

## LIGHTING THE WAY

Presenting the winners of the 2011 Outstanding Commitment to Teaching Awards

by Lindsey Lowe

Four University of Alabama educators were recently presented the National Alumni Association's Outstanding Commitment to Teaching Award. Since 1976, 141 UA professors have received the OCTA, which honors those whose dedication to teaching transcends the classroom. As they lead students to academic success, they also instill in them a fervor for learning, a boldness to dream big and the confidence to believe in themselves.

### Jannis "Jan" Brakefield

Jan Brakefield understands the importance of her role in students' lives. "The whole world looks to teachers as examples—beacons lighting the way," she said. "It wants to have faith in the knowledge that teachers are the greatest source of truth, goodness, inspiration and hopefulness."

Brakefield received her bachelor's and master's degrees from UA and earned her Certified Financial Planner certification from the College for



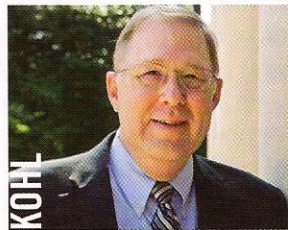
Financial Planning in Denver, Colo. After working for nearly 20 years at First Alabama Bank in Tuscaloosa, she joined the University faculty in 1994.

She serves as assistant professor in the College of Human Environmental Sciences' consumer sciences department, as well as Financial Planning Program director and CHES Public Relations Committee chair. Brakefield developed and implemented the Crenshaw Leadership Academy, which invites faculty-selected students in the college to a retreat focused on leadership development, fellowship and enrichment. Additionally, each summer she conducts a financial literacy youth camp called Camp Cash, to teach kids ages 11 to 14 money management skills.

Brakefield believes her most important task as a teacher is to encourage students to envision themselves as someone successful. "Every student deserves a chance to live their life in their own way . . . to be able to go for it, whatever 'it' is for them," she said.

### Lawrence Kohl

At modern universities, teaching is sometimes a secondary focus, eclipsed by research or technological advancements. But Dr. Lawrence Kohl, associate professor of history, understands that teaching is a monumental task. "We are handing on to the next generation the best



of what we already know," he said. "It is a time-honored purpose, carried on in a time-honored way by people with the time-honored title of teacher."

Kohl graduated with his bachelor's degree from Harvard University and went on to receive his master's and doctorate from the University of Michigan. After a stint at Fordham University in New York City, Kohl joined the UA faculty in 1987. He has since served as the interim chair, director of graduate studies and director of undergraduate studies for the history department in the College of Arts and Sciences. He is also active in UA's honors program and Blount Undergraduate Initiative.

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—Jan Brakefield

In 2010, he received the Last Lecture Award, for which he gave a presentation answering the question, “If this was your last time to address a group of students, what would you say to them?”

His area of expertise is the political history of the decades immediately preceding the American Civil War. He wrote *The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character of the Jacksonian Era*, which is now in its sixth paperback printing, and has served on the advisory board for the Papers of Andrew Jackson, a project to collect and publish Jackson’s entire literary record. Additionally, he has edited books and appeared in documentaries about the Civil War.

Wanting to pass along his passion for teaching, Kohl created the first course on “Teaching History” ever offered to graduate students at the University. While enthusiastically teaching his students about the past, he also wants to serve as a motivator for their present and future. “We are all where we are today because someone inspired and encouraged us when we needed it,” he said.

### Patrick LeClair

Dr. Patrick LeClair’s students are a testament to his devotion to getting it right. He is committed to sticking with them as they wade through the murky waters of learning physics, which isn’t always easy. “Sometimes it seems to require

superhuman levels of patience to keep explaining something in different ways when students aren’t understanding, and a commensurate level of optimism that they will understand if you keep at it,”



LeClair said. “The most amazing thing is that they almost always reward your patience and optimism.”

After graduating with his bachelor’s degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and his doctorate from Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands, LeClair held a three-year post-doctoral position at MIT. In 2005, he joined the UA physics and astronomy department in the College of Arts and Sciences. Now an associate professor, he has served as undergraduate director for the department since 2008. He developed a computerized laboratory system for electricity and magnetism labs, redesigned the “Modern Physics” laboratory and wrote a textbook for the algebra-based electricity, magnetism and optics course. He also implemented an introductory course for potential astronomy and physics students in conjunction with Dr. Ray White, department chair.

LeClair has set high goals for his department, and he is committed to putting in the effort to foster a better program for his students. He has pioneered the use of social media as a means of interaction with them, and is passionate about igniting their fires for learning and engaging them in the curriculum. “If you’re not excited about what you’re teaching, the students never will be either,” LeClair said. “They can always tell.”

### Seth Panitch

Seth Panitch had a dream of being a classical performer, and he made that dream come true. These days, his aspi-

ration is a little different: he wants to lead his students to achieving their own dreams, an opportunity he views so significant that he likened it to that of a heart surgeon. “No, I don’t hold anyone’s heart in my hands during acting class,” he said. “I hold something infinitely more profound. I hold their dreams, something more delicate than flesh.”

Panitch earned his bachelor’s degree from Occidental College in Los Angeles and his master’s from the University of Washington Professional Actors Training Program. In 2005, he joined the theatre and dance department in the UA College of Arts and Sciences, where he now serves as associate professor of acting and director of the BA and MFA acting programs. He has directed 10 productions for the department, as well as countless others around the country (Panitch incorporates his students into as many of these as possible). *Dammit Shakespeare*, which he wrote and directed, boasted a student cast and played Off Broadway, providing many of the actors with their first New York performing experience. His students were also featured in his documentary *A Night in the Theatre*. In 2008, Panitch became the first American to direct a play in Cuba in decades—*The Merchant of Venice*. A year later, he took a UA group to Havana to appear with Cuban performers in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

His most cherished role is the one he steps into when he stands before a room full of eager eyes, all holding the same dream he had. This is the one that brings him the most challenge, but also the most pride. “We teachers, we share the highest responsibility,” Panitch said. “We are entrusted with a young person’s dreams for a better tomorrow. For me, there is no finer honor.”

