

2012 Mentor Award for Lifetime Achievement - Jean DeSaix

If you are one of the very large number of fellow faculty members, post-doctoral fellows, graduate students, undergraduates, or a member of the many committees and working groups that Jean DeSaix has nurtured for almost 40 years at UNC, your life has almost certainly benefited from her wisdom, commitment, boundless energy, and good will toward all people. A Senior Lecturer in the Biology Department at UNC, Jean is gifted at mentoring fellow faculty members and students in making professional decisions and helping them develop skills essential for success. As one of her fellow lecturers describes her, “Jean has served as a pre-health advisor for 15 years. ... Between meeting with admissions folks, taking trips to learn more about certain programs around the country, or sending e-mails back and forth to needy students—this is not an activity that could be fit into a discrete 8 hours. I never hear Jean complain about this—she loves all of these interactions. ... [And] Jean has been a mentor to me, since I started my faculty position in 2004. She guides in a way that makes me learn for myself. Besides the tangible details of what I learned about how to manage a 400+ person classroom from her, what I admire most about Jean’s mentoring are the aspects of role modeling that are hard to put a finger on.” Jean’s leadership and professional influence on others reach beyond the campus and across the state of North Carolina. A physician at another university writes, “I have also witnessed her counseling and advising her peers in the statewide organization HPANC (Health Professions Advisors of NC), where she has served as president.”

In a large academic department such as Biology, students need a place they can call home, someone with whom they connect, who listens to their current concerns and long-term aspirations, who offers clear input and direction, and who joins with them on their professional and personal journeys. For the many students she has mentored, Jean DeSaix serves in that role. Numerous students have written to the Awards Committee telling their “Jean stories” and urging the University to honor this very special person. One student tells of joyously receiving an e-mail from Jean at 4 a.m. one morning because somehow Jean understood that this student was in need of a caring message at that time. Another writes about adopting Jean’s home as her “home-away-from-home,” never leaving Jean’s house without leftovers to take back to her dormitory room. A third recounts a time when she left her calendar in Jean’s office, only to receive an immediate e-mail from Jean informing her about the calendar and including a list of the student’s appointments for the day in case the student did not have time to return to Jean’s office that day to retrieve the calendar. These are some of the personal touches that students recount, explaining how Jean has provided them with the emotional support they have needed to thrive in this academic setting.

Jean and her husband Peter are advisors to the Episcopal Campus Ministry, taking students on yearly beach retreats, having students to their home regularly, being “... constantly in motion during Tuesday night meetings, orchestrating cooks in the campus kitchen, baking famous DeSaix bread for students, rescuing recyclables from the trash, and facilitating discussions ... about Habitat Partnership meetings.” Her leadership and mentoring in organizations goes on and on.

One student sums up the sentiments expressed by so many, “I cannot think of anyone more deserving of such a prestigious award, not because she has acted as a mentor for me over the last decade, but because my story is not unique. Everyone who comes in contact with Jean is touched by her warm spirit and her dedication to students. She is one of those outstanding people who puts endless amounts of good into the world by making those who know her into better people.”

On behalf of all those whose lives you have touched, and as a statement of this University’s appreciation for your commitment and contributions, we are honored to present the 2012 Mentor Award for Lifetime Achievement to you, Jean DeSaix.