Distinguished Professor Award

Nancy E. Kinner
Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering
College of Engineering and Physical Sciences

Nancy Kinner is renowned for her work in the area of oil spill response, but in her heart she’s a teacher. When the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, it unleashed the largest oil spill in U.S. history. It also sent Kinner into action. And she embraced her role because she knew not only how important it was, but also what an incredible learning experience it would be for her students. Never once did they take second fiddle. An environmental engineering class that includes a total of 14 hours a week of group project meetings for Kinner remained a priority, even if it meant waking at 3 or 4 a.m. to participate via conference call when she was in Alaska. Instead, she found ways for her students to be involved.

“Nancy’s devotion to communicating the science of the spill to the U.S. is an excellent example of why she is deserving of this award,” says Whitney Blanchard, a former student and current NOAA employee. “Nancy is a teacher. She taught science and engineering to everyone watching PBS or reading The Economist as well as to the U.S. Congress.”

She testified before Congress three times, responded to hundreds of media inquiries, provided information on the latest oil spill research and development to NOAA and the Coast Guard—her phone never stopped ringing. On the day of Commencement she was on stage serving as chief faculty marshal when that phone buzzed. It was David Kennedy, head of NOAA’s National Ocean Service asking her to convene an emergency international meeting to address the use of dispersants in cleanup efforts...in two days. Her answer was yes before quickly adding that she would have to call him back; she had to get the ceremony started.

“This spill was a unique opportunity to show the strengths UNH has in environmental and marine work,” says Kinner. “It’s really about the people I have the great privilege and honor of working with; it’s all of them that make me look good.”

Those who know Kinner wouldn’t be surprised to learn she’s just as involved in the Deepwater Horizon disaster today as she was when the explosion and spill happened more than a year ago.

“The reality is that drilling and spills are going to happen,” she says. “There will be spills and we need to be ready for them.”

—Erika Mantz