

BYE, BAKE

Beloved Andrews Academy English teacher retires after 40+ years in the classroom

by Amante Gonzalez
with David VanDenburgh

As Mr. Baker strides up to the chapel podium, there is an expectant buzz in the crowd. Whispering voices hush and students watch intently as Baker clears his throat and characteristically swings the microphone away from him so that he is forced to project his voice. No one knows exactly what the topic is going to be, but there is a feeling it is something different. Something in the air suggests that Baker has a new message to deliver to the students of Andrews Academy—a final message.

He begins by asking the student body a question: “If you could have anything in the world, what would it be? Would it be a bright red sports car, or something more down-to-earth?” And when Baker directs the question to himself, there is no doubt in any student’s mind what he would choose: Trains.

Baker begins to tell the story of a trip he took to Colorado several years ago. He cues a video clip. Blinking red lights, a railroad crossing, and the shrieking whistle of an oncoming train flash across the screen and echo through the chapel. As the train thunders closer, a middle-aged Baker realizes that two locomotives are linked together. The audience can hear Baker’s voice off-camera as he whoops, “A doubleheader! All right!” Everyone laughs at the show of pure delight as a youthful and ecstatic Baker cheers at the sight of the train, pumps his fists into the air, and smiles from ear to ear.

At the podium, Baker remains serious. He acknowledges that he likes trains—there’s no surprise there—but there’s something that he values even more. In his inimitable style, Baker intends to teach a lesson to the last.

He describes an episode of *The Wonder Years*, a video that he uses for his AP English class about the process of saying goodbye and the conflicting feelings that come with it. By now it is evident: Mr. Baker

is giving his goodbye speech, one many never expected to hear.

He shows a clip from the show in which Kevin Arnold, a junior high student who feels slighted when his teacher misses a tutoring session, says accusingly to his teacher, “I thought you were my friend.” The teacher responds, “Not your friend, Mr. Arnold, your teacher.” At this, everyone gives a slight chuckle due to the teacher’s apparent rejection. But Mr. Baker explains that the teacher is eager to mentor his student, preparing him to be able to do things on his own.

Mr. Baker’s final message is clear, and he leaves no room for misinterpretation: “I hope, after the many years I have been teaching here, that I have not been just a friend to you people. But instead, I hope I have been a good teacher, and in doing so became your friend.”

For 36 years, Mr. Thomas Baker has been a teacher and a friend to the students and faculty of Andrews Academy. The scores of students who return to AA years later to thank him for teaching them how to write or how to think, testify to the most enduring gift of friendship a teacher could ever give. He has worked determinedly to implement a rigorous and effective English curriculum, maintaining what he calls a “dogged and insane insistence on writing.” And his insistence on excellence led to the creation of several unique and challenging courses such as New and Old Testament Classics, Art of Autobiography, and Research Composition. Mr. Baker has also sought opportunities for learning outside of the classroom, forging strong ties with Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen in Austria and coordinating several tours to Austria and Germany since the 80s. Students continue to benefit from the German-language exchange program.

Closer to home, Mr. Baker has promoted culturally enriching programs through his literary interpretation class. Since the first



Right: Brent Geraty, (chair of the AA Board), Tom Baker, Gwen Baker, Robert Overstreet (AA principal), President Niels-Erik Andreassen



Below: The Andrews Academy cast of a school play directed by Tom Baker



production of *Our Town* in 1981, Mr. Baker has built a solid reputation in the community for directing stellar dramatic productions, including *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *We Shook the Family Tree*, *Matchmaker*, and most recently a return to a play he directed over a decade ago, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Members of his cast recall with admiration Baker's passion for extracting the subtleties of the text and his knack for helping them inhabit their roles. Their performances over the years have entertained and inspired. "Baker was always passionate and active. There was never a line that he made seem dull," said Dillon Zimmerman, who played the role of Stage Manager in *Our Town*.

The AA faculty has also benefitted immensely from Baker's passion, wisdom and friendship. His leadership and service on various academic and curriculum committees has been invaluable, placing the Academy on sound philosophical and academic footing. In the words of one student, "Although Baker is leaving Andrews Academy after this year, there is no doubt that he will never be forgotten. He will always have a lasting impression on our school. He will always be respected by both faculty and students. He will always be a legend."

There's a wonderful scene in the film *The Emperor's Club*—incidentally, it's also a movie Baker was fond of using in his classes—that captures the ethos of Mr. Baker's career. It is a powerful story about a teacher who inspires his students to be men of character and learning. Near the film's conclusion, the teacher, Mr. Hundert, is surrounded by a group of young men who were his students 25 years prior. Now, all these years later, with time to reflect on what their teacher had taught them, the men gather around their teacher, mentor and friend to present him with a plaque. The words on the plaque read:

"A great teacher has little external history to record. His life goes over into other lives. These men are pillars in the intimate structure of our schools. They are more essential than its stones or beams, and they will continue to be a kindling force and a revealing power in our lives."

Mr. Baker, their sentiment is ours: You are a pillar, and you will continue to be "a kindling force and a revealing power in our lives." Thank you for being our teacher, mentor and friend. ■

Amante Gonzalez is a senior at Andrews Academy; David VanDenburgh teaches English and serves as *Sanjo* sponsor

I Feel, Therefore I Write

Mr. Baker is a big part of the reason why I am a writer today. In my earlier school years, I did not like reading, and especially not writing. The constant bombardment of good literature as well as the incessant marking up of each paper by Mr. Baker helped to rectify this earlier opinion. With his rules and corrections, he allowed me to properly express my thoughts through writing. He provided me with a medium in which to be both professional and creative. It was as if I unknowingly had wings beneath my skin, and always felt uncomfortably tied down. Mr. Baker saw my potential to fly, and was willing to cut away the skin that held my wings down. Yes, at first I fought him, insisting that flying with language was not an option for me. But once I was free, I came to see his wisdom and I give thanks today for his persistence.

Many people get caught up with the idea that they cannot show anyone their work, for they do not want to be criticized. This falls under the category of "ignorance is bliss." But I have come to learn that without criticism, I cannot improve. My work is always far from perfect when I choose to show it to a friend or teacher. Those extra eyes—eyes that have not been staring at a computer screen for hours, unsure of what to fix—provide a perspective of what I can change to help me create the best possible product. This practice also applies to those who believe that their particular choice of bad grammar can be explained with the excuse, "that's my writing style." The blood vessels on Mr. Baker's forehead would visibly throb when a student tried to pass off their writing under this pretext. Bad writing is bad writing, regardless of style.

My best advice for writers who wish to improve is to find someone who is willing to edit your work—someone who understands your writing style and the points you wish to make. Someone who is unafraid to tell you that you need to stop blathering on about a specific detail and return to the subject at hand. Someone who wants to see you succeed. A polished product requires time and proper editing.

Mr. Baker provided me with the opportunity to see the errors in my work, allowing me to become a significantly better writer. This is why, even now, when I sit at my computer desk, trying to think of how to properly phrase a sentence or describe a sensation, I think of him. I hear his voice reading over the words that I put down, forcing me to edit as I write. I remove words or phrases that he would deem redundant or irrelevant. I can still see him pacing back and forth, one fist upraised, the other holding chalk, pointing at the board with enthusiastic rage, repeating, "commas do not end sentences!" This is a picture I hope to keep with me forever.

~Excerpt from tribute read by **Christian Bacchiocchi**, senior English major, at Baker's retirement reception