

PAM WHITE: SHIFTING PROFESSIONAL GEARS

by Jill Kasiewicz Caseria, M.A. '04



If you were 17, you'd want Pam White to be your high school guidance counselor. Soft-spoken, conscientious, trustworthy, and possessing a quiet "cool" factor, White is someone most of us probably would have wanted to lean on for advice during those emotionally turbulent teen years. And for about 200 lucky New Canaan High School students, she's there, ready to listen. Sometimes she finds a few waiting outside her office door when she arrives at school at 6:50 a.m. "It's not something that happens every morning, but they know that if they have a problem to talk about, I'm there early," she says.

Getting to school early is something White never imagined she'd be able to do on a regular basis. Now, four years later, the routine is old hat.

Wait, *what?* you ask. That's right – she's only had this counseling gig since 2001, just a few years after she decided to switch gears in life to follow a dream she had harbored for nearly two decades.

In 1998, just after her 52nd birthday, White – who earned her first master's degree from Fairfield University in 1989 from the Graduate School of Communication – started taking courses in the Graduate School for Education and Allied Professions in counselor education. She expects to finish the program in January.

Counseling was something completely different for White. She earned her undergraduate degree in art history from the University of Wisconsin in 1968, and held positions with *American Heritage*, *Time*, and *Life* magazines in New York City, and was a picture researcher/editor for a photo firm.

Switching directions in life came after her husband decided to take early retirement in 1997, and her two children had graduated from high school. White decided to take advantage of the "me" time that lay before her. "What I really wanted to do was to help kids get into college. Plus, motherhood was such an important, satisfying experience for me," says White.

"I thought this career was the way I could, in a way, do what I wanted and be a mother again, but without coming home to a houseful of my own kids!"

But before becoming a counselor – or even taking courses – she needed to get some undergraduate admission experience. She approached Fairfield University about volunteering in the Office of Undergraduate Admission, and did so a couple of days a week. She soon became a paid member of the staff and interviewed candidates, held information sessions, and led summer workshops for prospective students. "It was perfect," she says. "There was no traveling, I got to read applications, and had contact with high schoolers. Volunteering gave me the flexibility to explore this area without committing myself to it." She credits the encouragement that then-acting director Judy Dobai (now associate vice president for enrollment) and then-assistant director Marianne Gumpfer (now director of graduate admission) provided her into pursuing the degree program in the GSEAP.

From there, things just fell into place. She heard about a one-year guidance counselor opening at New Canaan High School, replacing a woman on maternity leave. "The school was looking for someone with experience in the college admission process, which I had," she says. "Plus, I already had one master's degree and was in the school counseling program at Fairfield. It was a match."

But the reality is, she says, that now only about 25 percent of her time with students is spent on the college application process. "More often, it's about talking to kids who have academic or emotional problems, and parents who want to be reassured that

their child will be okay," she says.

As with any counseling position, no two days are the same. "You never know when some disaster might happen," she says. Even a "nice" town like New Canaan isn't immune to social ills like domestic violence, rape, and drug abuse among kids and families.



Having nearly completed her master's degree in school counseling, Pam White (second from right) discusses her job with classmates (l-r): Kathryn Hillen, Susan Stanlie, and Elizabeth Thana.

"It can be hard to ask, 'Is there something else going on?' Initially, I was concerned about asking that powerful question, but then I found that the kids were so relieved when I did."

And White couldn't ask for anything more. "Now, working and living in the same town, and doing what I love, I feel like I've died and gone to heaven!" ■