

# Career Switchers Bring Valuable Experience to the Classroom

By Amy Biderman

Kevin Laub never planned to become a teacher. With an undergraduate degree in English, the native New Yorker decided to pursue a career in investment banking on Wall Street. “In college,” he says, “I had one goal: to make enough money to live in New York City.”

Everything changed on September 11, 2001. Laub was working at Morgan Stanley on the 62nd floor of Tower Two at the World Trade Center. The company lost five employees in the terrorist attacks, but Laub survived in a harrowing escape—he walked down 62 flights of stairs as a plane flew into the tower. Following that horrific experience, Laub says, he had an epiphany, “a single moment of intense, maybe even violent, clarity when I looked at my life and thought, ‘This is not my beautiful life.’”

While Laub had already begun to question his career path after seven years on Wall Street, he admits that he would have maintained the status quo without the events of September 11 as a catalyst. “I don’t think anything else would have spurred me on,” he says. “I was really comfortable and not motivated to change. But after the terrorist attacks, it seemed that the harder I worked, the emptier everything seemed at the end of the day. My scales were off; issues that I used to sweat over suddenly seemed so pathetically trivial, and everything about my job—the work itself, the constant rebuilding, the fact that Morgan Stanley sent me to New Jersey—was a constant reminder of that horrible day. The weight was becoming unbearable.”

The turning point came when the woman who would become his wife asked a simple question: *Why don’t you become an English teacher?* “In that moment,” he says, “the weight lifted. ‘Oh my god,’ I said. ‘I’m supposed to be a teacher.’”

Laub dreaded the thought of spending years starting over in a new profession. Then he discovered the Career Switcher Program on George Mason’s web site. “It was perfect,” he says. “I could take my six years on Wall Street and start over.”

CEHD’s Career Switcher Program prepares experienced individuals for Virginia licensure as secondary school teachers with certification in biology, chemistry, earth science, English, history/social science, mathematics, or physics. Applicants need five years of professional experience, ide-

ally in a field related to the teaching specialty, as well as passing scores on standardized tests.

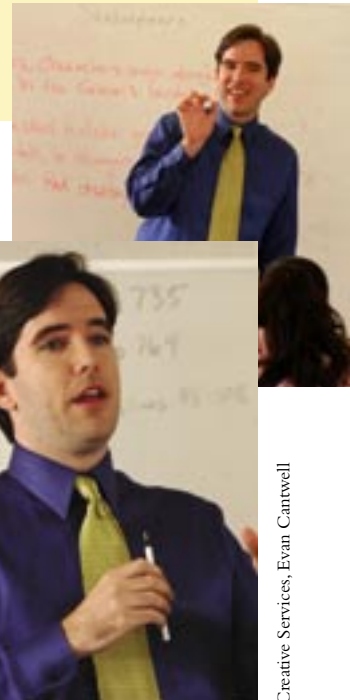
Twenty-five students are enrolled in the program.

“George Mason is taking a leadership role in securing top quality teachers in critical needs teaching areas,” says Anastasia Samaras, coordinator of the Career Switcher Program. “The program harnesses the amazing talents of experienced individuals and supports their entry into their new career as

teachers. Imagine a chemist, a biologist with a PhD, an accountant, a restaurant manager, a West Point graduate, and many others who bring their content specializations, life skills, and maturity into Virginia’s classrooms. I am in awe of their transference of skills and their passion to teach.”

The Virginia General Assembly created the Career Switcher Alternative Route to Licensure Program in 1999 to address the teacher shortage by attracting well-educated individuals to a second career in teaching. Lawmakers asked the Board of Education to develop an alternative teaching path for individuals who had not completed a teacher preparation curriculum, but had considerable life experiences, career achievements, and academic backgrounds relevant for teaching PK–12. The first pilot program, geared toward military personnel, began in 2000. It was so successful that the Board of Education expanded it to other professions. George Mason is one of nine universities that offer versions of the program.

Samaras points out that the Career Switcher Program does not work with so-called provisional teachers who have little or no preparation. “There are many types of alternative programs that have variable quality and level of preparation,” she says. “In fact, many school districts are hiring individuals with little or no preparation—in some places, the shortage is so bad that people are hired with only one education course. But CEHD’s career switchers complete virtually the same



Creative Services, Evan Cartmell

program as in the traditional teaching route at Mason. This rigorous process is designed to reduce the number of career changers who take teaching positions on a provisional license.”

Laub admits that the decision to change careers and leave New York was a difficult one. “I felt I was betraying the city by leaving it. But I couldn’t do what I was doing on September 10, 2001; I was constantly reminded of the events of September 11.” He moved to Washington, D.C., in August 2002 and entered the Career Switcher Program in January 2003. He started teaching ninth-grade English at Westfield High School in Chantilly, Va., in August 2003 and went on to earn his master’s degree at George Mason in 2005.

“What made the Career Switcher Program were the people who supported it,” Laub says. “The faculty accepted us into the world of teaching—we were one of them. They served as advocates for us and even made personal phone calls to school principals to help with our job search.” He notes that everyone who was with him in the program got a teaching job.

Like Laub, Judy Bello made a dramatic career change, but hers came after 30 years in the legal and policy fields. She had been a counsel for private law firms and government agencies, as well as executive vice president of a pharmaceutical trade association. While she had been an adjunct professor at Yale and Princeton Universities, her teaching experience was confined to the graduate and professional levels.

“I decided I wanted to do something dramatically different,” Bello says. “I always had a passion for literature and found that I was fleeing to it in my free time—I thought that was very telling. I decided it would be a joy to have literature as the center of my vocation, rather than as an avocation.”

Bello entered the Career Switcher Program in January 2005 and started teaching 10<sup>th</sup>-grade English at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Va., in September of the same year. Her enthusiasm for her second career shines through when she talks about her students. “They are the best part of teaching,” she says. “Teenagers are full of

ideas and feelings and questions. If you can engage them and bring energy and passion to the subject, it is incredibly rewarding to share your excitement for literature with sophomores in high school.”

While Bello knew she would enjoy working with the students, she notes that she didn’t realize how much satisfaction she would get out of the larger teaching community. “I’m learning from—and getting enjoyment from—colleagues, the administration, and the parents of students,” she says. “The best way to reach any student is to have a whole village working in unison to make sure each child’s needs are met. The teaching community supports me in my objectives.”

In particular, she credits the program’s ability to bring together a community of people with shared goals and direction. “You don’t just join your classroom; you find yourself with people who have a diversity of career experiences and have decided they want to be in K–12 classrooms. It’s energizing and serves as reinforcement—even for people working full-time who have family responsibilities. It creates and sustains momentum.”

Bello admits that she viewed the teacher credentialing process as “bureaucratic, with hoops I needed to jump through and tasks I needed to complete. But the Career Switcher Program made the process a rejuvenating experience by developing practice skills and a sense of community. It’s engaging and stimulating—a life lesson in itself.”

In fact, Bello thinks so highly of the program that she touts it to others. “Career Switcher takes people who have affirmative, motivating reasons for entering the teaching profession, but aren’t sure how to do it,” she says. “It’s the best way I can imagine to encourage more people in mid-life who desire change to open a new door and contribute in a different way. We need so many teachers—all kinds of teachers. Career switchers have a lot to bring to the classroom after a wealth of experience from being out in the world.”

Bello adds that she is thankful for each day that she gets to work with students and the community at Thomas Jefferson. “I don’t have a single regret about changing my career,” she says. “I’ve never felt more fulfilled.”

Laub, too, has nothing but praise for the Career Switcher Program. “I’m so thankful the program existed,” he says. “Teaching is the hardest thing I have ever done—and this is from someone who ran down 62 flights of stairs while an airplane flew into his office building. There were some really great people at George Mason who prepared me for a job you cannot be prepared for. I’ve found what I’m supposed to be doing; I’m teaching, and I couldn’t be happier.” ♦

