



Wit, Wisdom and Fun for 35 Years

M.J. Smythe on her retirement: “I’ve been here way longer than I was old when I came.”

Professor M.J. Smythe planned her disappearance from the department in August as a way of avoiding any retirement hoopla. She was serious about it.

Smythe’s reluctance to mark the moment centers on a philosophical question she has been pondering while facing her fade to black: After 35 years in the profession, who is she going to be if she’s not a professor?

For Smythe, a formal ending was too much to endure. “I never expected to retire,” she says. “I figured that like an old cart horse I’d just fall in my tracks.”

She knows that leaving academe will be a challenge. As it does with each faculty member who lays down the chalk, the transition began with a culling of mounds of paperwork and collectibles and a rush of accumulated memories.

“I have always loved academe. Just being happy with what you do have been an inducement to stay,” she says.

Teaching Nonverbal Communication, a course that she developed, has been a particular joy for Smythe because students engage with the subject matter, which resonates with their own lives.

Smythe’s own interests are so broad that she could easily slip into the role of a classic academic. Being a perpetual graduate student and just taking classes for the sake of learning would make her happy.

Little wonder then that Smythe, a Phi Beta Kappa, is known for her knowledge of the field of communication, which students often mention in their course comments. Department Chair Michael Kramer says she has an ability to recall what seems like every article she has ever read, even those from years ago.

That extensive knowledge led Smythe to teach a remarkable number of courses: Relational Communication, Nonverbal Communication, Culture and Communication, Gender and Communication, Communication Theory, Introduction to Graduate Studies, Topics in Communication Theory, Quantitative Research Methods, Interpersonal Communication and the Capstone Course.

“Getting to share information with and learning new things from your students is what keeps this job most alive,” Smythe says. “I was trained to think of the enterprise of teaching as dialogic and a co-construction between you and the students.”

In conversation, Smythe's legendary vocabulary immediately becomes apparent. What could seem extraordinary and even intimidating about her way with words is simply an easy fluency that is normal to her. It's how her parents talked. She and her siblings were read to as children and acquired a love of reading that led to even more word expansion.

Associate Professor Michael Porter describes Smythe's vocabulary as the most extensive, usable vocabulary of anyone he has ever known. "At faculty meetings, when MJ spoke she would use words I've never heard before or only read," he says. "She uses huge words and always appropriately. She talks like a textbook, a graduate level textbook."

Students have noticed as well. Participants in the London program selected her as the faculty member most likely to use all seven tiles in one Scrabble turn, which she has done several times.

Relic of the Ice Age

Smythe is considered a female pioneer in a department where women now form more than half the faculty. She has been a strong faculty member on women's rights and served for years on the MU status of women committee.

But students have been the greatest gift of all, she says. "The day-to-day interaction with them is the payoff."

Once when a student asked Smythe how long she has taught at Mizzou, she off-handedly joked that she's been here since the Ice Age, thinking anyone would know what she meant, and he said, "No Way." She was immediately heartened by the response, thinking the student believed she was much too young to be kidding about being around since the Paleolithic era. Then he finished the thought: "That movie's just five or six years old."

Smythe loves such reminders that although teachers give examples in class that make sense to them, students still must use their own points of reference to interpret the meaning.

"I do get a lot of insight from my students that surprises and refreshes me," Smythe says. She has taken their advice on locating YouTube clips that make good examples for class, and she admires this generation's skills with technology. She rolls her eyes though at the thought that any student could consider Wikipedia a scholarly source.

"Kids today!" she quotes from the musical *Bye-Bye Birdie* before quickly adding, "I'm sounding like a coot."

Smythe is neither coot nor codger. During decades of teaching, she experienced and appreciated some unconventional delivery style and subject matter. Students took the lectern in her classes to present speeches while wearing attire that ranged from business suits to Spiderman costumes; to communicate in gangsta rap, complete with costume; and even to demonstrate a persuasive speech aimed at gaining a date with a classmate.

If today's students follow the pattern of yesterday's graduates, they will long remember Smythe's influence on their careers and lives.

Ty Christian, BA '77, seized an opportunity to honor her when he visited the department as a lecturer. While speaking to Smythe's class, he reached into the lectern and pulled out a bouquet of roses for the teacher who had expressed confidence in his ability to succeed as an advertising executive. Christian now heads the PR firm TRC Consulting. His floral tribute was a Hallmark moment for the usually unflappable Smythe.

Seventeen years ago, senior Bryan Cooper, BA '91, found another creative way to say thanks to Smythe. Just before graduation, Cooper wrote and performed a rap in her honor. He presented her with a taped version, complete with music and beat box, and the cassette is among her favorite mementos of teaching. Go to the department Web site at <http://communication.missouri.edu> to read excerpts from Cooper's rap.

Cooper, who works in recruiting, training and development with the Edward Jones firm in St. Louis, says Smythe challenged him to raise his own standard of performance.

"She was able to recognize and reaffirm my abilities and at the same time challenge me to re-evaluate my own opinions of that ability. To be able to do that without damaging the esteem of the student is certainly a gift."

Smythe, of course, enjoys hearing from her former students. She quickly points out that praise of teachers is often balanced with negative opinions of their abilities. She can quote verbatim some of the more interesting student comments on her courses:

Describe what you liked about this class? *Nothing!!!*
What needs to be changed? *The teacher!!!*

"You take your lumps," she says of the student comment that compared her to Cruella DeVil, the evil puppy snatcher in Disney's *101 Dalmations*. Smythe's two German Shepherds, Cowboy and Carmella, supported by Maggie the cat, beg for rebuttal time on that perception.

At any rate, Smythe and her three furry pals are moving to Hilton Head, S.C., near a longtime family vacation retreat. There are no puppy-killing plans in Smythe's future, and (she breathes a sigh of relief here) no retirement parties either.

Favorite Smytheisms

Submitted by Bryan Cooper, BA '91

- Communication is as much about receiving as it is about giving.
- A speaker must first establish “ethos.”
- Somewhere along the line, you are not going to be able to get by on boyish charm.
- You can be anything you want to be in 10 years if you decide to take yourself seriously.
- While I disagree, I will hear you out on this one.
- It's communication, not communications.

Rap to M.J. Smythe

By Bryan Cooper, BA '91

(excerpts)

I'm still using my knowledge of communication.
One day you're gonna hear it on a radio station.

Cause even though I'm down with the rappin' scene,
you can say words, and I don't know what they mean.
So here's your present. I made you a rap.
Stomp your feet and let your hands flap.

So accomplished — and intelligent,
cultured, athletic, feminine and elegant.
One of such stature. I'm lucky to be chosen,
as your student. Do you think I'm brown nosin'?
That's for me to know; you can only assume.
You can ponder it each day when I walk in the room — late.

If you don't like my rap ... I won't spank you.
I think you're pretty cool, M.J., so basically, I'm here to thank you.