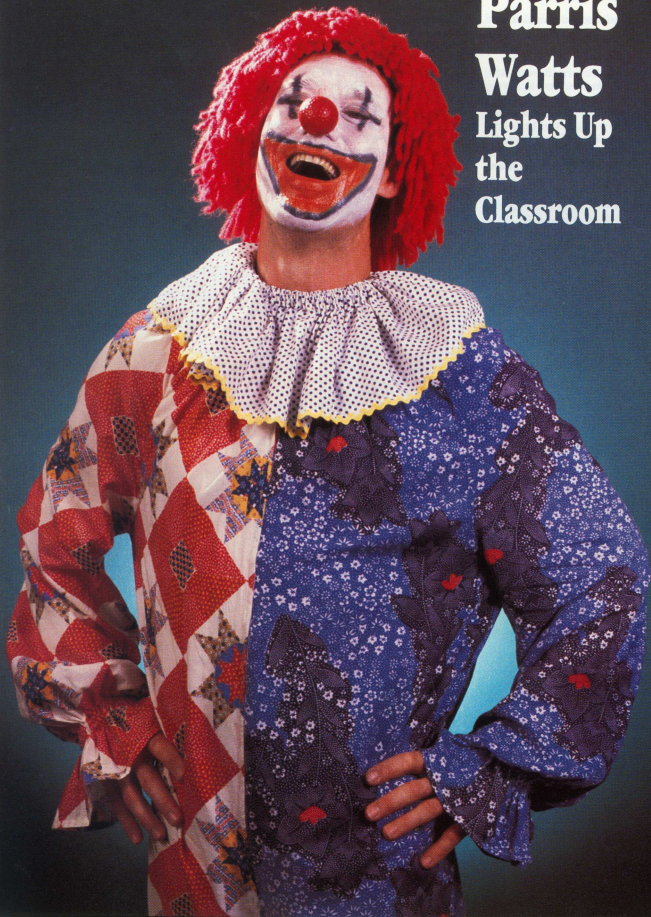


# Parris Watts Lights Up the Classroom



# **A** **AN ATMOSPHERE** of tension hangs thickly in the room. Palms sweat and stomachs churn after students hear Dr. Parris Watts, associate professor of health education, announce that it will be impossible to cover all the material that's supposed to be on the first 100-point test.

**A 30-POINT POP QUIZ** will be given today to help lighten the test load. The quiz, he says, will consist of true-and-false questions, a format Watts earlier promised the class he never would use.

Though the students aren't yet aware, the quiz material not only has not been covered in class discussion, but also is not in the class textbook. Welcome to stress management test day in Elements of Health Education!

After handing out the quiz, which is filled with typographical errors, Watts walks around jingling the change in his pocket. His manner is contemptible.

After five minutes pass, his demeanor explodes from obnoxious to angry. Watts accuses a preselected student of cheating, and in a rage, snatches the quiz from the student, informs him he gets a zero, and dismisses the student from class. The silence of the classroom is deafening.

Breaking into a huge smile, Watts announces to the class that they've just completed an exercise in stress management, and the whole episode was fabricated.

A resounding chorus of laughs, sighs and groans is heard, as students release buildup pressure.

An examination of how the students responded physiologically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually to the stress follows, providing a springboard for Watts' lecture on stress.

Since his arrival at Mizzou in 1981, Watts has become known for his unusual classroom techniques. He does ask his students to keep quiet about techniques like the stress test, but full class rosters give testimony that his classes are among the most popular electives on Campus.

"I always wanted to be and believed I would be a teacher," says the winner of the 1984 AMOCO Award for teaching excellence. "I had good teachers in high school. They were impressive role models. I said, 'Hey, I want to do that.'"

**AS AN 18-YEAR-OLD** senior at Truman High School in Independence, Mo., he was elected by his teachers to receive a scholar-

**ALTHOUGH** admitting he is a serious person, Dr. Parris Watts isn't afraid to reveal "the clown" in himself to his classes. "There are some whose initial reaction is, 'This guy can't be for real,' but generally I think they enjoy it."



**FRESH** teaching techniques are trademarks of Dr. Parris Watts, associate professor of health education. "I try to make their education experience relevant and practical," he says. That includes everything from a critique of students' lunches to counting caloric intake.

ship for the student judged most likely to become a successful teacher.

Nineteen years later, Watts is fulfilling that prophecy at UMC. Besides winning the AMOCO Award, he was the College of Education nominee for the 1985 Burlington-Northern Faculty Achievement/Teaching Award.

Another method he uses to teach Elements of Health Education is less harrowing, but just as effective as the stress management test. For personality development day, Watts asks students to bring an object to class that best describes their personalities. He then shows up in a multicolored clown costume, complete with makeup, a stringy red wig and unmatched tennis shoes. After a short class discussion of his costume, Watts turns the tables and asks the students how their object describes them.

"I wear the clown suit to break the ice," he says. "It's an instant rapport builder. There are those whose initial reaction is 'I can't believe this. This guy can't be for real.' But generally, I think they enjoy it."

From that point, Watts says, "it's like dominoes" as students share their objects

and describe how they reflect their personalities. Watts uses the students' descriptions as a launching pad for the day's lecture on personality.

The clowning also crumbles walls between teacher and students.

"I thought it was great that he could risk looking like a major-league fool in front of the class," says Danielle Dickerson, a junior theater education major from Festus, Mo. "You respect a teacher more if he tries something like that."

"By nature, I'm a very serious individual," Watts says. "I do expect a lot from my students. But the clown suit helps them to see that though I'm demanding, I'll be human, too."

**WATTS SUBSCRIBES** to the theory of "you get out of yourself and others what you expect." That's why he is constantly looking for new teaching approaches. He first used the clown costume, made by his wife and mother-in-law, at elementary health education carnivals while teaching at the University of Kansas. After coming to Mizzou, he

decided to try the concept with college students. Like personality development day, the stress management test was his own idea.

**"I HAD TO COME UP** with a way to make the lectures more meaningful," he says. "If there's anything I can do to make my teaching unique and bring it to life for them, I will."

According to Dickerson, his techniques are successful. "I thought it [the stress test] was for real. Everyone was upset. He could have just sat up there and talked about stress, but this way, everyone felt stress."

Students are also given the opportunity to express their feelings about dying in Elements of Health Education. Watts gives each Crayons and a blank piece of paper and tells them to draw their perception of death. Then the class is broken up into groups of five or six to discuss each other's drawings, and answer a list of 15 questions about death. Sexuality and nutrition are other topics explored.

Elements of Health Education is Watts' favorite because he is able to use a holistic approach to health education. Course content covers the emotional, physical, mental, social and spiritual realms.

"The course is intended to enhance the quality of life of the student. I see incredible changes take place in the lives of people," he says, such as weight loss, smoking cessation, formation of responsible drinking habits and a positive attitude toward exercise.

**RUNNING A CLOSE SECOND** to Elements of Health Education as his favorite is

his course, Education in Human Sexuality. He has seen students come to grips with their sexuality and replace anxiety and guilt with positive, wholesome attitudes. Misconceptions and myths about sex are brought into the class by students, says Watts, but by semester's end "they've made quantum leaps in knowledge and attitude toward sexuality."

Though many of his students are studying to become teachers, he exhorts all of them to become good sex educators of their children. Recent studies, Watts says, show that only 10 percent of American young people are getting quality sex education in their homes.

**SUCH GENUINE REGARD** for the welfare of his students and their future is one of Watts' greatest attributes, says Dr. Ralph Stewart, chairman of the health and physical education department. "He has a real sincere interest in the students, and they recognize that."

Terry Alexander, a senior music major from Montgomery City, Mo., noticed. "He knew my name and that really impressed me. He has the ability to talk on our level and get us to open up to him."

Watts says the key to open communication between teacher and student is maintaining a positive class atmosphere. "They're open because they realize there is nothing wrong with taking a chance and being wrong. The main thing is that we work together to get the right answer."

Devotion to hard work landed Watts the AMOCO Award. The award is a national program sponsored by the oil company, but

conducted on a campuswide basis. Each department chairman nominates a teacher. Nominations are publicized among students, who write supportive letters for the candidate of their choice. A nominee from each school and college is selected, and a panel of former award winners and students then selects the campus winner. The impact of winning the award, says Watts, was twofold.

**"IT WAS A HUMBLING** experience because it challenged me to go forth and do an even better job," he says. "Now I'm identified as an outstanding teacher, and I have a reputation to live up to. I think it also gave me more confidence. It is an affirmation from my students and colleagues that they've witnessed in me the qualities that earned me the right to be considered. It reinforced the desire to continue doing the things I've done."

Watts, a Christian, believes many of his educational approaches are an extension of his religious beliefs. The application of the principle of stewardship to an individual's health is a classic example, he says.

Watts, whom Stewart characterizes as "sincerely believing in and practicing what he teaches," is a model of good health. The thin, muscular 37-year-old runs eight to 10 miles a day, and chops enough wood to keep the furnace stoked at his New Franklin, Mo., home. A large garden and fruit orchard provide the Watts clan with a healthy two-thirds of its food supply.

"I try to model what I teach," he says. "There's an old saying, 'I'd rather see a sermon than hear one.' I go into my classroom daily believing that."

Watts is inspired by the example of Jesus Christ as a teacher.

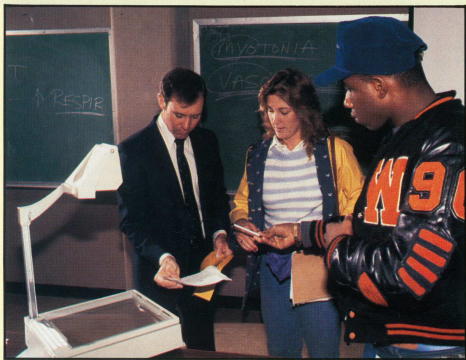
"He was the best teacher who ever walked the face of the earth. He had 5,000 who were waiting for every word that came out of his mouth, and I'm sure he didn't have to call his class to order."

Watts applies the same teaching principles on the baseball diamond. After moving to New Franklin, he was recruited to coach a Little League baseball team. Competitive running was the only organized sports experience Watts possessed, so he made numerous trips to the library to read up on baseball. Watts got permission from Mizzou baseball Coach Gene McArtor to sit in on his Coaching of Baseball class. Watts' teams have qualified for the state tournament three years running, and have a winning percentage of 90 over five seasons.

**WATTS' GOAL** is to establish a wellness lifestyle center, staffed by faculty and his former or current students, on the UMC Campus. Plans are currently in the works. Whatever the outcome, his primary goal as a teacher of health education remains the same.

"I want to help my students become the best they can become, often in spite of their limitations."

Watts' high-school teachers would be proud. □



**RAPPORT** with students is one of Watts' strongest attributes. Adjectives students use to describe him are personable, enthusiastic, open-minded, and knowledgeable.

"He knows some people are here because they have to be," says Ken Weber, a social studies major. "He takes that into account and makes the class enjoyable."