

BOOTSTRAPPING THROUGH EDUCATION

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Seeing the academic progress of our students was one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching for the University of Maryland abroad. In 1977, the first course I taught at Sheridan Kaserne in Augsburg, Germany, was RTVF 314: Introduction to Film—a course that students usually took as an elective because they assumed it would be easy. (It wasn't.)

On the first day of class, only two students sat on the front row, side by side—Benny and Barbara, I'll call them. Benny was short, stocky, and very muscular, with a shaved head freshly scarred in several places and a face that never changed its dark expression, although he was always very polite. Still, he looked like a thug you wouldn't want to meet in a back alley at night. Barbara was blonde, very pale, had a placid, rather bovine expression on her face, and looked to be ten months' pregnant. They were husband and wife.

Both took notes in class with a pencil, on Big Chief tablets like first-graders use. Benny printed the words very slowly, in large block letters. Barbara wrote a bit faster, in script. Occasionally Benny asked me to repeat something I'd said, so he could get it down on paper. I appreciated their serious attitude in class, but wondered if they'd be able to make it through the course.

My initial impression was way off track: Both made A's on the first test in the course, the mid-term essay exam worth 50% of their grade. (Lesson learned by me: Never judge students on their appearance.)

At that point I asked the Education Center staff about Benny and Barbara—and learned they were the pride of the education program there. Benny had enlisted in the Army, straight from the barrio, without having finished high school. He'd earned his GED in the military, then taken all the developmental courses in English and math that would get him to the point of earning transferable credits in University of Maryland courses. Both of them took courses every term, usually four nights a week, and had made almost straight A's. And both were the first in their family to go to college.

I began to notice that they were competing, somewhat subtly, to make the best grade in my class. Both of them aced the final exam, although she made a slightly higher grade in the course than he did, despite her having to miss two consecutive classes when their baby was born.

Benny and Barbara signed up for my follow-up course, RTVF 413: History of Film, the next term. And both earned A's in that one, too. More than 40 years later I still remember them. I've always wondered what they, and their descendants, went on to achieve in their lives. I'd bet money they rose above—far above—the circumstances they were born into. Students like that

are the ones who have truly benefitted from the opportunity to get an education while stationed abroad with the U.S. military. And they're the ones who make our work as teachers so worthwhile.

Dates and divisions of overseas service with UMUC:

European Division (1975-1978; 1981-1993)

Asian Division (1978-1979)

Munich Campus (1985, 1989-1992)

Augsburg Campus (1992-1993)

Russia Program (1993-1995)

Other: Writer of UMUC history books (1996-1997, 2007)