

Teacher instills a love of words, but the lesson is about life



Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times

English teacher Phil Holmes discusses an essay with Brianna Hollins. Also in the English class at View Park Preparatory Charter High School in Southwest Los Angeles are Josalyn Burns, Arianne Hithe and Greg Smart. A longtime teacher at an elite L.A. private school, he decided to see how his methods would work in a much different setting.

Phil Holmes has taught English for decades, first to the privileged but lately to the disadvantaged. His method and his intensity make a solid connection with both extremes.

By Mitchell Landsberg, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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Phil Holmes, one of the great English teachers of his generation, is standing before a class of high school seniors, trampling all over their self-esteem.

It is a Thursday in October, not long into the school year. Holmes gazes out at his class, his proper prep school face set off by white hair and rimless spectacles, and tells his students, all of them black kids from South Los Angeles, that the first grading period is ending "and most of you will be getting Fs."

The students stare, dead silent. For perhaps the first time today, he has their full attention.

"This is not a good start," Holmes continues, his tone stern but even. "But on the other hand, it's not unusual."

Class dismissed.



Holmes spent 35 years building his reputation at Harvard School for Boys and its successor, Harvard-Westlake, which attracted some of the best, the brightest and the richest students in Los Angeles. His teaching methods, his curriculum, his empathy, his intensity, his relentless demand for clear, well-ordered thought, changed kids' lives.

More than that, he shaped wave after wave of young teachers, many of them now working at some of the most influential educational institutions in America.

But when he and a colleague wrote a book describing their teaching method, publishers scoffed. Of course their method worked! Their classes were filled with bred-for-success overachievers! Who couldn't teach them?

So in 2002, at a time when most people his age were sliding toward retirement, Holmes accepted a teaching job at View Park Preparatory High School, at Slauson and Crenshaw boulevards.

A public charter school founded by Mike Piscal, one of Holmes' Harvard-Westlake colleagues, View Park wanted to find out if high-quality teaching could make a difference in the lives of underperforming black students.

Holmes offered the school a gold standard. If a View Park student got an A from him, Principal Robert Schwartz figured, it would mean they were ready to compete with the best of the best.

But what if they got only Fs?

Watching Holmes teach over the course of the school year -- which would be the last in his 41-year career as a classroom teacher -- the answer came slowly into focus.

That Thursday in October began with students filing into the 12th-grade English composition classroom that Holmes shares with a younger View Park colleague. He was dressed in a suit, green dress shirt and tie, black loafers, his hair neatly trimmed, his bearing attentive.

Just before the bell, one of his students poked her head in, hoping to get excused from class. "We're taking a makeup test in AP history today," she said. "Do you mind?"

"Yes, I do mind," Holmes said. "We're doing something very important in here."

Holmes had nothing unusual planned. He considers every lesson, every minute of class time, to be important, and, at age 66, he often stays up past midnight preparing for the next day's lessons. There are 26 students enrolled in this class, which was designed to give them the skills they would need to write college papers. All were dressed in some variation on View Park's uniform: khaki pants, a maroon sports shirt.

Holmes asked them to take out a homework assignment -- a critique -- that was due.

The assignment called for the class to analyze a student's college application essay. In the course of the next 90 minutes, Holmes led the class in dismantling not just the essay, but one student's critique of it, paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, word by word.

There's a hanging detail, he said at one point -- why is it a problem?

"It's too vague," a boy answered.

"What's vague about it?" Holmes demanded.

The boy couldn't answer at first, but Holmes was relentless, forcing him to think. In the end, they hammered out an answer.

At another point, a single word -- resourceful -- launched Holmes into a discussion of Odysseus, and how his resourcefulness ("He found a way to blind the giant") could be a source of inspiration for the students.

The entire class was like this, Holmes leading a discussion in which no point, no word was insignificant. He could be brutal, dismissing one student's argument as "mindless." And he could be generous, if guarded, with praise.

Outside after class, Khadijah McCaskill said the students don't mind the tough talk, or the tough grades. This is her second class with him.

"His toughness helps the class concentrate and makes it easier to learn," she said.

"He's a phenomenal teacher," she added. "He's phenomenal because everything he does connects together. And even if you don't know it then and there, it will . . . be connected to a larger thing later on."

View Park Prep is no blackboard jungle. For many View Park parents, the choice was not between the charter and a traditional public school -- say, Crenshaw or Dorsey High -- but between the charter and a private school.

Still, the 15 miles that separate View Park from the rolling Coldwater Canyon campus of Harvard-Westlake might as well be 15,000.

More than 96% of the students at View Park are African American, and studies show that even middle-class black students tend to do worse in school, on average, than comparable students of other races. Moreover, roughly half of the students are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

"At first, it was a shell shock," Holmes said, "because of three things. I wasn't prepared for the students to be so far behind in their reading development. . . . We were reading "The Odyssey," and within one or two days I knew we couldn't move through it like we did at Harvard-Westlake. Second, these students had no training in classroom discipline. At Harvard-Westlake, I could ask kids to start writing an essay in class, and I could go upstairs, get my mail and come back and they'd just be quietly working. If I walked out of class at View Park Prep, it would be total pandemonium.

"And the third problem. . . . I was a white man -- and, as Mike Piscal said to me, I was not just white, I was very white. I had several times when I had students say, 'Why did you even come here?' They themselves could not believe I could have an authentic reason for coming to their school."

Piscal, who is himself white, adds another problem: "Phil is not connected to the popular culture at all," he said. "You say '50 Cent,' he'll take two quarters out of his pocket."

Holmes grew up in the San Gabriel Valley, the son of a physician. Young Phil was a good student, although his favorite subject was math, not English. He was a good enough baseball player, a catcher, to be recruited by a Dodger scout while still in high school, and he spent portions of his winters training with the team at the old Wrigley Field at Avalon Boulevard and 42nd Street, catching the likes of Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale.

His baseball career ended in his freshman year at USC, when he tore his rotator cuff. But two professors had already ignited a love of English, and he went on to earn a master's degree and complete most of the work on a doctorate before being hired to teach at the Harvard School.

At a party for Holmes after he left Harvard-Westlake, Barton H. "Buzz" Thompson Jr., now a law professor at Stanford, recalled being a student in the first class Holmes taught in 1966 -- a sacred studies class that had been something of a joke on campus.

Thompson said he could barely remember a thing he learned in college or graduate school. "But I can remember every detail of what I was taught in that sacred studies course at Harvard School. Most important, I was taught to actually think. Furthermore, I was treated for the first time as somebody who actually could think."

At the center of Holmes' teaching is a slender red-bound book titled "The Uses of Argument," first published in 1958 by British philosopher Stephen Toulmin, which sets out a steel-trap method for structuring an argument.

Creative writing, Holmes believes, is a frill for most high school students. How many, after all, will become poets or novelists? But virtually all will need to write some form of persuasive essay, in college and in their careers. That is Holmes' central focus.

By midyear, Holmes' students were showing progress.

"Can you state," Holmes asked his class one day in January, "what is the writing goal for the whole View Park Prep curriculum?"

Mister Searcy raised his hand.

"Writing a sustained case, free of mechanical errors, in a readable style," he said, repeating the mantra that Holmes has been chanting all year long.

By this time, everyone in Holmes' class knew the formula for a sustained case: Claim, clarification, evidence and warrant, cemented by "backtracking," a practice in which the writer re-reads and challenges his own work and answers any questions that arise.

The method works, as any number of View Park graduates can attest.

Skye Williams, now at Clark University in Atlanta, said Holmes' lessons "really helped us in college -- in history, biology, anything."

But Williams said that English composition was the least of what she had learned from Holmes. "He didn't just teach us about English," she said. "He taught us about life."

No graduate gives Holmes greater pleasure than Jamilla Thomas, one of his most difficult students. "She was angry here for four straight years," he said. He said he never once saw her smile. "I was not a bad child," Thomas said, "but I had, like, a bad attitude."

Thomas had Holmes for the first time in 10th grade. "I was horrible to him," she recalled.

When she was in 11th grade, in the 2005-06 school year, Holmes was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. He was out for most of the year. Along with many students, she sent him a letter.

"Dear Mr. Holmes," she wrote. "I hope you get well soon. I know that we have been throw ruff times the past couple of years, but I have come to control my attitude. Everyone has come to see how much I've change except for you."

The spelling, the grammar, were still awful. But there were signs of a thaw. "You have helped me to become a better writer and you helped me to develop a passion and a love for writing," she concluded. "Please don't give up on me and my fellow students."

He recovered, and returned to school the next year. The cancer had revealed a gift. The View

Park students had come to care deeply about him.

"That lifted him up like nothing else," said his wife, Susan.

Thomas had Holmes for senior composition. He would tell her, "You can do it. . . . Don't put yourself down."

And then, as the end of her senior year approached, she had a breakthrough. "I took my time and paid attention and got help from him . . . and actually understood exactly what I needed to do.

"I remember him telling the whole class that I did an outstanding job . . . and I think I remember him reading it in class. He told me there was still room for improvement, but he told me that I really understood what I needed to do and did it."

Thomas went on to Santa Monica College, where she said she aced the freshman composition exam. She is looking forward to transferring to a four-year college and eventually opening her own business. She still returns to View Park to visit Holmes.

"He's a brilliant teacher, a brilliant man," she said. "He really helped me change my ways, at home and at school." He did it, she said, "by being himself, by not sugarcoating anything, by telling me that if I didn't get my act together . . . I wasn't going to amount to anything. . . . He pretty much opened my eyes to see I could amount to something, and I *am* going to amount to something."

As winter rolled into spring, Holmes was increasingly pleased by the progress of his senior class.

He prepared a series of lessons about Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama. Although Holmes has little but contempt for the multicultural curriculum taught at many schools, he has focused many of his lessons at View Park on African American themes.

When his students became interested in the Democratic presidential primary, and especially in Obama, Holmes saw an opportunity.

He used Obama's public statements as launchpads for the students to write critical essays, focusing on whether Obama had been consistent in his opposition to the Iraq war.

Late in the year, Holmes' focused the students on statements by Obama in 2004 when he said he and Bush didn't have "much of a difference" on Iraq. Was he being inconsistent when later, in his presidential campaign, he focused on his pre-war opposition to the conflict? "He's pandering for votes," one girl said. "That's horrible."

Holmes, as usual, didn't take sides. But he liked the sophistication of the word "pandering." "That's great," he told the class.

As the school year drew to a close, Schwartz, the principal, was pleased: Almost 90% of the 2008 graduating class had been accepted to four-year colleges. Eventually, 98.5% would commit to a four-year or two-year college. Of 67 graduates, nearly a third were admitted to a University of California campus, including nine to UC Berkeley. One enrolled at Stanford and several at historically black colleges such as Clark, Hampton and Tuskegee.

Holmes' students were no longer failing. Of 21 who made it through the whole year (five transferred to other classes or left the school altogether), two will get A's and nine Bs. There will be no Fs. Holmes said that if you peel away the few "off the charts" students at Harvard-Westlake, the level of A and B work at View Park is comparable.

In class, he gives them the assignment for their final exam, which is to be an essay either defending or attacking affirmative action. For the next 90 minutes, he will challenge the students' ideas, forcing them to think, as he sometimes says, "until their brains hurt."

Class ends with the announcement that next Tuesday will be devoted to independent work on the final exam essays. Holmes will be back next year, but only to work on curriculum and teacher training.

So this was the last regular class of his career.

There are no fireworks, no speeches, no round of applause. Just this: As he walks out the door and heads to the parking lot, Phil Holmes knows that today he delivered a good lesson. He didn't waste a second. He made the students think.

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