

# WARNER

educator

## Urban Education: Alumni and Students as Agents of Change

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Mary Ellen Burris: An Entrepreneurial Icon



Institute for Innovative Transition



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**On the Cover:**

DeVon Rodgers, a graduate of Rochester's School of the Arts, performs in a poetry slam, one of many partnership projects between the Warner School and Rochester's urban schools.



## From the Dean

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the creation of the College of Education at the University of Rochester, I have spent a considerable amount of time remembering our past and planning for our future, all the while actively managing the here and now. At the core of everything we do and all that we have planned is the Warner School's mission—a mission grounded in the complex, but pure belief that education can transform lives and make the world more just and humane.

Through research, the preparation of educational professionals and researchers, and our reform outreach and collaboration, we are at the forefront of important work. All of our efforts are designed to give good, committed, hardworking people the preparation, knowledge, and support needed to make change that will promote learning and positive human development.

As we embark on this year of celebration and reflection at the Warner School, we do so with a working theme of "Mission in Action," turning to the stories of our faculty, students, alumni, and community partners who are leaders and agents of change, making a difference for people, schools, organizations, and communities. We will enter classrooms and institutions and examine the ideas and research of scholars. We will witness the many forms our Warner mission takes as it ripples out into the community and globe, through our students and our graduates, and through the knowledge and innovation that is generated by our world-renowned scholars.

I invite you to enjoy the profiles in this issue of the Warner Educator and to visit the Warner Web site ([www.warner.rochester.edu](http://www.warner.rochester.edu)) and the new Warner blog ([www.warner.rochester.edu/blog](http://www.warner.rochester.edu/blog)) for more stories about the Warner mission in action and to engage with the Warner School in dialogue about important issues that shape the educating fields.

Raffaella Borasi

Dean and Frederica Warner Professor

## WARNER PERSPECTIVES

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### Education Blog

Please join the Warner School community as faculty and student bloggers share their opinions, research, reflections, and experiences. The Blog is a community space for dialogue and exploration of important issues that affect our students, the professions, and research and policy in education and human development.

[www.warner.rochester.edu/blog](http://www.warner.rochester.edu/blog)

# Urban Education:

## Alumni and Students as Agents of Change

High dropout rates, higher expectations to boost student achievement and parental involvement, teacher shortages and high turnover rates, and shrinking budgets make this a challenging time for urban education. As urban America faces increasingly greater challenges, highly-qualified, committed educators are desperately needed in today's classrooms.

Urban schools need help from graduate programs now more than ever as they look to colleges and universities to prepare quality educators who are committed to making sure all children learn and engage in ambitious intellectual learning.

The Warner School's commitment to urban education is clearest in the work of its students and alumni. Warner offers a range of programs that not only prepare knowledgeable, reflective, skilled, and caring educators, but also prepares them to meet these growing demands. Through passion, hard work, and a commitment to urban education, Warner alumni and students truly embody the School's mission of making a difference in individual lives as well as their fields and leading as agents of change in education.

"A mark of our students and graduates, alike, is that they are constantly arguing for change in education," explains Joanne Larson, Michael W. Scandling Professor of Education and chair of the teaching and curriculum program. "They are not afraid to advocate for change and children. They know what they are doing and why they are doing it and, therefore, always argue for doing the right thing."

Lynn Gatto, a Warner doctoral student who has devoted her life to transforming urban education, recently retired from a career as an elementary school teacher at Henry Hudson School No. 28 in the Rochester City School District. She describes a career in urban education as trial by fire. "If you got it, you burn brightly," says Gatto. "If you don't, you burn out. It takes a special kind of person to be an outstanding urban teacher."



Miriam Vasquez '90 (Ed.D.) with students at the Maria de Hostos Charter School in Rochester

It's clear that Gatto has what it takes. As the recipient of three prestigious teaching awards—including the 2007 Disney American Teacher Award, the 2004 New York State Teacher of the Year Award, and the 1998 Presidential Award—Gatto is not afraid to take risks. She credits her time at Warner for helping her to prepare for the many challenges in urban education.

"My graduate study has made me understand my own viewpoints in a more intellectual way and to articulate them better," she explains. "It has pushed me to take bigger risks and made me feel stronger about what I do—to no longer be afraid. It also has solidified my belief system."

She realizes the importance of not only being a social activist, but also of pushing her eight- and nine-year old students to be social activists. This past year, Gatto and her fourth grade class led their own reform movement by producing a documentary called "Lunch is Gross." Using this as a tool to integrate learning and teach students about the kind of social movement that aims to make gradual change, her class created the documentary for school administration with the goal of improving school lunches for everyone. The Rochester Area Health Foundation awarded Gatto and her students the Community Champion Award for their work on this project.

Warner alumna Miriam Vasquez '90 (Ed.D.) is another example of an educator who leads as an agent of change in urban education. After devoting the first 24 years of her career to working in the Rochester City School District as both a teacher and a

school principal, she ventured off to open a new bilingual school, Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School, in the City of Rochester in 2000 to improve the educational alternatives for city students. As a founding member and principal, she continues to lead Eugenio Maria de Hostos today.

Throughout her career, Vasquez's commitment to improving urban education, and her willingness to lead, have not wavered. "Starting the charter school was an opportunity to start something from the ground up," says Vasquez. "I couldn't pass it up and I've been pleased ever since. Because I've had the advantage of being part of the founding group, it has been rewarding to see our idea grow into the implementation stages and provide the charter school as a choice for families."

Vasquez, who brings strong organizational and finance skills, an instructional background, and an ability to work with a diverse group of people, believes experience leading an urban charter school helps to develop leaders who are thoughtful, knowledgeable, and reflective administrators and who are equipped to approach the challenges of urban education. "You really have to have a broad knowledge base," says Vasquez. "It's just you and the school—you don't have an entire district as a support system. So as an urban charter school leader, you get a tremendous wealth of experience and grow to become a stronger administrator."

Educators from urban charter schools share some of the same challenges that educa-

continued next page

tors encounter in urban public schools. "I think our biggest challenge today is trying to connect with parents and build a bridge that we need to work as partners to help children," she explains. "It's always a challenge to build that bridge."

Through the Urban Teaching and Leadership (UTL) Program, the Warner School provides a concentration in urban education to Warner School teacher candidates in both initial and professional certification programs that develops teachers for city schools who are skilled, committed to equity, and role models for other beginning teachers. Beyond the program's initiatives, UTL serves as a nexus for university, school, and community stakeholders to collaborate on solutions to some of the most significant challenges facing urban education.

Ninety percent of the candidates in the first cohort to complete this rigorous three-year program are now working in schools in Rochester, New York City and Boston, and after two years of successful urban teaching, most have begun to take on teacher leadership roles in service of their colleagues and students.

UTL alumna Joyce Akwaa '06 (M.S.), an elementary teacher at Clara Barton School No. 2 in the Rochester City School District, strives to create a classroom where both she and her students can become agents of change.

"The UTL program helped put me in the mindset of where my students' families are from, their background, and socioeconomic status, and to understand the issues, including crime and drugs, taking place in their neighborhoods," says Akwaa. "It has allowed me to create a classroom where my students try to improve these issues occurring within their own communities. For the issue of racism, they've created classroom forums on ways they can improve racism."

UTL alumna LaShara Evans '06 (M.S.), who teaches at The Children's School of Roch-

ester in the Rochester City School District, says that her biggest accomplishment as an educator has been taking her kids to a higher level of thinking and getting them to succeed in the face of adversity. "I work every day to make kids' lives better," Evans

says. "If I give them the reassurance to know that they can make a difference, then that gives them more confidence and control over learning. When kids take ownership of their learning it makes a difference in their experience as a student."

Evans' class participates in class council every Friday where her students put a class concern or an encouraging word or words anonymously into a box. As a class, they then openly discuss the concerns and acknowledge the encouraging words.

They also do daily chants as a way to get students motivated for the day.

Evans points to poverty as one of the biggest challenges that urban schools face today. "There's a cycle of poverty facing many children in urban education that's

hard to break," she says, "and often the blame is put on the child, not the aspect that contributes to it. We need to work together to bridge the gap between the schools and the community in order to address the needs of children."

Outside of the UTL program, several other Warner graduates continue to make great strides in urban education. Chereeze Hall '95 (M.S.), who devoted the beginning of her career as an elementary teacher and curriculum developer, can be found taking on teacher leadership roles in service of her colleagues.

"In urban education," she says, "you are a teacher one moment, a mother another, a nurse to some, a psychologist to most, and a therapist to many, and it's done with limited funds and limited sleep."

Hall, who has a true passion for helping both colleagues and students grow, has developed a profound level of trust among her colleagues who see her as a leader. Several colleagues seek her assistance and knowledge in planning and implementing their units of study for their students.

"If you are there as a sounding board, you can help other adult colleagues grow," explains Hall. "It is necessary to build and maintain these relationships because it facilitates student learning and growth. Teachers and students know the expectations and set goals for purposeful learning through hands-on activities and discussion."

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**"I work every day to make kids' lives better. If I give them the reassurance to know that they can make a difference, then that gives them more confidence and control over learning. When kids take ownership of their learning it makes a difference in their experience as a student."**

*—Lashara Evans '06 (M.S.)*

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Joyce Akwaa '06 (M.S.) with students at The Children's School of Rochester in 2006





## Mary Ellen Burris: An Entrepreneurial Icon for Wegmans' Customers

When Mary Ellen Burris '68 (Ed.M.), senior vice president of consumer affairs at Wegmans, joined the supermarket chain 37 years ago, she took her knowledge of human development and education into the corporate world to help build a successful company known for its attentiveness to, and focus on, customers.

"Adapting our practices to the changing needs and concerns of consumers is very important to the growing success of the company," she says.

In addition to earning the trust and respect of Wegmans' shoppers, Burris has also had a dramatic effect on the health and well-being of millions of families' shopping along the east coast.

Burris, an entrepreneur at heart, has been a powerful advocate for consumers since joining Wegmans in 1971. She continues to represent the voice of customers for Wegmans, which has been named one of the '100 Best Companies to Work For' by *FORTUNE* magazine for 11 consecutive years, ranking #1 in 2005 and #3 in 2008.

Burris began her career at Wegmans shortly after completing her master's degree in educational psychology, now human development, from the Warner School of Education, formerly the College of Education. Prior to joining and creating the consumer affairs position at Wegmans, she worked a

number of years for Cooperative Extension in New Jersey and later in upstate New York. Before that, she was an educator in a New Jersey school for two years, teaching food and nutrition.

With customers and stores throughout the east coast—including New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, and Maryland, and soon-to-be expanding into new states—Burris leads all of Wegmans' customer communications out of the company's Rochester, New York headquarters.

After listening intently to consumers' needs over the years, Burris has made it her priority to work inside the 71-store supermarket chain to help make the shopping experience better from within.

Burris devotes her time to addressing concerns of rising food prices, food safety, food quality, the obesity epidemic, and business practices that impact customers, the company, and the environment.

"The most significant challenge today is food safety," Burris says. "The endless recalls have made it obvious that identifying the root causes of contamination and tracing back to the source is very difficult."

She also focuses much of her attention to helping people find ways to live healthier, better lives through the Wegmans *eat well. live well.* program, part of which is 'The chal-

lenge', an eight-week program that she helped initiate to motivate people to make healthy everyday food choices and find balance in their busy lives.

In her leadership role, Burris oversees customer communications, including community relations, media relations, food safety and quality assurance, as well as the company's nutritionists and registered dieticians.

In addition, her weekly column in Wegmans' ads helps shoppers learn about what goes on behind the scenes to provide the products and services that make each store a great place to shop.

Wegmans' goal is to be the very best at serving the needs of its customers, and Burris recognizes that this success must be ignited from within. "We have to be sure that we are modeling care and respect, that we are empowering our people, and that we are making a difference in every community that we serve," she explains.

An enormous effort has gone into having Wegmans employees understand what the company's values are and how deviating from them will not lead to success.

"When your basic philosophy is that you can't be the best at serving the needs of your customers unless you fulfill the needs of your own people, then leadership is about being sure that you are, in fact, setting a vision and identifying and developing your people," she says. "The critical factor for me is feedback—it's listening and responding to the needs of your own people. And that's easy to do at Wegmans because it's at the heart of our philosophy."

Education is a part of Burris' life. In addition to sitting on the Warner School Dean's Advisory Committee, she also finds herself frequently applying her background in education to her current career at Wegmans.

"Understanding why people do what they do has been hugely important in a job that requires you to understand the motivations and the behavior of the customers and buyers," she says. "Consumer affairs is like sitting on a fence. You are the place where the customer meets the company and sometimes the desires are not common, so understanding human behavior and looking at things from not just two sides, but all sides, has been really critical to this role."



## Golisano Foundation and UR Launch New Institute for Innovative Transition

The Golisano Foundation has teamed up with the University of Rochester to launch an Institute for Innovative Transition. The partnership came as a response to the vital community need for effective transition information, programs, and services for young adults with disabilities and their families. Efforts will impact more than 900 families in Monroe County and focus on the transition from high school to adulthood.

The Institute for Innovative Transition will be led by Martha Mock, director, and Susan Hetherington, co-director. Mock and Hetherington both hold joint appointments as assistant professors in teaching and curriculum at the Warner School and in clinical pediatrics and education in the Department of Pediatrics in the Medical School.

The Institute will be housed at the Strong Center for Developmental Disabilities, a division of Golisano Children's Hospital at Strong. It is made possible thanks to a \$600,000 grant from the Golisano Foundation, which aims to improve the quality of life for young adults with developmental disabilities, and their families as they transition from school age to adulthood.

"Every child has dreams for the future, but students with developmental disabilities often have difficulty realizing those dreams," said Ann Costello, director of the Golisano Foundation. "After two years of study and research, we are very proud to see this Institute become a reality because it will fulfill a critical role in addressing serious gaps in services in our community that make it very difficult for students to move from high school to further education or employment. Older students with disabilities will be able to better

access services and new community-based options and have more opportunities to achieve their potential."

The new Institute will provide a robust and comprehensive set of initiatives to all constituencies—young adults with developmental disabilities, their families, schools, and adult service providers—involved in making transition a seamless, successful process. The services offered under this umbrella organization will include innovative pilot programs, improved information dissemination, technical assistance, training and professional development, and policy initiatives.

The Institute for Innovative Transition is timely for Monroe County, as low graduation and employment rates for these individuals are exacerbated by inconsistent transition planning and lack of employment and internship opportunities.

"This investment is a testament to the confidence that the Golisano Foundation has in the Rochester community to improve the staggering low graduation and employment numbers for people with developmental disabilities," said Mock. "Securing employment, and the confidence that comes from

meaningful school experiences that lead to employment, is crucial for adolescents with developmental disabilities to become contributing members of our community."

Families, students, agencies, and schools have been, and will continue to be, fundamental to this effort.

The Institute has already developed a number of key partnerships with organizations, including the Finger Lakes Developmental Disabilities Services Office (FLDDSO), Midwestern Regional Transition Coordination Site, Monroe I BOCES, Monroe 2-Orleans BOCES, the Rochester City School District, and adult-service providers such as Lifetime Assistance and the Arc of Monroe.

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"Every child has dreams for the future, but students with developmental disabilities often have difficulty realizing those dreams."

—Ann Costello, director of the Golisano Foundation

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"For transition to be successful, students

with developmental disabilities and their parents need partners from across the community," explained Jeanne Ricigliano, the parent partner at the Midwestern Regional Transition Coordination Site. "When these students transition, they are transitioning into the real world—our community, so it's important for them to have community partners that can build opportunities, be a resource, and, most importantly, be a champion. Everyone needs a champion, and that's especially the case for children with disabilities."

## Student Profile: Banister Steps Up as Rochester Surround Care Community's New Leader

As a child, Iris Banister, a Warner doctoral student in counseling and human development, required neighborhood friends to attend her backyard "school" equipped with chairs from the kitchen and desks made from the cardboard boxes she collected from her family's corner store.

"When I was three years old, I determined that I wanted to be a teacher, and I have been teaching ever since," says Banister, executive director of Rochester Surround Care Community, formerly known as the Rochester Children's Zone.

The nonprofit organization, which focuses on a more holistic approach of improving community life and helping children and families achieve in neighborhoods in northeast Rochester, was created to advocate for all children, their families, and the community that surrounds them. The Rochester Surround Care Community seeks to provide life skills, nutrition, job readiness training, and financial planning and credit counseling services to residents.

The goal is to turn one of the city's neediest neighborhoods into a productive and progressive place to live.

By the time she got to high school, Banister was filling out medical forms and reading documents for adults in her community who couldn't read. In college, she taught reading, writing and math to migrant children and volunteered as a public school tutor. Since then, she has earned a reputation for her work with Rochester's children in various roles with the Rochester City School District and, most recently, as executive director of Wilson Commencement Park, a transitional housing development for low-income, single-parent families striving toward stability.

In her newest position, Banister frequently attends meetings and pounds the pavement to learn what dreams residents and business owners have for their community.

One source of inspiration has been her dissertation work on the rise in violence she has witnessed in recent years among girls in particular, a trend she attributes to attachment issues in early childhood.

"The neighborhood I'm trying to create is the neighborhood I grew up in," she explains of her upbringing in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. "It was a very close community, middle class, basically African American. There was a high value on education and health. And it was safe."

Banister decorated the organization's new headquarters on Central Avenue with craft dolls she has collected from around the world. They hang, they sit, and they stand. "They're constant reminders that this is all about the children," she says.

Some of the miniature children are from West Africa, where, in 2001, she was crowned Queen Mother Nana Ama Bortsewa I of the township of Winneba, Ghana. Responsible, in part, for the growth of women and children there, she has sponsored the building of a dental clinic, provided education on family planning and AIDS awareness, and is currently sponsoring construction of a children's library at the Winneba University of Education. When she visits, Banister does radio shows that are translated into 32 indigenous languages.

Despite the geographic distance and cultural differences between Winneba and Rochester, Banister realizes that families everywhere want the same basic tools to be happy and healthy and to set up their children for success. She looks forward to her efforts here at home producing equally promising results.

The toughest part of her job, she says, is generating a belief among all partners that their goals can indeed become reality.

"If you can believe it," she says, "your heart can conceive it and you will achieve it."



## University Establishes New Donor Recognition Society

The University has established the George Eastman Circle to honor the distinguished donors who provide leadership Annual Fund support to any of the University's schools and units, including many areas within the Medical Center. It is the only society to recognize Annual Fund Giving across the entire University.

Annual Fund gifts have a significant impact in every area of the University. They are, by definition, unrestricted, current-use funds that provide the head of each school, unit, or department with maximum flexibility for responding quickly to new opportunities or to meet unexpected needs. In the Warner School, these funds typically support operations, educational programs, scholarships, research, and similar initiatives.

The George Eastman Circle is more than a donor recognition program. It is an opportunity for the University's alumni, parents, and friends to join together to strengthen and advance the University as it enters the next transformational period in its history. Members will have access to programming that highlights and celebrates the University's greatest achievements.

Member status will be granted to supporters who make a pledge at one of the following annual levels:

MEMBERS	\$1,500 - \$4,999
FELLOWS	\$5,000 - \$9,999
BENEFACTORS	\$10,000 - \$24,999
PATRONS	\$25,000 - \$49,999
FOUNDERS	\$50,000+

Members of the George Eastman Circle will help the University provide even greater service to the community and world. By joining together, they are honoring the legacy of one of the University's greatest benefactors, George Eastman.

For more information on becoming a Member of the George Eastman Circle, please contact Preston Faulkner at (585) 275-2454 or [pfaulkner@warner.rochester.edu](mailto:pfaulkner@warner.rochester.edu).



# Kigunda Builds Special School in Kenya

In Kenya, where Warner School alumnus Joseph Kigunda '86 (M.S.) grew up and now lives, it is not uncommon for the Maasai people to marry off their young daughters to old men. So when Kigunda's 11-year-old daughter asked if her 10-year-old Maasai girlfriend could live with them and attend school instead, he agreed.

Later that year, after hearing Kigunda explain the community benefits of education, the girl's father donated five acres of land for a school that would give orphans and other vulnerable children—those who have disabilities or have been rescued from early marriages and forced circumcision—special education services and the skills they need to be independent in the future.

Kigunda and his wife, Jennifer, started the Tania Integrated Rehabilitation Centre nearly nine years ago.

Named after a stony hill on the bed of Kenya's Great Rift Valley, Tania is located in the pastoral heart of Maasai land, an area that starts about 12 miles south of Nairobi and extends to the Tanzanian border. Its people wear traditional clothing and live the same way they have for centuries. Before the school opened, children often were abandoned at home while their parents searched for green pastures for their cows.

Being proprietor of such a place can be overwhelming. When the challenges of providing education, shelter, meals and love to more than 100 underprivileged children gets to be

too much, Kigunda gets out of bed in the middle of the night to seek God's guidance. That happens most often when food is scarce.

One exciting development is the construction of a modern girls' dormitory (at a U.S. cost equivalent of \$30,000). But funds are needed for much more, including a boys' dormitory, dining room, kitchen, classrooms and a dispensary.

And school fees only go so far.

"We sometimes get support from individuals, well wishers and the church," says Kigunda, but it's not even enough to meet all of the school's regular expenses. As a result, he often spends his afternoons—and at times his evenings—searching for donations of food and other materials.

Kigunda has a history of making progress in underrepresented areas. For example, as Kenya's Ministry of Education inspectorate in charge of special education in 1987, he was instrumental in developing and documenting Kenyan sign language. Within a year, the Kenyan Government established a commission, on which Kigunda served as

secretary, to explore the teaching of deaf children. Today, sign language in that country is commonly used at meetings, on television and in books used by the Methodist Church.

Meanwhile, Tania has introduced farming to the Maasai community as a means of livelihood and has established the missionary-based Tania Community Church there.

To relax at night, Kigunda leads the under-10 crowd in his house (home to several relatives and friends) in storytelling and drama sessions that focus on African folk tales and Bible lessons.

"This is so enjoyable for all of us," he says, then adds with a chuckle, "it also keeps me awake as I do not go to sleep early."

