



Lifetime Tiger

A winner of a 2019 Kemper Fellowship for Teaching Excellence, Botswana Blackburn never forgets what it's like to be a student. Story by Tony Rehagen, BA, BJ '01 • Photo by Rob Hill

Botswana Blackburn senses the tension in her classroom. Standing at the front of 1500 Hawthorn Residence Hall, she notices that the group of MU School of Health Professions seniors gathered for their capstone course in health care organization and leadership is strangely quiet for a group of 20-somethings. No one seems to notice the sunny April day just outside the windows; all eyes are fixed to their screens. At least one young woman scrolls through her resume on her laptop. Graduation is only weeks away.

Blackburn understands her students' unease — that's part

of her job. In fact, the associate teaching professor was just named one of five recipients of the 2019 William T. Kemper Fellowship for Teaching Excellence, given to outstanding instructors at MU every year. Part of the reason she won that honor is that she is especially attuned to the needs of her students.

Today, rather than fight the acute senioritis, Blackburn decides to embrace it. She loads a video on the projector — a clip of the famous chocolate factory conveyor belt scene from *I Love Lucy*, where, under the watch of a vindictive supervisor, Lucy

and Ethel stuff their mouths with the candies they can't wrap fast enough. The lesson is in the failure of the surly overseer's leadership. The hilarious passage gives this distracted and anxious audience a chance to take a breath, have a laugh and discuss more effective ways they might manage people when they are in charge. It's also Blackburn's tactic for distracting her students from their worries outside the classroom so she can arrive at a teachable moment. "She really cares about the well-being of her students," says Ebony Lockhart, one of Blackburn's former students and current teaching assistants. "You can tell she wants everyone to succeed."

The professor knows what her students are going through, in large part, because she has been in their position, on this campus, multiple times. In fact, it'd be tough to find anyone more experienced at being a Tiger than Blackburn, who started at Mizzou even before she graduated from high school.

Blackburn grew up in Kansas City, Missouri, and as an incoming high school junior, she was one of 330 gifted students from around the state invited to participate in the Missouri Scholars Academy on the MU campus. "Those were three of the best weeks of my life," Blackburn says. "It was my first time around students who were similar to me. Some of them are friends to this day. I just fell in love with the place."

She returned to Mizzou as an undergraduate with dreams of becoming a broadcast journalist. But through the mentorship she received from faculty as a student and her experiences volunteering with various campus organizations, Blackburn soon felt the pull of public service. After graduating from the Honors College with degrees in journalism and political science, she earned a master's in health promotion before going on to work for the Kansas City health department as a disease intervention specialist and health educator. "Mizzou prepared me for life in more ways than one," she says.

But it wasn't long before Blackburn was drawn back to her alma mater. In 2011, after 14 years working in public health and with a newly minted doctorate in education and social science from the University of Missouri-Kansas City, Blackburn was offered a position as an assistant teaching professor in the School of Health Professions. As the department has grown to become one of the largest on campus, Blackburn has taken on more and more responsibility. And last year, when it came time to appoint someone in the school to be the program director of Bachelor of Health Sciences, the largest major at the university, Blackburn got the call.

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"She's so connected to campus and to the students. She has an authenticity that comes with being someone who can say, 'I've been where you are sitting, and the decisions you're making now are going to impact you down the road.' Maybe that gives her an extra edge."

says Enid Schatz, department chair of health sciences. "She's so connected to campus and to the students. She has an authenticity that comes with being someone who can say, 'I've been where you are sitting, and the decisions you're making now are going to impact you down the road.' Maybe that gives her an extra edge."

When Blackburn was named a Kemper Fellow, the university also highlighted her work outside of the classroom with student groups, such as being adviser for Alpha Kappa Alpha, the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life, Alpha Eta national honor society, the MU chapter of UNICEF, and the health professions freshman interest group. She also volunteers off campus with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Columbia. And she is always available for a late-night call or email from a student in need. "She finds time, even with everything she has going on," says Lockhart. "She helped me get a tuition waiver so I wouldn't be in debt. She allows more students into the capstone course than the allotted amount. She doesn't want them to be left behind."

Once her capstone students are done chuckling at Lucy and Ethel and the chocolate factory, Blackburn releases the stressed-out seniors early to get a jump on their year-end group projects. Then she walks across campus, over to Arts and Science, where her afternoon class, Public Health Principles and Practice, awaits. The students are almost all freshmen, and Blackburn anticipates a different vibe. Unlike the seniors, these youths are restless, boisterous and constantly drawn outside to the first real day of spring and the summer vacation it portends. That doesn't bother Blackburn. She's already planning to open up the class for discussion about public health in popular culture. She doesn't let the talking get out of hand, but she lets the students have their fun. She knows exactly how they feel. **M**

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