

Spotlight

academic awards triannual

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The energy and impact of Dr Olenka Bilash can be felt from her U of A classroom to the world stage.

Whether donning a foam sandwich to illustrate negative verb conjugations to her secondary education students, or joining world experts to help UNESCO create linguistic solutions to peace research, Bilash has a passion for learning that is contagious.

“She is an amazing teacher because she comes with such energy,” said fourth-year education undergraduate student Samantha Mannes. “When a teacher is very passionate and energetic about their topic, it is easy to be enthusiastic as well.”

“I’ve always loved learning,” says Bilash. “The story in my family is that I’ve always been a teacher and that I’ve never left school.” Her excitement for discovery-based learning started as a young school girl when she first experienced the moment she describes as “the joy of getting it.” That first moment was immediately followed by an intense desire for the teacher to stop explaining and overly guiding and allow her fellow classmates to experience that same joy of discovery for themselves.

Known for her animated and interactive teaching style and for her rigorous academics, Bilash advocates for teaching philosophies aimed at transforming the way students view the world. While teaching several U of A graduate classes in a Saskatchewan Aboriginal community, her students honored her with the Cree nickname *Opastosiw*, meaning ‘Whirlwind.’ She was told this was because she would “come



Transforming Lives

with the
Joy of Discovery

Dr Olenka Bilash

Professor, Department of Secondary Education
2010 3M National Teaching Fellowship Recipient

in, turn everything around and then five or six days later, as everything started to settle, the context was transformed and the people were transformed.”

“I take what I do really seriously,” says Bilash. “Every student I have is a citizen and a potential

continued overleaf...

building a **community** | building a **reputation**



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...“Transforming Lives” continued

parent and whether or not they become teachers, they are going to have an influence on other people, on a future generation and on our society. The more aware they are, the more ‘conscientized’ they are, the better everything is going to be for everyone. I believe this right to my core.”

‘Conscientization’ is a concept Bilash uses for being both conscious and having a conscience. “The world will never change without action,” says Bilash. “Information is just information and it can be accessed easily.... The human element is what we do with information, combining it in ways to develop world views, attitudes, and perspectives and that’s where a teacher comes in—to help mediate and challenge that.”

Hailed for her work in second language education by her students and peers, Bilash is one of two U of A recipients

of the prestigious 3M National Teaching Fellowship for 2010. “I never imagined a professor like her existed at any university in the world,” said fourth-year secondary education undergraduate student Amélie Leblanc.

Bilash has also been awarded the Faculty of Education Undergraduate Teaching Award, the Rutherford Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, the Alberta government’s Centennial Medal for her contribution to Ukraine-Alberta international relations and numerous awards for developing native and heritage language programs. Despite all this recognition, awards are not what motivate Bilash. “If we are only driven by the award then that’s not being a good teacher,” says Bilash. “The good teacher doesn’t just care about the learning, but why the learning is so important. Because it is going to make a difference in that individual’s life and every life they have a connection with.”

When asked to describe the factors that make a good teacher, Bilash says her own greatest lesson was to listen to the learner: “You have to know your students so that you know how to deliver the message. Today’s students are not the same students as ten years ago or 20 years ago. That means you have to stay current... and don’t forget we have to blend technology with the face to face, the humanity.”

“As much as knowing your field, you have to have a sense of a picture that’s bigger and constantly work to see and make interconnections between your own and other areas,” said Bilash, who also stresses the importance of interdisciplinary work. In the end, Bilash is mindful of leaving a legacy: “Remember that every person counts. You will leave an impression. Ask yourself what you would like that to be.” ■

Upcoming Deadlines for Academic Awards

3M National Teaching Fellowship

The 3M National Teaching Fellowship is a national teaching award that recognizes teaching excellence as well as educational leadership. University of Alberta faculty members have won 32 3M Teaching Fellowships, the highest number in Canada, making our university the national 3M leader.

The 3M Teaching Fellowship is open to all individuals currently teaching at a Canadian university, regardless of discipline or level of appointment. Up to ten Fellowships are awarded each year. The deadline to submit a 3M nomination package to the Academic Awards and Ceremonies Office is noon on **August 23, 2010**.

Our office will be hosting a 3M workshop and consultations on July 20th and 21st with 3M specialist Carole E Dence, who has compiled winning nomination packages for faculty members at Carleton University. The workshop will provide valuable insights and strategies on construction of a successful nomination package for this prestigious award. The individual consultations are for candidates and their nominator(s) who plan to submit a nomination package this year and provide an opportunity for an in-depth review of their nomination package. An electronic notice regarding these events will be sent to Faculties and departments in June; please contact us for more information.

Copies of previous successful 3M nomination packages are available for review in the Academic Awards and Ceremonies Office; please contact us to make arrangements to view them.

Traditional Fulbright Scholar Awards

The Canada-US Fulbright Program offers a unique opportunity to explore important contemporary issues relevant to Canada and the United States and the relationship between the two countries. Traditional Fulbright Scholar Awards are intended for candidates who wish to conduct research, to teach or to undertake a combination of both activities at an academic institution of their choice in the host country.

Postdoctoral researchers, emerging and established faculty members, as well as experienced professionals are eligible to apply for a Fulbright award. Candidates must have obtained a PhD or equivalent professional/terminal degree by December 31, 2010, or have equivalent professional experience. As well, candidates must be a Canadian or American citizen at the time of application. The deadline to apply for the Traditional Fulbright Scholar Awards is **November 15, 2010** (for awards tenable in September 2011 or January 2012).

For more information...

Visit our website, www.ualberta.ca/academicawards, and use the search tool or navigate to the award you are interested in. For discipline specific awards, select the appropriate field of study and determine which award(s) are applicable to you.

Academic Awards and Ceremonies Office

The University of Alberta is committed to the sharing of our accomplishments with the broader community. Success by our faculty and staff in receiving recognition in teaching, learning, scholarship and community service is critical to realizing the University’s vision and to maintain and enhance the University’s reputation.

We have added numerous new awards that University of Alberta faculty members have received to our website, www.ualberta.ca/academicawards. If you have received an award and your outstanding accomplishment is not celebrated on our website, please contact us so that we may recognize your achievement.

Need help with an academic award nomination? For more information or assistance with a teaching award nomination, please contact Bobbi Schiestel, Faculty Awards Facilitator, at 780.492.2644 or via e-mail at bobbi.schiestel@ualberta.ca. ■



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