



Two remarkable Susans: Sgorbati (left) and Borden.

## THE EMBODIED MIND: A NEW FRONTIER

What do a serious knee injury and a lifelong fascination with the nature of human imagination have in common with an emerging field of study that engages cognitive and clinical psychologists, evolutionary biologists, philosophers, ethnologists, geneticists, computer scientists, anthropologists, and countless other “ists” in pursuit of answers to its profound and far-reaching questions? Or with a course taught at Bennington last spring by two women with multiple connections to the College, whose students worked in areas as seemingly disparate as computer interface design, mental illness, and poetry?

Sound complicated? It is—the most complicated subject imaginable, in fact: the study of the origins, structures, and processes of the human mind and its connections to the brain and the body. Last spring trustee **SUSAN BORDEN '69** and faculty member **SUSAN SGORBATI '72** teamed up to teach a seminar at Bennington, “The Embodied Mind: Toward a Study of Human Nature.” During October’s Reunion Weekend, the two presented background on the field of study to a standing-room-only crowd of alumni, parents, and students.

As a Bennington student, Susan Borden studied economics, physics, and music, not biology—although that didn’t keep her “from being absorbed by biological questions and having as my real intellectual heroes Darwin and William James and Freud,” she remembers. Borden also had a formative field work experience at Harvard with Jerome Bruner, a leader in the field of cognitive psychology.

A decade later, an interest in biological and psychological linkages and a propensity to comb the stacks of medical school bookstores led Borden to the work of Nobel Prize-winning scientist Gerald Edelman. “I was overwhelmed by the beauty of his idea that the brain works by selection-on-variation principles, like evolution or the immune system; it accounted for the open-ended nature of human cognitive capacity,” she says. Borden established a correspondence with Dr. Edelman, and after several years of increasing immersion in the work, she became a director of the Neurosciences Institute, a team of 50 people studying global brain function in La Jolla, CA.

Susan Sgorbati’s interest in connections between mind and body originated from a highly personal source—the reactions of her own body during surgery and recovery from a locked knee joint due to a severely torn medial meniscus. She began her process of inquiry by reading voraciously; attending several Harvard Graduate School courses, conferences, and seminars sponsored by Boston’s Mind/Body Medical Institute; studying with a biologist, a movement specialist, and a surgeon; and, along with **PEGGY FLORIN MFA '89**, instituting a series of courses at Bennington that explored experiential ways of gaining knowledge and connections between movement and anatomy. “For me, the work has a lot to do with balance,” Sgorbati says. “It covers everything from biology to physics to self-regulating mechanisms in the body; from what constitutes balance physically or visually to the implications of balance in terms of justice or fairness—a balance of power or understanding. A lot of my dance work is involved in this, too. And Susan [Borden] and I are a kind of balance for each other.”

These two remarkable Susans came together at Bennington during spring term 1998 to model a seminar, the structure of which was as esoteric as its multilayered subject. The Embodied Mind seminar enrolled 15 students whose interests ranged from psychology to poetry to computer science, from human evolution to human rights and human illnesses, both mental and physical. Susan Sgorbati met with students weekly—in Dickinson 117 for roundtable discussions on individual research topics and readings, in a VAPA dance studio for movement sequences. Susan Borden met with the class and with students individually six times during the term, communicating regularly between meetings by e-mail. Faculty guest lecturers included Ruben Puentedura on systems theory, biologist Betsy Sherman on the functioning of the nervous system, physicist Norman Derby on color vision, and psychologist Susan Engel on memory.

As far as Borden is concerned, the importance of this inquiry in a college setting, and especially at Bennington, is clear. “To know oneself, surely, is one of the great aims of a liberal education. I believe in the next 20 years or so, studies in the neurosciences will be a cornerstone of an undergraduate degree. And for a Bennington kind of education, one in which students are invited to join faculty at a frontier of discovery, it couldn’t be a better subject. Not only is it relevant to every imaginable intellectual and artistic domain, but each student is a walking laboratory. Added to that, it’s an area about which people often have strong intuitions, some defensible and some not. For a teacher, it’s wonderful to explore a subject with students who are ready to hypothesize, provided you’re prepared to ask them—continually—to test and revise those hypotheses.

“Finally, and most specifically,” Borden concludes, “if students discover that ‘ephemeral’ experiences—falling in love, learning new words, experiencing disappointment, turning ideas into objects and events, yearning for home—not only are biochemically mediated but also cause structural change in the brain, I believe they can transform that understanding into a life-sustaining, generative understanding of themselves as makers of remarkable range and responsibility. Could there be a greater purpose to a Bennington education?”