish this sentence: I love what I do because...

Teaching is an endlessly challenging and joyful adventure. Even though I plan every lesson, I never know exactly how learning will unfold. I love the discovery part of teaching every day in the classroom.

