Stepping foot inside a different classroom on campus

by Rachael Gerendasy | Hatchet Staff Writer

Bernard Demczuk teaches a class of high school students from the School Without Walls at the Multicultural Student Services Center earlier this month.

For a few hours each week, one of GW’s top administrators trades his Rice Hall office for a classroom of 15 rowdy high school students.

Bernard Demczuk, the University’s chief city liaison, teaches a class on black history at School Without Walls, in which he tells stories about working with civil rights activists who gathered on GW’s campus in the 1970s and helps students take action, like planning a protest against the contentious killing of Florida teen Trayvon Marvin.

Demczuk is one of a handful of GW administrators and faculty who teach at the high school, which has sat on G Street for more than 40 years and draws some of the city’s most gifted students.

GW has fostered a close-knit relationship with the magnet high school by offering mentorships to School Without Walls students and sharing classrooms and faculty. The high schoolers frequently use meeting space in the Multicultural Student Center as the group works to help mentor the students.

Demczuk has taught the class on African American history for more than a decade. He started out by giving talks at the school several times a week and decided to teach there permanently.

“My students can walk around the campus and tell you all the black history sites,” he said. “Most kids can’t do that.”
Demczuk frequently invites his GW colleagues to serve as guest lecturers. Sociology professor Richard Zarnoff comes to discuss the history of African Americans in baseball, and American history professor Jim Miller tells stories of the Harlem Renaissance.

“We can’t ignore each other. We are a part of what Dr. King referred to as the beloved community,” Demczuk said of the two schools.

John Ralls, one of the leaders of GW’s Office of Operations, teaches a weekly sociology class at the high school, which he says helps him in his role at GW.

“Urban public schools need a lot of support, so I think that it’s important that Universities in particular play a role in helping partner with schools. Plus, being around younger students is invigorating, it’s refreshing,” said Ralls, the senior associate vice president of operations administration.

Over the years, the neighborhood has evolved from a vibrant community to a mostly homogenous area punctuated by the high school, which is known for its diversity.

“What’s interesting now is this is a white community, and a black high school within it. So it’s just turned upside down,” said Demczuk, who has a doctorate in African American history.

Zawadi Carroll, a senior in Demczuk’s class, said the diversity of the District makes a class on African American history especially important.

“Learning African American culture is important, especially in D.C., because we have a lot of black history here. It coincides with American history, and as a black person, it’s interesting and it makes me feel empowered,” Carroll said. “He lets us learn visually, musically and we go out in the city and do things too.”

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