

CAREER 2.0

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After a career in corporate America, Phil Hureau '04G found himself back in the classroom—first as a student and now as a teacher.



PHOTO BY ROB CARLIN

There was a time, not too long ago, when taking an early retirement package from your company meant settling down to a couple of decades of relaxation; very few people thought about embarking on a new career. Times have changed, of course, and many of us will find ourselves at middle age starting on a second or even third career. For **Phil Hureau '04G**, a Vietnam veteran and former chief financial officer for a regional branch of an international advertising agency, that new beginning brought him back to the

classroom, first as a graduate student in the M.A.T. program at Rivier, and then as a high-school social studies teacher.

“Kiddingly, I used to say that when I turned 55, I would quit advertising and go work in a gas station,” says Hureau, now 61. “The corporate world was very rewarding but exhausting at the same time.” A series of corporate takeovers and downsizing left Hureau with a small severance package and the time to really think over what he wanted to do next. “I always enjoyed being part of employee development programs, so I thought, ‘Why not try and teach?’”

Hureau volunteered in an adult literacy program and as a youth tutor, and “it was so much fun I was hooked.” Social studies seemed like a natural choice for him, in spite of his career background in finance. “I enjoy looking at the past through lots of lenses, trying to understand who we are,” he says. “Having an ocular view on the past rather than a specular one adds a wonderful dimension to the study of our roots.”

Hureau’s next step was to find out what additional education he would need to become a teacher. “My first contacts with other schools were not encouraging at all,” he says. “They tried to dissuade me from even attempting to enroll.” His call to Rivier led him to Dr. Martin Menke, director of the M.A.T. program in social studies, and a much more positive attitude. “He invited me up and talked to me for about an hour. He was actually encouraging!” he says. “I sat in on a class and was really excited about the prospects. A short while later I enrolled.”

A Positive Attitude

“Phil’s enthusiasm, as well as his experience and maturity made him a model for many of the other M.A.T. students,” says Menke. “Repeatedly, he said he should have done this years ago.” Menke was also impressed with Hureau’s can-do attitude toward the challenges that came with starting something new. “Phil was reflective about his work,” he says. “In his early field experiences, his coursework and in his student teaching, he was never afraid to admit he’d made a mistake or that another approach might be more successful. His lack of ego in this regard allowed him to benefit fully from the experience. He also had a great sense of self-deprecating humor about him, which always helps.”

That reflective attitude and sense of humor are both important attributes for a teacher at the Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School, where Hureau teaches social studies to students who are considered at risk for dropping out of school before graduating. “We offer a second chance to these students,” says Hureau. “Our school emphasizes 10 core ethical values. The curriculum and the school culture are framed by these values.”

Hureau finds the experience gratifying. “Being able to connect with a group of young people, gain their trust and respect and work with them to help them achieve their goals is priceless. Most of our kids have not had good experiences in education prior to coming to our school. Our greatest challenge is to instill the trust in them for us and for themselves so they will try to be successful.”

For a teacher like Hureau, coming from an executive position in the corporate world, issues like discipline and trust could have been difficult to manage. But he embraces that as part of the job. “As a teacher you must be comfortable with yourself and your students,” he says. “Once we are successful in gaining trust, the relationships with the students become more manageable. Notice I didn’t say easy, but manageable.”

Above all, Hureau believes it is his job to connect to his students in any way he can. “When I was doing my practicum, a young teacher said to me that it’s not good enough to reach most of the kids, it is crucial to reach all the kids. I hope I never forget that notion. Regardless of their history, they are all worth our best efforts.”

A Well-rounded Life

As time-consuming as his teaching career can be, Hureau also makes time for professional activities outside the classroom. This past year he became involved in a Teaching American History project, “Citizenship, Property, Identity & Representation: the Historical Journey of Southern New England’s Native Peoples.” The project provides social studies teachers with an 80-hour per year course of professional development institutes and seminars on the interrelationships of Native and non-Native peoples of southern New England over the course of four centuries. “It’s a three-year project and intellectually it has been very rewarding and inspiring.”

Hureau makes time for family and hobbies as well. He and his wife, Charlotte, have been married for 35 years and have a grown son and two grandsons. He is also “dad” to four Siberian huskies and enjoys dog-sledding whenever he gets the chance. The Lowell resident has lived all his life in Massachusetts, raised in Malden and Tewksbury.

“Returning to school at 54 years old was a unique experience,” says Hureau. “[Dr.] Menke, Dr. Kaloudis... and the other students in the M.A.T. program were terrific in keeping me interested and encouraged to try to do this.” At an age when many people are getting ready to retire, or wishing they could, Hureau is deeply committed to his relatively new vocation, grateful for the preparation and education he received at Rivier. “The greatest reward of teaching has to be the students,” he says. “They are invigorating, exasperating and heartbreaking all at the same time, but after all is said and done they are worth everything we can give them.” ■

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