2010 Michael W. Teitelman Leadership Award
Dr. Melinda Hennessey

Every once in a while, a great teacher comes along whose mere presence becomes legendary. Dr. Melinda Hennessey is that legend. She is that enthusiastic educator we all want for ourselves and our children, who has dedicated over 30 years at Bishop’s, inspiring young people to become more than history students, to become historians.

Melinda’s love of history began at an early age. Born and raised in Arkansas during a time of segregation, she grew up acutely aware of the social issues that existed in the United States. Melinda went on to the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville to receive both a bachelor’s degree and master’s degree in U.S. History. Still interested in race relations within the country, she furthered her studies at Kent State, earning a Ph.D. in African American history.

During her time of study, headlines documented the social unrest in our country, race issues concerning segregation and integration. While studying at Kent State, there were frequent protests against the Vietnam War and, in 1970 when the Kent State shootings happened, Melinda was on campus.

Whether it comes from her shared personal experiences or from her sharp and analytical edge, Melinda has a powerful ability to connect students to history. In Melinda’s classroom, students do not learn history; they live history. In her Advanced Placement (AP) European History course, students remember the Thirty-Years’ War is not just a war that occurred between the years 1618 and 1648. It is a historical event that opened with a somewhat hilarious account of two people being thrown out of windows and landing in a pile of manure – the defenestration of the commissioners of Prague. She paints a picture that is seldom forgotten.

Many point to Melinda’s innovative teaching methods as the key to her and her students’ success. Her passion for history draws in the students; her passion for educating keeps them there. As a student in her class, you want to do well, you want to know more. Should you be lucky enough to get “a slap from Dr. Hennessey,” it will simply make your day. Melinda has the tradition of returning A+ work by rolling it up and slapping it into the deserving hands. It is just one of many ways that she breathes life into her classroom.

In the Bishop’s community, Melinda has been far more than a legendary classroom teacher. In addition to teaching AP European History and U.S. Social History, she continues to develop interdisciplinary courses with colleagues with the focus of deepening her students’ understanding of history. She has served as the chair of the history department and the dean of faculty for several years. Above all else, she is a figure worthy of great respect.
She could have been a college professor. Instead, she has remained at Bishop’s for the last 32 years and inspired over 1,300 students in AP European History alone. When you ask her why she has stayed, her answer is simple. “It turns out I really like teenagers!” And for that, we are truly grateful.