

THE HENRY L. THOMPSON CHAIR IN MATHEMATICS

Awarded at Opening Convocation

September 9, 2009

Within a year of your appearance on Mount Ida, you were emailing the head of school to accept multiple new responsibilities—leadership of the mathematics department and heading of the Conduct Review Committee—with your only reservation being your worry that you might not do everything perfectly. In fact, you wrote, “...time is not as much an issue for me as how well I do my job.”

Today we recognize how very well you have done your job. In awarding you the first Henry L. Thompson Chair in Mathematics, we recognize those qualities and experiences that you share with the late Mr. Thompson and with his daughter, Victoria Thompson Winterer, Class of 1961. Like Henry “Larry” Thompson, you believe that the highest value in education is “teaching an individual how to think;” as an officer in World War II, one of his assignments was to teach mathematics and meteorology to Army Air Force cadets. Stressing, as do you, the practical application of mathematics, he and his students formed the Allied team responsible for the successful invasion of Italy. After the war, Mr. Thompson eagerly incorporated nascent IBM technology into his business; your ready adoption of leading edge technology as one important arrow in a teacher’s quiver demonstrates yet another parallel between his work and yours.

For H. L. Thompson’s daughter, Vicky, mathematics at Emma Willard meant learning from a favorite teacher, one of your predecessors, Marjorie Pickard. Your students would describe their experience with you in the same terms that Vicky described her classes with Miss Pickard: “Every class,” she recalls, “was exhilarating.” One of your students recently summarized your effect on her and her classmates with similar enthusiasm and appreciation. “Ms. Schettino,” she wrote, “invoked a sense of wonder in me I never knew existed, and I ultimately found myself inspired to dig more deeply into the world I thought I knew so well.”

Since your arrival at Emma Willard in 2001, you have served as mathematics teacher, mathematics chair, dormitory affiliate, advisor, member of the curriculum review steering committee and the task force on standards of faculty excellence, and coordinator of innovative classroom practices. You have chaired the conduct committee and the study group on other models of school design. Through it all, you have adhered to your central conviction that the best mathematics learning and teaching is problem based. From your earliest days on this campus, you have been passionate about focusing the Emma Willard mathematics curriculum on problem solving. To that end, you co-designed and co-taught an integrated geometry/biology course that was extremely well received. You subsequently led the mathematics department in revamping the geometry curriculum, ridding it of traditional textbooks and transforming right-answer, parrot-like students into thoughtful, responsive collaborative learners. Your influence on pedagogy extends well beyond Mount Ida. Your article, “Transition to a Problem-Solving Curriculum,” accepted for publication in the highly selective Mathematics Teacher, reached an audience of 50,000 educators. In person you have reached hundreds of others as you are a widely sought workshop facilitator, sharing your insights with teachers all over the United States and, most recently, in South Africa.

You are, perhaps, a natural at problem-based learning. In the words of a former student, “She knows when to sit back and listen, yet offers genuinely thoughtful and inspiring advice when I am at a dead end.” Your colleagues have experienced the same combination of respectful attention and inspirational leadership.

You are a master teacher, curricular innovator and valued colleague. Carmel Schettino, it is with great pleasure that I announce your appointment as the first holder of the Henry L. Thompson Chair in Mathematics.