

# Cape Elizabeth students to feel absence of teacher and friend

● Joseph Conroy retires next month after 32 years of teaching individuals how to think.

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Staff Writer

**CAPE ELIZABETH** - Joseph P. Conroy knows more than his students' names and seat assignments.

He knows that one is trying to quit biting her nails. Another, he understands, has worked hard to overcome a learning disability and has qualified for an upcoming athletic competition. And the boy with his head down on his open literature

text is listening to the lesson, though he often has trouble expressing his thoughts.

Cape Elizabeth High School students and teachers say Conroy, an educator there for 32 years, has a rare talent. Yes, he teaches literature, grammar and the beauty of poetry. But he also teaches teenagers about self-assurance - using a decidedly personal approach.

Conroy, the senior member of the high school's teaching staff, has decided to pass that responsibility to

his younger peers. He'll retire next month when school ends. This year's senior class recognizes his contributions by asking him to speak at graduation June 11.

"He works so hard as a teacher that it makes you want to work hard," says Pam Stevenson, a senior.

Another senior, Max MacDonnell, said a sophomore English class he taught by Conroy was one of the best classes he's had.

"He really likes and respects his students and they realize that and respect it," said Betsy Wiley, head of the English Department. Knowlton

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Staff photo by Gordon Chibroski

**Joseph Conroy, on the job in his classroom. He plans a new career in real estate.**

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## TEACHER

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and understanding of individual students is the hallmark of a professional teacher, she said, and it is a skill Conroy has honed particularly well.

Conroy is modest about his effect on the 4,000 or so young people he has taught throughout his career.

He jokes about having taught two generations of Cape Elizabeth residents — and notes that he wants to stop before he gets grandchildren of previous students.

“He has touched so many kids in this high school,” said Principal Rick DiFusco, who has known Conroy for 15 years. “When you run into graduates, their first comment is, ‘Is Mr. Conroy still there?’”

“He really represents the institution in many ways.”

### School is his life

Conroy is lively and gray-haired, with bushy eyebrows and glasses that hang on a cord around his neck when he isn't wearing them. He will give his age only as “plus 50 — other than that, very youthful.”

He lives in South Portland with his wife, Elizabeth (Ibby), a registered nurse. Their four children, Joseph, John, Paul and Ann, range in age from 21 to 28.

Conroy's hobbies, as well as his teaching career, revolve around the school on Ocean House Road. He relaxes before and after classes by building furniture in the industrial arts room. He runs, swims and lifts weights in the school's athletic facilities.

He chats with students in the

gym, the industrial arts room and the halls — and sometimes slips into the band room to listen to them play their instruments.

### Wanted to be a doctor

Conroy was born in Portland, the son of Irish immigrants who taught him and his six siblings to love reading and value education. After graduating from Cheverus High School, he went to St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, intending to become a doctor.

The turning point in his life came when he was drafted into the Army after the Korean War. He served with an infantry division in Korea, where he read everything he could get his hands on. He said he learned “that I was not so smart. I learned there were other skills besides intellectual skills. I learned to be my own man, make my own judgments.”

He went to work at the American Can Co. in Portland after two years in the military, then decided to try teaching. He was hired at Freeport High School in 1959. He has been at Cape Elizabeth High since 1962, including a decade during which he also taught writing at the University of Southern Maine.

### Each student a challenge

Conroy struggles to describe how he teaches. Helping teen-agers fathom a poem, for instance, is “like taking the petals back on a rose that may be closed.”

But of teaching them self-assurance, he said, “there's no strategy for that. None whatsoever. There's a lot to it. You can't bottle it.”

Among the students he remembers best are those who challenged him.



Staff photo by Gordon Chibroski

Joseph Conroy discusses an assignment with Sarah Bond, a student at Cape Elizabeth High School. The popular English teacher is retiring next month after 32 years at the school.

One, a young man who graduated a number of years ago, he recalls as “a person who came in here with a chip on his shoulder.” The youth was mortified when asked questions in class. His homework, Conroy said, was “slovenly, and junk work.”

Conroy set about to change that. He drew the boy aside in the halls and talked with him. In class, he slowly worked on the boy's self-confidence.

One day, he'd ask the boy to recite the homework assignment from his desk. Then, he'd get the youth to

stand up beside his desk and speak. By the end of the year, he had him in front of the class at the chalkboard.

That personalized approach and emphasis on each student shows in Conroy's classroom. A favorite saying of his is tacked up on a bulletin board: “I know I'm somebody because God don't make no junk.”

### A day in the life

It's the last period of the day, just weeks from the end of school, and the sophomores are filing in. They are obviously tired. Conroy is not.

“You cannot be flagged,” he says.

“You cannot be unenergetic. It's like the concert pianist who practices all year for one concert. You have to be on.”

He never sits at his desk during a class, preferring to pace the front of the room with, as he says, his “antenna up.” Or, he joins the class at a student desk.

His first order of business is checking homework, which he assigns daily. He says he can tell by a student's handwriting how much they've been able to overcome their tentativeness.

Students, he says, “first need some kind of assurance or certainty that they can do the work, and that their work will be respected.”

One boy admits, “I'm totally clueless on this homework. I tried.”

“All right,” Mr. Conroy says, “as long as you tried.”

But don't think he's easy. Students who don't work up to their abilities may end up doing their lessons over. Conroy says he's looking for neatness and “expansiveness of idea or concept.”

In other words, he is trying to teach the teen-agers how to think.

Today's lessons are two poems, “I Am Raftery” by Anthony Raftery and “Requiem” by Robert Louis Stevenson. Most of the hour-long class is spent on the first one.

Conroy coaxes his class through the short poem line by line. Using the approach of Greek philosophers, he doesn't lecture, but asks questions so students will have to reason through their own answers.

He writes the word “perception” on the chalkboard. “Does he have perception?” he asks of the poet. “I don't understand it.”

Later, he talks about contrasting lines in the poem. “Would you explain the contrast?” he says to a girl. “I don't see it.”

The students must explain — and by doing so, they learn. “The focus is on them,” he says. In fact, at the beginning of the year he tells students he is “a tool” for them.

He prompts the sophomores in this class to talk about differences among people, about prejudice, about persisting with beliefs.

Part of his design this day is to let a boy who helped launch the lesson draw its conclusion. The student stumbles a bit, but comes up with an answer that satisfies his teacher: “If you feel that you're filled with, maybe, love . . . and you want something really bad . . . if you want to do something, you should do it no matter what anybody says.”

### 'Blessed to be a teacher'

Conroy essentially followed that idea himself — and couldn't imagine having spent his life any other way.

“I was blessed to be a teacher,” he said, insisting he doesn't know how or why he became one. “I don't know why I'm one of the fortunate ones who fell into a career that enriched him. I've enjoyed every moment of it.”

Upon his retirement in June, Conroy plans to pursue full-time a career as a real-estate broker. He also may return to Cape Elizabeth High next year to teach an English class. Wiley said there will be some freshmen who need concentrated help — just the kind of challenge Conroy enjoys.

Wiley said 130 teachers applied for Conroy's job and two other English teaching posts that are open. But she and DiFusco, the principal, say Conroy is irreplaceable.

“There'll be someone in Room 211,” DiFusco said, “but it won't be the same.”