



# Teaching Excellence

“I don’t smile,” says Ewa Cairns (PhD ’87) emphatically when we ask to take her photo. But ironically, her smile lights up the room when it comes to talking about graduate students.

Photo by Shawn Simpson

“I just love teaching graduate students,” beams the veteran Professor of Medicine and Microbiology & Immunology. “There is constant challenge for me intellectually to keep up with them and to keep them going as well.”

Cairns did her PhD with Schulich Professor Emeritus Dr. David Bell, who remains an ongoing research collaborator today. Cairns herself has trained Masters and PhD candidates, as well as residents and fellows for more than 20 years. Her research is focused on the pathogenesis of rheumatoid arthritis. “I had great role models and I always wanted to do that – to be one myself in the future,” she says.

In 2008, Cairns was recognized with a Schulich Award for Excellence in Education. In fact, for many students – even those outside her own lab – she is one of the most influential faculty members. And her thorough review and editing of theses is legendary. “I am actually very picky,” Cairns laughs, estimating she spends about 40 hours reviewing a single thesis. “I am probably the designated person that if students want to have a thesis that is almost perfect for submission, they usually come to me.”

It’s that attention to detail that students are often most grateful for. In his letter of support for Cairns’ award, former PhD student Jonathan Hill said, “I’ve always admired Dr. Cairns for her detail to technical precision in science ... This attention to precision

did not come at the expense of creative exploration however, and providing her students and postdocs with this balance has generated an exciting and productive environment for research.”

Another former Microbiology & Immunology graduate student, Jennifer Trowbridge, said Cairns’ enthusiasm also sparked a lot of interaction and discussion. Recalling classes with Cairns during a first-year immunology course, Trowbridge said, “It was the only time during that course that the hours seemed to fly by, and no one seemed to mind if we went on past the scheduled class time.”

Cairns is also an important role model, particularly for women in science, but says it hasn’t always been easy in a male-dominated field. “I work extremely hard, very long hours ... but that’s another lesson. In science not all jobs are permanent. It’s a risky business, especially for women who have families. They have to spend a lot of time building their research career.” But she adds, “I don’t know what I would do otherwise. You have intellectual freedom in academia to follow the ideas you want to.”

Her passion for science and teaching is a great lesson on its own for students. She admits, “I do smile but not all the time. I try to show that I am happy with what I am doing ... And if you’re happy, people see that it’s a great job and they take that lesson from you.”