An Introduction to Dr. Margaret Rose Torrell
by Joanna Russo (class of 2012)

Allow me to present Dr. Margaret Rose Torrell as one of the finest examples of what students should be striving to emulate. I sat down with her in her office and after only a few minutes I was convinced that her heart pumps a love of education that flows through her veins. Although she is quite possibly the busiest person I have ever met, I suggest that everyone try to grab at least a quick conversation with her during your time at Old Westbury. While some of us are only able to get a brief glimpse of Dr. Torrell as she’s running off to her next class or meeting, I’ll give the gist of what you could discover about this perpetually on-the-run gem of a guru.

Dr. Torrell’s journey is both impressive and relatable. She attended Long Island University at the C.W. Post campus where she received her B.A. in English Education, followed by her M.A. in English. Upon the completion of her master’s degree she enrolled in the English doctoral program at New York University. She spent four semesters there and did very well, but due to family health issues, Dr. Torrell needed to leave her studies and work full time. For several years she focused on developing her teaching career. During this time she started teaching at SUNY College at Old Westbury in the English Department. When she was finally able to revisit the pursuit of her doctorate she specifically targeted St. John’s University because their focus on composition studies and multicultural literature closely matched the curriculum at SUNY Old Westbury. It was from St. John’s University that Dr. Torrell earned her Doctorate of
Art in English, although she doesn’t mind if you still refer to her as “Professor Torrell” because, as she says, “The title of ‘professor’ is always near to my heart because it means teacher and that’s the profession I love.”

Dr. Torrell’s career has been decorated with awards and achievements. Dr. Torrell was honored at the Alumni Association’s Twenty-Second Annual Awards Dinner with the award for Excellence in Education in Fall 2011. She also received awards for Outstanding Student Service in 2004 and 2008. She has published articles on writing instruction and disability studies. Her recent publications include: “Plural Singularities: The Disability Community in Life Writing Texts,” an article about how the depiction of others in an autobiography can help to build awareness of a disability community, recently published in *The Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, and “On Nancy’s Husband George: Masculinity, Disability and Sex After Cancer” published in a critical anthology on Nancy Mairs. She has forthcoming book chapters on disabled masculinity in *The Mad Woman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Disability, and Discourse* and *New Directions in Disability Theory*. In her academic writing, Dr. Torrell continues to focus on working out the complexities of the intersections between disability and masculinity. She also dedicates a lot of her energy towards research in writing across the curriculum.

However, amongst the student population in our English Department, Dr. Torrell is more known for her contributions within the SUNY Old Westbury community. She designed the course Extraordinary Bodies: Disability in Literature as part of the department’s focus on multicultural literature, a course which asks students to identify and reconsider assumptions they may have about disability and bodies. She has taught English Literature I and II, Literature across Cultures II, English Composition I, and a variety of English Composition II courses,
including The Lyric which she developed. She currently teaches Senior Seminar I and II at the undergraduate level and has taught Foundations of English Literature and Rhetoric and Composition at the graduate level. It seems as though Dr. Torrell has been affected by the autobiographical nature of the Senior Seminar I course. Lately she has found that autobiographies have the most potential in terms of literature’s power to transform the way people think. She says, “Life writing can restructure the way the autobiographer herself thinks about the world and it can also give readers a roadmap for conceptualizing new ways to understand themselves and the world.” Some of her favorites include Audre Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of my Name, Nancy Mairs’s Waist High in the World, Eli Claire’s Exile and Pride, Liz Murry’s Breaking Night, and Jeanette Walls’s The Glass Castle.

Outside of her classes, Dr. Torrell is the Chair of the English Department and the Coordinator of the Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) Pilot Program. She is also the faculty advisor of Sigma Tau Delta, the SUNY Old Westbury chapter of the International English Honor Society. Her past roles include serving as the Coordinator of Writing Programs, the Writing Consultant for the Early College in High School Programs, the Chair of the Appointment, Reappointment, Tenure, and Promotion Committee, the Coordinator of the Language House Writing Center, and the Co-Chair of the Student Life Committee. She is both an academic advisor and a senior thesis advisor and is involved in many educational initiatives on the campus. I wasn’t kidding when I said that Dr. Torrell was one of the busiest people I have ever met!

Yet, her students come first. She may joke around and say that she became a teacher because she likes to tell people what to do, but the truth is that she became a teacher because she loves to teach. It is her passion. She loves to share knowledge with people and encourage them to develop their potential, which she does through her love of discussing literature and the
exploration of different ways of approaching literature. As a former student of hers, I can attest that Dr. Torrell’s energy in the classroom is palpable and infectious. She radiates enthusiasm for both teaching and learning. So it is no surprise that when asked what her teaching philosophy is, Dr. Torrell responds, “WHOO HOO! Knowledge is power, but enthusiasm pulls the switch!” All of this being said, it was also no surprise when Dr. Torrell admitted that her one of her personal goals is making it a priority “to get some sleep.”