

When Opportunity Knocks

It all began 23 years ago with a simple knock on a door.

That is when Kathleen Kelly '79 triggered a chain of events that would open doors for many Canisius students to come. You see, Kathleen was applying to graduate schools and in need of some faculty feedback on an application. So she knocked on the door of **Dr. Frank P. Riga**. "It needed a lot of work," recalls this professor of 19th century British literature. So the two worked together – rewording, revising and rewriting, and by the end of the fifth draft they were confident Kathleen's application would stand out among thousands of other applicants.

They were right. Kathleen applied to and was accepted at three prestigious graduate schools. During a visit to one of them, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she was told her coursework at Canisius coupled with an outstanding application statement helped secure her acceptance to the university.

"Dr. Riga's individual attention and the time he spent helping me write that application statement truly paid off," recalls Kathleen. "I learned more from him about writing in just trying to write that three-page statement. He really has had a great influence on my life."

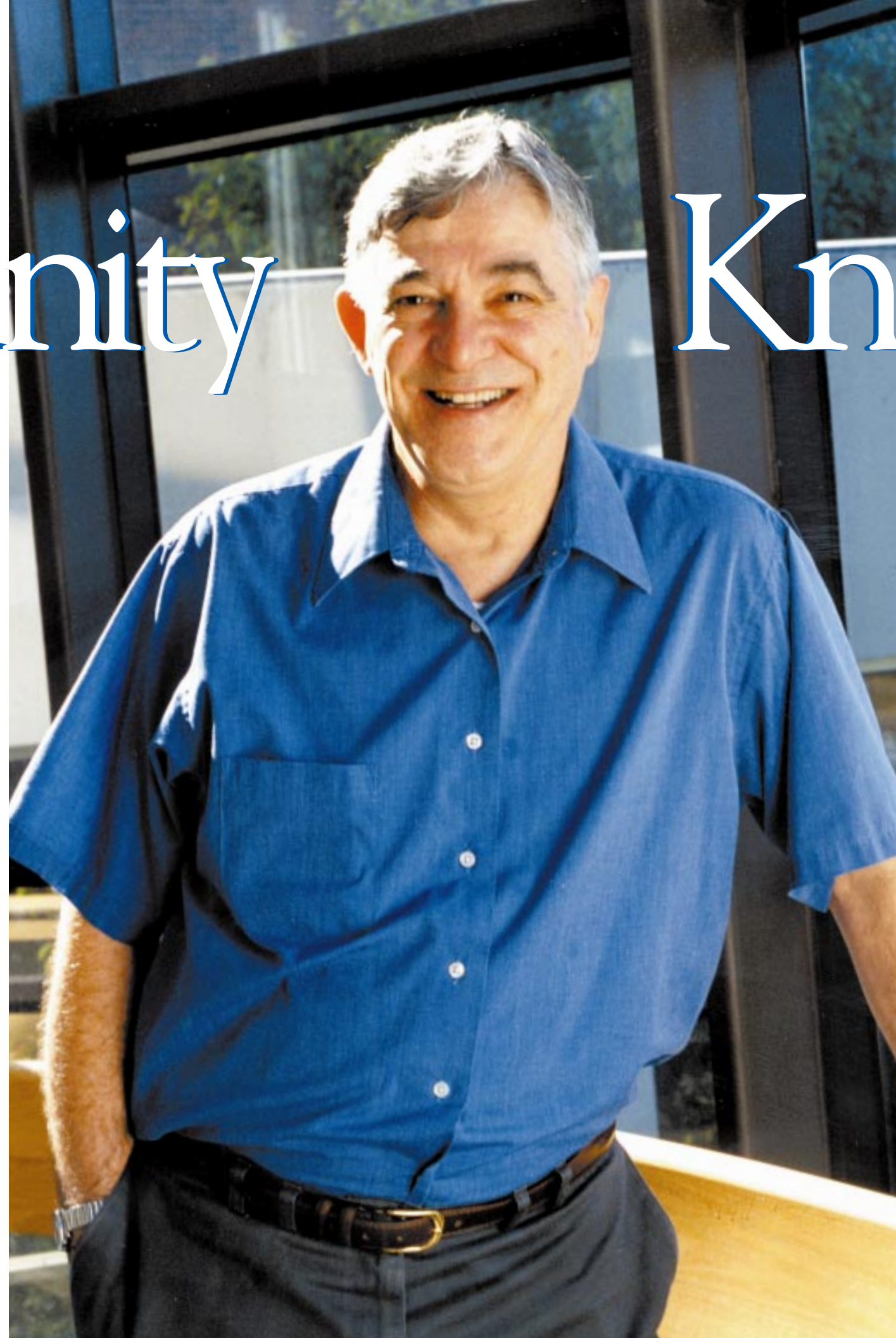
For Kathleen, the opportunity began with a knock on a door and paved the way for her current work as professor of English at Northeastern University at Boston College. For Dr. Riga, that knock on the door became an opportunity to set students on the path to success through graduate scholarships and inspired this 37-year veteran of the college to volunteer his time in the Graduate Scholarship Office. He worked closely with students interested in applying to graduate school. And in 1985, the college asked Dr. Riga to assume the role of director. He happily accepted.

"My work in the Graduate Scholarship Office is the kind of thing that, certainly for me, has been one of the

most satisfying single teaching experiences I have had at the college."

One only has to examine the numbers to appreciate Dr. Riga's dedication to the students. Many are applying for such prestigious scholarships and fellowships as the Fulbright Scholarship, the Jacob K. Javits Fellowship and the Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship – all of which provide partial, if not full, tuition assistance, stipends and an opportunity of a lifetime. But the competition is fierce with thousands of talented students across the country all vying for the coveted fellowships. This is what makes Canisius' record of success under Dr. Riga's direction all the more impressive: 20 J. William Fulbright Scholarships since 1987; three Jacob K. Javits Fellowships since 1996; two Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarships since 1997; one Harry S. Truman Scholarship; and one Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship.

When students receive such nationally recognized fellowships



and scholarships it serves as a testament to the quality of students enrolled at Canisius and the college's commitment to academic excellence. But, as Dr. Riga reminds us, the students applying for these fellowships are the true beneficiaries.

"The application process alone does so much for the students. It gives them the opportunity to grow, develop and mature and it becomes a kind of educational experience in-and-of-itself. So even for those students who don't win, they still win."

They win, explains Dr. Riga, because no matter how prestigious the scholarship, the student applicants are required to examine three critical questions about themselves: where they have been, where they want to go and what their life ambitions are. Because most students have yet to figure out the answers to such thought-provoking questions, it is Dr. Riga's job to serve as their guide in a self-exploration. He describes the process as a close working tutorial.

"I suspect there might be a more 'mass production' way of doing this," states Dr. Riga, "but I like to treat each student individually. When someone comes through the door and tells me they want to apply for a graduate scholarship, I set up a whole series of meetings so we can talk and find out who they are and where they want to go."

As students begin to discover more about the direction in which they want to take their lives, they must detail it in a curriculum vitae that highlights their academic excellence and shows evidence of leadership through community service and political involvement.

"The hardest part about the whole process is the applying," says **Meghann Drury '01**, the second recipient in the history of the college to be awarded a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship. "You have to talk about things you've done, what has influenced your academic life, what you want to do with that and how it has motivated you to



Meghann L. Drury '01, recipient of a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship, will travel to Ireland or Australia in fall 2003 to study the impact of religious and educational changes on family communication.

of projects the Fulbright required you to do," explains Michael. "Dr. Riga showed me some projects other students had done in the past. He even went to the library downtown with me on a few Saturdays to help me research modern literature in

various countries." With a little direction from Dr. Riga, Michael chose to focus his Fulbright proposal on the study of international development in Canadian modern poetry.

What follows is the tedious and sometimes tormenting work that scholarship applicants often refer to as 'the relentless revision' process. Once they put their accomplishments and hopes for future achievements on paper, Dr. Riga intercedes as an enforcer employed to ensure each student's

John "J.R." Lipartito '01, an English major and the college's first student to be accepted into the Japanese Exchange and Teaching Program. "I'm not exaggerating," he adds, "but it was worth it. Dr. Riga taught me that in writing it's important to make every word count."

"The first few revisions are drastic," admits Dr. Riga. "Initially, it's just helping them get organized and deciding what should come first and last. But by the time they get to the fifth or sixth revision, it's more a matter of trying to clarify things, trying to tighten copy, trying to get the students to say something in a more sophisticated manner."

Despite all the writing, rewriting and research students endure when applying for such distinguished graduate scholarships, most will tell you the waiting is the hardest

part. And many turn to Dr. Riga during this time for reassurance. He tells all his students that whether they are awarded a scholarship or not, they still walk away a winner.

"Just by applying, students are able to determine what their values are, what their ambitions are

and how that feeds into their values," says Dr. Riga. "The whole

process really gives them a chance to examine their lives and set goals for themselves that they might not have otherwise done. It's really a wonderful thing to watch."

That reassurance goes a long way for students who come to view Dr. Riga as their friend and mentor.

"He is always very encouraging," says J.R. who left for Japan this month where he will teach English for one year. "He talks to you about your interests and as he finds out more about you, he lets you know what types of opportunities are available to you. That really helped me shape my goals for the future."

"Dr. Riga's work with students isn't so he can say 'I developed this Fulbright or Rotary scholar,'" adds Meghann who will attend Northwestern University for one year before using her Rotary Scholarship to study family communication in Ireland or Australia. "He really wants us to succeed and I think that's his motivation for what he does."

Mindful of the part he plays in helping shape the lives of students, Dr. Riga operates on an "open door policy." He works full-time – often over-time – so that he can be available for students in need of advisement, guidance

or just a friend.

"They come to me at a point in their lives where they are beginning to pull things together both personally and professionally," says Dr. Riga. "So they need somebody who, especially in their pro-



Michael A. Slosek '01, recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship, will study international development in Canadian modern poetry at McGill University in Montreal.

fessional area, can give them the opportunity to examine and understand their lives. You can't help but get very attached to these youngsters."

And they to him. Most, like Kathleen Kelly, are now living and working in leadership positions all around the world and continue to stay in touch with Dr. Riga through letters and E-mail. Their achievements are a testament to their Canisius education, their mentor Dr. Riga and opening the door when opportunity knocks. ■

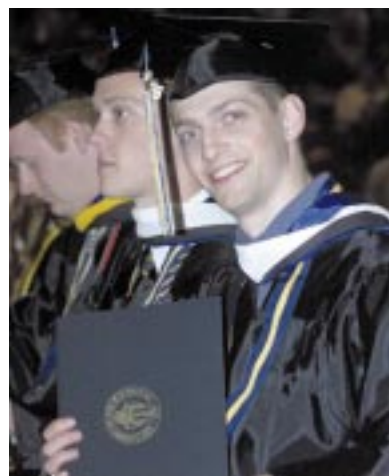
be where you are today. Dr. Riga really gets you to focus on these things and then tie it all together."

The process – particularly for such prestigious fellowships as the Fulbright, the Javits and the Mellon – then requires graduate applicants to submit a 500-word essay, which details the specific area they intend to study, demonstrates their working knowledge of the subject and explains how they reached their decision.

"This part of the application is probably the most difficult for students," says Dr. Riga. "When they come in initially, they're very vague. They might say 'I think I want to do something about modern literature.' But the project has to be much more specific than this so they have to do a good deal of research to narrow their subject down."

Such was the case with **Michael Slosek '01**, an English major and a 2001 Fulbright recipient, who came to Dr. Riga in fall 2000 and expressed an interest in applying for a fellowship.

"I knew I wanted to do something in the English field but I really had no idea what type



John "J.R." A. Lipartito '01, will travel to Japan in fall 2001 where he will teach English for one year, as part of the Japanese Exchange and Teaching Program.

application is flawless. "I must have made a million revisions," jokes