

The Curator Says...Wendy Cleveland shows us how the influence of a teacher can last over a lifetime. Wendy's writing is rich in detail, poignant and clear, thanks in part to a demanding teacher, Mrs. Livingood. Wendy is a gifted writer who makes the past come alive in the present moment.

Mrs. Livingood

Wendy Cleveland

Mrs. Livingood, my tenth grade English teacher, was known for her strictness, and everyone feared her. Early in September we knew better than to walk into her class late or even sneak in as the bell rang. We knew we had to have our #2 pencils sharpened and our notebooks organized into neon-colored sections of grammar, literature, spelling, vocabulary, and book reports. Warriner's grammar books had to be covered by the end of the first week of school. We had to have ample composition paper and use the correct heading with name, date, assignment in the upper right-hand corner.

Her personal expectations were no less than those she imposed on her students. In 1963 before women wore pants in the classroom, Mrs. Livingood came to school every day in fashionable suits and dresses. Taffeta skirts rustled as she paced the aisles dictating spelling words. When spring arrived with its warm days, she opened the windows facing the baseball field and rolled up her long-sleeved blouses. It was implausible to think she perspired or even needed to use deodorant. The breeze from outside swirled her Wind Song just above our noses with its heady shades of orange, sandalwood, clove, and jasmine. Her high heels boosted her short frame and added three or four inches and clicked on tile like staccato needles when she marched into the room after a trip to the office to check her mail. Thick glasses with large round rims magnified texts she read all day and student essays she corrected at night, and when she was feeling particularly cranky, she glared, and they slipped down her nose so that she had to peer over them, her eyes heavy with black mascara, searching for the source of a titter or fingers drumming on a desk. Her curly short hair never changed over the year, though she did favor different bright shades of lipstick to match the colors of her outfits.

As the year passed, I found myself looking forward to her class every day. Just as I thought I had mastered grammar, she'd call me to the board to conjugate *lie* and *lay*. Authors came alive in her room; they were more than two-dimensional black and white photos on book jackets. She filled our heads with stories about their lives, their loves, their styles, and their achievements. We enjoyed hearing her read letters they wrote and letters written about them. When she read aloud parts of *Travels With Charley* and explained the reference to Don Quixote's Rocinante, I imagined myself riding this skinny horse out of New York and westward, meeting rogues and rascals in small diners and parks along the way. Her Christmas recording of Dylan Thomas reading *A Child's Christmas in Wales* inspired me to read more of his poetry, my first experience with alliteration and assonance though I had no idea what those words meant back then.

Through her rigid expectations she demanded excellence. Commas had a purpose, and we needed to know how to use them. Vocabulary opened doors, she said, so we learned twenty new words a week. However much I feared her, I respected her vast wealth of knowledge. I never crossed her in the classroom or even attempted to challenge her omnipotent authority. I soaked up her facts about the lives of authors. I listened to her interpretations of literature and gained the confidence to express my own. In her classroom I learned how to organize ideas, how to think. That year with her guidance I made the leap from literal to figurative, saw Hemingway's Old Man as a symbol of Christ, Holden Caulfield's red hat as his badge of individuality, and George's farm as his and Lenny's perfect escape from a world of cruelty.

There were long discussions in her room after school as the journalism members laid out the school newspaper. Our opinions mattered to her, and she gave us full rein in deciding what articles would find their way to the front page. I can still see the afternoon sun slanting across her desk cluttered with essays, reading reports, or pop quizzes, for which she was notorious.

As my sophomore year drew to a close and most of my friends were preoccupied with social calendars and summer plans, I was studying for *Livingood's Hardest Hundred* final exam, which she administered over two days. I memorized verbs in all their tenses, matched titles to authors, paired literary terms with appropriate examples from the texts, and practiced diagramming Henry James-length sentences.

During the summer between my junior and senior year my friend Johnny and I decided to do the unthinkable: visit Mrs. Livingood at her home. Her address was in the phone book, so we drove his boxy little English Ford to her neighborhood on the other side of town, parked, and walked up to the brown arched door with a small square window. Not quite so brave now, we rang the bell and waited without breathing, wondering if this was inappropriate rudeness or a gesture of admiration. The door opened and there she was in a baggy shirt hanging over a pair of pants, a stranger for the shortest second, but those buggy glasses and bucked teeth (sans lipstick) were the unmistakable features of our favorite teacher. She smiled largely and never gave any indication of surprise, gesturing for us to come in and sit down. We refused her offer for iced tea, saying we were not staying but just wanted to say hello and tell her how much we loved her class. I can't remember anything beyond that. My eyes played tennis, darting from one side of the room to the other taking in all her personal effects, which I cannot remember either. I imagine there must have been books, photographs, paintings on the wall. I had not yet mastered the art of small talk so the ten-minute visit remains a blur. I do, however, think I can remember her easy laughter as we commented on her famous final exam and her invitation to drop by again, which we never had the opportunity to do, as she and her newspaper reporter husband moved to a larger city. It was hard to imagine another teacher sitting at her desk or walking the aisles of the room that echoed the words of famous writers and still carried the faint fragrance of her signature perfume.

Wendy Cleveland Says... I retired after 30 years of teaching high school English in Ithaca, NY, and moved with my husband Tom to Auburn in 2004. Not quite ready to slip into lazy days, I worked for another eight years as an academic mentor for Auburn University student athletes and volunteered as a teacher with the Christian Women's Job Corps. Teaching has been a lifelong passion, inspired by my beloved Mrs. Livingood. Now, re-retired I'm enjoying photography, traveling, book club, OLLI classes, reading/writing poetry, and compiling family stories for granddaughter Kathryn. My poems have appeared in *Yankee*, *Red Rock Review*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Chinaberries* and *Crows: An Anthology*, among other publications.