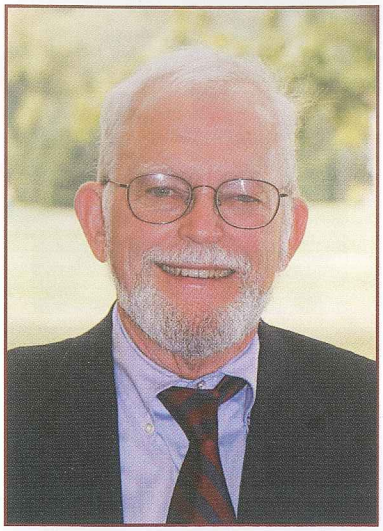
Faculty Spotlight on Vin Barrett

by Rick Ohler

A look back on twenty-five years as a teacher, technology pioneer and BattleBots mentor



The educational experience at Gow can bring on a transformation in students. After a few years of tackling a challenging curriculum and discovering in the process his (or her, now) unique talents, a young person can emerge with the tools and the confidence to go places he never thought possible. But do we expect that a teaching career spent on Emery Road in South Wales will lead to a similar transformation in faculty members? With retiring teacher Vin Barrett, you would have to say it has.

Barrett arrived at Gow in 1987, after several years as an international rural development worker in West Africa. He was hired by former headmaster, the late David Gow, and joined the history department, expecting to be an instructor in the discipline for which he had received his master's degree at SUNY Buffalo. That would be a short-lived appointment, because he soon began to make history instead of teach it. As the technology revolution swept inevitably into education, it was Barrett who became part of Gow's avant garde. By 1995 he was offering young Govians computer science classes, introducing them to then state-of-the-art design and graphics programs such as Hypercard and Adobe Suite. Soon he, along with former colleague Mike Sullivan, was integrating computers and software into the unique academic programs that keep Gow at the top of schools specializing in teaching those with dyslexia. A feature entitled "Personalizing Technology" in the July 2007 edition of Ed Tech magazine highlighted the duo's innovative idea of having all students use school-issued laptops loaded with specific software.

Vin Barrett retires (or is threatening to, much to the dismay of all at Gow) this December as one of the original campus technology gurus, the first chair of the burgeoning Applied Technology Department (appointed in 1999) and the leader of Gow's successful foray into the world of interscholastic robotics competition called BattleBots.

Those who know Vin Barrett only outside of his role as the BattleBots mentor, might find it a contradiction that these fierce fighting machines will likely form a substantial part of his considerable legacy once he leaves Gow. After all, in the BattleBots program he guides his students as they spend the school year designing and fabricating machines out of metal whose aim is to eliminate—even destroy—their adversaries at annual spring competitions in Florida or California. To meet Barrett, however, is to realize at once that he is quiet and unassuming, thoughtful but quick with a laugh, often at his own expense. More Mr. Chips than Bill Belechik. Hardly the calculating warrior you might expect to find at the helm of such a program.

What becomes clear as you get to know him, though, is how perfectly suited Vin has become to the BattleBots and the entire Applied Technology curriculum.

Former headmaster Bill Patterson came to Gow in 1997, just as technology was gaining primacy, and as Barrett was involving himself more and more in the integration of computers and software into the academic life at Gow. He says of Barrett, "He has a grasp of what it means to be educated, just as Peter Gow did in 1926." And by educated he's talking about "the full circle of learning," including hands-on mechanical, tactile and manual learning that is not an addendum to traditional courses of study, but an integral part, considered as equal in value. When Gow alumnus Trey Roski, '84, launched BattleBots in 2000 and offered to help his alma mater get involved, Patterson understood that it was right for Gow. A coat and tie headmaster by day, Patterson was off-hours a hands-on tinkerer, who always had some sort of antique vehicle restoration project underway in his garage or basement and who frequently involved Gow students in the fun. The combination of hands-on skills, computer competence and theoretical knowledge necessary for the design and fabrication of a competitive BattleBot played right into his notion of the full circle of learning. And he knew that Vin Barrett was the right man to bring that kind of learning to Gow.

For Barrett, computers, graphic arts and applied technology played into an educational philosophy he already espoused. He had watched with interest as students who struggled with academic subjects came alive in Bill Parsons' art classes when they could work in media other than words and understand by touching. The art component of graphic design offered a similar type of learning. But it was with BattleBots that he saw the biggest boon to his dyslexic learners.

Roski had come to appreciate, as had decades of Govians before him, that he learned differently from others. "Without putting my hands on a subject, I couldn't grasp it," he said, no pun intended. In Parsons' art classes he could be successful using the hands-

on approach. "Dyslexics," he discovered, "have a unique ability to relate to the real world." So as the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, he tinkered with a concept where students would design and build combat robots and enter into competition. "It gave kids a chance to feel good about themselves and experience the thrill of building the BattleBot and to learn, even in failure. They had to work together—a great preparation for business—and got to engage in a form of combat, of team competition, where no one got hurt."

"Barrett," Roski said, "is a brilliant man. He let the kids be themselves; he listened as well as talked, and he could see in their faces how they were learning both as individuals and part of larger team, and how that learning changed them. It changed him, too. The program really took off because of him."

Barrett loves the way BattleBots generated its own energy in students. Each member of the BattleBots crew, he says, gradually, over the course of the school year finds out where he fits in the team. Everyone has an important role, and everyone contributes to the overall quality of the Bot. Since a BattleBots program depends upon components of mathematics, the sciences, computers, reading and language, it's a school-wide venture. And thanks in no small part to Barrett's pioneering efforts in and dedication to applied technology, the former dining hall will become the Alice Gow Center for Science, Technology and Research.

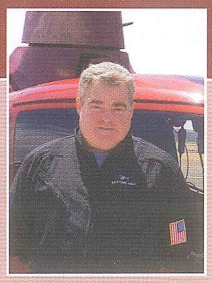
Barrett says his years at Gow have been marvelous. He loves the intimacy of a small school, the chance to connect with his students on so many levels—in the classroom or computer lab, on the athletic field as a lacrosse and cross-country coach, at the dining hall, in the machine shop and on the battlefield at a BattleBots meet. He's justifiably proud of the many, many students who have gone on from his classroom to a wide variety of university programs. The day I spoke with him he had received an email from a former student announcing his graduation from the prestigious Rochester Institute of Technology with a degree in engineering.

"The image that will live in my memory," Barrett says, "is of that young man at graduation, remembering the obstacles that confronted him when he came here, and now reveling in a sense of accomplishment." Barrett is too nice a man to say that the sense of accomplishment is in large part because of his dedication and involvement.

But we can say it. Well done, Mr. Barrett.

Writer Rick Ohler is a lifelong friend of The Gow School. His first book, "Have You Lived Here All Your Life? Not Yet," was published in July by Right Field Books. Visit www.rickohler.com.

Trey Roski '84
Inventor, Pilot, Loyal Alumnus



If you said that the Class of '84's Trey Roski understands the big picture, you'd be right on at least two accounts. In one of his many jobs, he's a helicopter pilot and owner of SkyTime Tours (www.skytime.com), a company that offers tourists a very big picture—of Mammoth Mountain, Mount Whitney and Yosemite National Park in California. But he also gets the big picture when it comes to education, and specifically education for students with dyslexia and other learning issues. When he co-founded BattleBots back in the '90s (he says a remote-controlled vacuum cleaner was the inspiration) and brought it to the Comedy Channel, he knew it offered an ideal hands-on, as well as theoretical learning experience encompassing design, fabrication, construction, operation and, finally, competition for kids who shared his learning style. That's why in 2000 he introduced BattleBots to headmaster Bill Patterson, teacher Vin Barrett and the Gow student body. With Roski's help the fighting machines were an instant hit and have become a fixture in the ever-growing Applied Technology Department.

Trey Roski is an easy man to talk to, especially if the talk is about his alma mater. Right now he helps in California by reaching out to students and their parents who are considering Gow. "It's a big decision, going to a boarding school. It was tough for me; any boarding school would have been. But I was so far from home that I knew there wouldn't be any weekends with my family. Essentially, I began to be raised by my peers." That's when the revelation occurred, he says. "You know, when you struggle as much in school as I did, you are always wondering why you can't read. What is wrong with me? Why don't others have these difficulties? Then I came to Gow, and I met a whole campus of students who had the same problems. That was the best thing about Gow. Finally I didn't feel different and I could focus on what special abilities I did have."

Eventually Roski went on to college at Cal State Long Beach and graduated in seven years with a degree in finance and real estate. But by then he knew that engineering was his real talent. "My hand-eye coordination is outstanding. Give me a helicopter to fly or a tractor to drive or a machine to put together, and it's easy. If I had to read about it, that was really hard, but if I could pick it up and touch it, I could figure it out. One hundred and fifty years ago, I imagine I would have been the village blacksmith, repairing, designing and fabricating and being an important member of the community."

These days he's no blacksmith (even though it's a good bet that he could manage that, too, if he set his mind to it), but he's one busy fellow. There's the helicopter tour business, and some government research he's doing on 3-D cameras and driverless vehicles. He still says that, "BattleBots are a large part of my day." And after a hiatus, his BattleBots will be back on TV on the Discovery Channel in 2013.

As for Gow, "I'll do anything they ask me to do," he says. Twenty-eight years after he graduated, he is still an important member of the Gow community.