AN INSPIRED TEACHER AND LETTER WRITING ADVOCATE

An Interview with Cynthia Miller

By Donna Padgett

Author’s note: Cynthia (Cyn) Miller is a retired first grade teacher and the niece of Reading Center founder and former Chair of Reading, Hazel Miller Croy. Cyn has been a great supporter of our Reading Center and over the last few years, alumni and faculty have been inspired by her stories about the letters written and received by her students. Over the course of multiple decades, Cyn has collected a treasure trove of responses to those first-graders’ letters. From Mamie Eisenhower to Dr. Seuss’s wife, the collection is amazing. In order to share this wonderful lady with other alumni, Kathi Bartle-Angus and I had interviewed Cynthia Miller over lunch in her home on Coronado Island on October 2, 2014. She was absolutely delightful, greeting us in the hallway with a smile that revealed her enthusiasm for life and wearing a t-shirt that revealed her sense of humor. Joining us was her former first grade student, Pam Mehner, who had her own stories about Cyn’s class to share. After the interview Cynthia and I made plans to turn her letter collection into a children’s book. The working title is Dear Miss Miller. I look forward to spending more time with Cyn and her letters as we work on this project.

Tell us about your relationship with Aunt Hazel and your family.

Cyn: Aunt Hazel was the baby of my father’s family. My dad was a nice big brother to Aunt Hazel. We had strong family values and connections. There were big family dinners; the last one had 60 in attendance. I would summer with my grandmother in Redlands, in the orange groves. Aunt Hazel would visit my family while we were living in Newport Beach. We played marathon card games, one named “Hell”, sometimes called “Spite and Malice”. Aunt Hazel was a “spicy lady”! She was fun and positive, foot loose and fancy free, and always told funny stories about her students her classroom.

Aunt Hazel taught at Redlands University without a master’s degree, which was a very special circumstance. She later completed her doctorate at UCLA and went on to become a Professor of Education at Cal State, Fullerton. We have had a lot of remarkable women in our family. My great grandmother wrote “What a Woman Can Do” which was published in 1880. She was the first woman school board member in her community.

When did you know you wanted to be a teacher?

Cyn: I was inspired to become a teacher by my grandmother, Aunt Hazel’s mother, Aunt Hazel, and by my dad. Actually, we had a whole family of teachers, aunts, uncles, sisters and cousins.”
Interview with Cynthia Miller

What schools did you teach in? Which grades? How many years?

Cyn: After graduating from Long Beach State (I was an original 49er!) with an education degree, I was hired by Santa Ana where I had done my student teaching. I taught there for two years. Then I taught for one year in Newport Beach. I was lucky to be at Newport Elementary, right on the beach, where I could indulge my love of playing beach volleyball. Then I returned to Santa Ana for two years before transferring to San Diego to be closer to family.

In San Diego I started at Silvergate Elementary in 1957. It was a top notch school and the sky was the limit. I taught first and second grade combinations before moving to Kate Sessions Elementary, where I taught first grade to many children from military families.

After completing my master’s degree in reading at Pepperdine I decided to move to a different community. At Brooklyn Heights Elementary, in a high needs area, I hoped my new expertise would be valuable to the students. I often had up to 5 parents helping in the classroom.

I retired from Brooklyn Heights after a 38-year career in teaching. I loved every minute!

Pam: I have to add in here how wonderful it was to be a student in Cynthia’s classroom. It was very experiential. I loved school because of Cynthia. She encouraged students to be astronauts and to build bridges. I became a teacher in large part because of Cynthia’s inspiration. Cynthia was one of those rare teachers that inspired students to keep in touch. She shared with me a letter from a former student who is now a famous doctor. He wrote about his memories of first grade, and thanked Cynthia for her encouragement and innovative teaching style.

What were some of the highlights of your teaching career?

Cyn: I loved taking students on field trips. One time we went to a high rise building in downtown San Diego to visit a bank. At the bank vault, the bank officer let us know there would be no free samples! The walking field trips and riding on the train were also memorable. My students made a freeway in the classroom, first using dried spaghetti, then with blocks. That adventure was covered in an article in Caltrans magazine. I was able to purchase the blocks with a $100 check that was sent to my students by Chin Ho Kelly. My class had sung “Mele Kalekemaka” when Chin Ho [Hawaiian detective who worked on the Hawaii Five-O television series], visited San Diego. Making connections with the community was a very memorable part of my career.

What inspired the letter writing?

Cyn: As a child, our family discussed current events around the table regularly. So writing to people in the news seemed like a good idea. I saw letter writing as a valuable writing exercise for my students - and everyone likes to receive letters. The first letter was sent to President Eisenhower to wish him well. The class received a letter back from Mamie Eisenhower thanking the class for their good wishes. Letters often included pictures drawn by the students. Letters were written to all U.S. Presidents, famous actors, authors, newscasters, singers, religious leaders and even the San Diego Chicken. We did not always get a response, but many did respond. One of the most memorable responses was when we sent letters to Irving Berlin on his 100th birthday. One letter was actually read on the television show honoring him. All of the students would write and in some classes I had 40 students! I would insist on sending all of them, though the principal wanted to send only the best.
Interview with Cynthia Miller (continued)

Do you have a favorite letter?

Cyn: My favorite letter was addressed Dear First Grade Class and came from a nurse. The students had written to POWs returned from Vietnam. Their letters and pictures were posted in the hospital ward to cheer the returnees. The nurse thanked the class for their good wishes to the POWs.

Another favorite is a post card from opera singer, Beverly Sills, which said “hug the children for me.” Other memorable letters include: a letter from Cy Young winner, Randy Johnson; a letter acknowledging her class’s contribution of $153 (raised by selling popcorn) for the Statue of Liberty restoration (Miss Miller’s class is also thanked on a plaque at the Statue of Liberty); a letter from Chet Huntley thanking the students for their wonderful letters to celebrate his retirement; and a letter from President Ronald Reagan, addressed Dear Girls and Boys.

End Note: It was truly a wonderful experience to spend the afternoon sifting through the amazing collection of letters and hearing story after story about her Cynthia’s rich teaching career. I am relishing the opportunity to work with Cynthia as we develop a book that will share her elementary school letter writing experience, the choices for the prompts, the responses and the power of writing and receiving letters. Thank you, Cynthia, for your energy and enthusiasm, for teaching, and for sharing your story with us.

Donna Padgett retired in 2014 from teaching undergraduate students for almost two decades at CSUF. She is an alumna of the Reading Program and served as REG President and multiple other board positions.

REG Grant Recipient 2014 Update

In the spring of 2014, the Saddleback College Academic Reading Center was graciously awarded a grant from the Reading Educators’ Guild. With the funds the Reading Department was able to supplement a part of their program, which was sorely needed. A high percentage of the 600-700 students who have access to the Reading Center in a semester are second language students. While improving their reading skills they also hope to improve their pronunciation of their new language. Addressing this concern, with the funds, the Saddleback Reading Department purchased twenty books on tape. This fit well with our program because the books on tape were novels we had on our shelves and we already had the comprehension questions for review at the end of the readings. We selected shorter novels such as The Little Prince, The Red Pony, Of Mice and Men, and The House on Mango Street. After completing the novel in two visits to the Center and completing the comprehension questions, the response was always the same….“Can I do another book?”

Saddleback College is indebted to REG for their generous donation and the materials purchased will be used for many years to come. This is another example of how REG impacts the lives of our reading students.

-Denise Green
IS NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFICATION IN YOUR FUTURE?

By Leslee Milch

Are you an accomplished teacher, wondering what your next professional development endeavor might be? Consider pursuing National Board Certification, the highest credential a teacher can earn, deeming a National Board Certified Teacher to be highly qualified to teach in nearly every state in the country. Currently there are more than 110,000 NBCTs, less than 2% of the nation’s teaching force. In California we have over 6,000 NBCTs.

National Board Certification is a rigorous one to three-year process that requires a minimum of 400 hours to complete the four components. Once achieved, the certificate is valid for ten years when it must be renewed. It is truly a performance-based assessment of what a highly accomplished teacher must know and be able to do in their classroom. Through the lens of their NBPTS certificate standards, candidates examine student work samples, video tape their lessons, analyze and reflect on what they do in their classroom. It is without a doubt, the most profound professional development opportunity available for teachers, transformational, resulting in a significant impact on student learning and achievement, as numerous research studies have concluded.

Numerous universities across the country, including CSUF, ground their coursework in the NBPTS Five Core Propositions. The CSUF Center for Maximizing Teacher Impact offers support for teachers pursuing National Board Certification. Consider applying to pursue certification at www.nbpts.org and visit our CMTI website http://ed.fullerton.edu/impact/national-board-for-profesional-teaching-standards/ for information about the support we offer.

Leslee Milch, M.S., is a National Board Certified Teacher who earned her Reading Specialist Credentials at CSUF. She teaches kindergarten in the Buena Park School District in addition to being on faculty with the NBPTS, serves on the NBPTS Early Childhood Generalist Standards Committee and supports candidates pursuing certification at OCDE and the CSUF Center for Maximizing Teacher Impact.
Cal State Fullerton claimed the top spot in the Forbes magazine #MyTopCollege social media campaign, which featured Tweets, Instagram and Facebook postings from more than 300 universities nationwide.

Forbes launched the national competition in late June and announced the winners today (July 30) to coincide with this year’s release of the magazine annual rankings of America’s Top Colleges.

The successful Titan effort benefitted from a vigorous series of postings by the Strategic Communications social media group, which currently maintains nine individual platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Storify, Flickr, YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram, Google+, Linked-In and Tumblr.

The enthusiastic participation of the University’s college-and-department-based social media channels provided the further leverage that led to success.

CSUF posts ranged from beauty shots of the campus to heartfelt thanks from alums and students about the quality of education they received at Cal State Fullerton.

REG Grant Application Due April 1st

The Reading Educators Guild grant was established in 2004 to provide financial support to an REG member. The $300 grant is intended to be a supplement to a typical classroom or professional materials budget. Applications must be submitted by April 1 to be considered for this funding round. See the REG website (http://reg.fullerton.edu) for the application form and submission information or email kangus@fullerton.edu to be sent the application form.

Criteria:

- Applicant must be an REG member.
- Funds are to be used for classroom books or professional materials only.
- By submitting the application, a recipient agrees to write a short (200 word) explanation of how the award was spent for publication in the REG newsletter.

To apply, complete and submit application to:

REG President
CSUF, Reading Department, CP570
PO Box 6868
Fullerton, CA 92834-6868

Or email to swilson@fullerton.edu

All applications must be submitted via U.S. mail or emailed by April 1 to be considered for this funding round.
Now Planning!

Literacy professional get together combining the REG, Orange County Reading Association (OCRA), and current graduate students. A mix and mingle event is being planned. Watch for a date and location on our Facebook pages and as an email blast.

The REG membership dues enable REG to make significant contributions to Reading Department students and the community through the Reading Center.

For more information about joining, renewing, or donating, please contact Matt Harris, Vice-President of Membership, at matt80s@yahoo.com or visit http://ed.fullerton.edu/reg/join-us/

Has your contact information and address changed? Please take a moment to update your information, if necessary. Contact Matt or visit the website listed.

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2014-2016

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Vince Piro – College Book Clubs
Samantha Rodriguez – Comprehension Assessment for ELLs
Heather Wilson – Parent Literacy Resources

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26200 Country Club Drive
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Saturday, March 7, 2015
9 a.m. check in, social time, raffle
9:30-11:30 a.m. buffet & program

See flyer insert to register or contact Debbie Lombardi at dlombardi@cox.net

HONOR AN EDUCATOR
College of Education Event
April 18, 2015

The ‘Honor an Educator’ program was created in 2006 with two primary goals – to recognize educators who have made a difference in the lives of others, and to provide scholarships for current College of Education students. Alumni, faculty, and friends of the College are invited to submit names and honoree’s name. Honorees are sent a congratulatory letter from the Dean of the College, as well as an engraved photo frame as a permanent memento of thanks and appreciation of their outstanding contribution to excellence in education. Honoree’s names will be listed on the college’s website, along with donor’s names and descriptive paragraphs they wrote about the honorees.

For more information or to nominate an educator visit: http://ed.fullerton.edu/alumni/awards/honor-an-educator-awards/

Opportunity Drawing to Support the Hazel Miller Croy Reading Center

Five years ago in an effort to raise funds for the Reading Center, the Opportunity Drawing at the annual breakfast was conceived. Since then almost $2000 has been raised by having breakfast attendees purchase tickets for opportunities to win prizes donated by REG members and the Reading Department.

Please join us this year!
- Purchase tickets for the drawing with your registration for the event
- Bring cash or check to purchase tickets at the event
- Donate an item for the drawing – contact Kathi Bartle Angus at kangu@fullerton.edu
- Have fun “shopping” with your tickets at the event

Ticket Prices: 1 ticket for $1, 12 tickets for $10, or 25 tickets for $20

If you cannot attend the breakfast and would like to make a donation to the Hazel Miller Croy Endowment, you can do so on the web: https://giving.fullerton.edu/default.aspx