

New NEHS Chapter Dedicated to TC Treasure

by Amy (Jones) Ramos, c/o '96

"To be or not to be: that is the question..."

You probably heard that quote even before your days at Tampa Catholic, perhaps in a movie, a commercial, or Silly Symphonies cartoon. But if you graduated from Tampa Catholic within the last three decades, you were probably in Ms. Flowers' classroom when you learned what that famous soliloquy meant. She introduced so many of us to Hamlet, that poor troubled Dane, and made Shakespeare accessible, interesting, even enchanting. Whether you were her student last year or twenty years ago, you may remember that Ms. Flowers didn't just tell you what those lines meant; she asked questions that guided you down a path to discovering the meaning for yourself. She set you up to experience that soulful surge and pang of concern when you figured out what Hamlet was saying, that he was contemplating suicide.

And you *were* concerned, because by Act III he was a friend. You saw him not as a prince in a centuries-old fairy tale speaking in iambs, but rather as a mixed up kid not unlike yourself. Ms. Flowers made this possible. For those of us who went on to read more of Shakespeare's work, it was a gift that kept on giving.

Born in Lancaster, Ohio in 1948, Linda Flowers wanted to teach for as long as she can remember. Even at age 12 when she taught Sunday school to younger children, she knew it was her calling. She studied at Ohio University and received a fellowship to graduate school. She even began work on her PhD but could no longer wait to get in the classroom. For six years she taught high school at her alma mater in Ohio, but a move to Tampa in 1979 brought her to the school she has long considered her home.

On March 6th, I had the privilege of visiting Ms. Flowers at Tampa Catholic. Twelve years had passed since I sat in her classroom, and unfortunately we were to meet in the office instead. I vividly recall that (in 1996) shelves of her own books stretched across the east wall of her classroom, towering from floor to ceiling. They overwhelmed me the first time I saw them and made me worry that her class might be too difficult for me. Indeed it did not take long to realize that she knew every line of every poem and play from memory. However, throughout the year, her classroom became the most comfortable place on campus, a sanctum really. Those books were like photographs on a mantle, mementoes of characters she had met, places she had been, lives she had lived. She was a legend, and her classroom was my favorite place at Tampa Catholic.

Linda Flowers has taught over 4000 students. She taught us how to properly write a five-paragraph essay, but she also gave us important life lessons, something she refers to as helping students pack their bags for the future. Where a child may not cheat for fear of being caught, the adult leaving her class with honor and self-respect knows that cheating has "built-in punishments" such as mistrust and suspicion of others. Never claiming perfection, she even used her own mistakes as teachable moments, such as a

tearful warning against the peer pressure to smoke.

It's not surprising that many of her students would be inspired to study and teach literature themselves. I began teaching high school English this year and used my meeting with Ms. Flowers to glean some advice. Considering she combines the wisdom of Confucius with the delivery of Carol Burnett, it shouldn't surprise that her first advice to new teachers was to be able to laugh at yourself. "A sense of humor is like an American Express card; you don't leave home without it." The respect students have for Ms. Flowers is inspiring, because it comes from something more than just discipline tactics. "It's the difference between inspiration and coercion," she describes. As some of her current students said in a recent tribute, "You don't want to be late for her class, not because you'll be punished but because it would make her feel bad." She models respect and it's reciprocated.

"Education is the last institution that touches every citizen," she said. "As teachers, we have an opportunity to create the society we want and need." She told me to help students see themselves as stakeholders in their education. "Love and care for them while you have them, but also prepare them to do the same for themselves." Asked about the differences between her first and current TC students she explains, "Fads change, specifics change, but not the essence. The heart of the human being never changes. These students have the same hurts and hopes."

2009 will mark the 30th year in Ms. Flowers' career at Tampa Catholic, and she plans it to be the last. She humbly expresses a need to quit while she's still adept, and I quietly wonder if this isn't a concern brought on by years of teaching *Death of a Salesman*. For three decades, she has commuted from her home in south St. Petersburg to teach at TC. She celebrated a milestone birthday when she turned sixty this February, an event that incited much reflection. "I will never make \$100,000 as long as I live," she told her students, "but I am the richest woman alive. And I mean it."

Last year, two students (Anna Daggs and Chris Rios) approached English teacher Lisa Mendenhall (c/o 2000) with the idea of forming a chapter of the National English Honor Society. "When we were applying, we had the option to name our chapter," explains Mendenhall, a former student and current colleague of Ms. Flowers. "We all decided that Ms. Flowers was the only logical choice since she has had such an impact on the TC student body for so many years." The same evening I interviewed Ms. Flowers, she was surprised at the Honors Induction ceremony with flowers, cheers, and a plaque celebrating the newly christened Linda D. Flowers chapter of NEHS.

Recently, Ms. Flowers handed the English department's reigns to new chairperson Pat Bindert, choosing to focus solely on instructing (especially enjoying her long-awaited Shakespeare class). Asked about her retirement plans, Ms. Flowers admits her temptation to work in community theater or just relax in a cabin on a lake somewhere. However, she describes a motivating need to feel worthy of life, and I'm reminded of the last lines of a Robert Frost poem she taught—"I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep." She went on to share her hope of working with migrant workers in the

Ruskin area, especially mothers who are learning the English language. As I drove home from the interview, it occurred to me that I've always considered my TC education a gift of privilege and that now those without privilege might be able to enjoy that same gift. She may feel like the richest woman alive, but it's we—more than 4000 of us—who are richer for having learned from her. Thank you, Ms. Flowers.

You can e-mail Ms. Flowers at lflowers@tampacatholic.org. She always enjoys hearing from her former students.