

(April 9, 2011)

The Spanish Department was one of the first programs to sign up when the University of Virginia began to conceptualize a new partnership with secondary schools in the Commonwealth in 1982. Nobody knew what the so-called Center for the Liberal Arts was going to be, but it was developing with a very specific purpose: find out what high school teachers needed and wanted from the U, and deliver content programs in the individual disciplines. In addition, those offerings were not only going to be free of charge, but teachers who participated in them would be paid for their time.

As we flailed around trying to figure this out, we pulled together some teachers from across the State, individuals with experience who could help us tailor our offerings to be of maximum use. Marilyn Barrueta, who had been teaching at Yorktown High School since 1978 (but who began teaching in 1957), joined my team and immediately became a leading light as we wrote curriculum, made lists of essential topics, studied areas of need, and began to build what would become an important and exciting collaboration between the university and the high schools.

Marilyn was a rock, and a rock star. I called on her hundreds of times, invited her to every program, and drew on her immense knowledge of all things Spanish and Spanish American. Her boundless energy, good will, and generosity made her a key consultant to the program.

It was a logical step, then, when we turned to the National Endowment for the Humanities for external funding for a program we ended up calling "Literature in Performance" (the idea of which came partially from Marilyn's insistence that "there must be more we can do with literature than read it and have students answer the questions at the end of the book") that I turned to Marilyn to serve as my high-school point person. That summer project produced the "Performance Guides to Spanish Literature" on the works of Cervantes, Matute, Unamuno, Lorca, García Márquez, and Neruda. We went back to the NEH two years later for additional funding, and Marilyn was once again an integral part of that project.

I confess, though —and I would be less than honest if I didn't include this in my remembrance— that Marilyn also drove me crazy. She was an avalanche of ideas and opinions, suggestions and commentary, possibilities and innovation, and also of words. The woman could TALK!

So in 1992, when I turned to the NEH again for another chunk of your taxpayer dollars to create a program called "Spain Today and Toward the Year 2000," I decided to ask someone else besides Marilyn to be the expert consultant. Well, I should have known. It was a disaster, and I learned my lesson. When we repeated that program in 1994, Marilyn was back on board, and the work —including a well-regarded activities guide— got done efficiently, quickly, and brilliantly.

The same dynamic operated as we developed the "Cine con clase" website, and Marilyn was an energetic and key player in that initiative, working with us from 2004 until just last summer.

Marilyn was my go-to guru for computer stuff; she was always up on the latest trends, always had the newest gizmos —or wise warnings about upcoming innovations. This e-mail note from late 2009 captures her knowledge and enthusiasms:

Have you upgraded to Snow Leopard? If not, I'd suggest you hold off a bit; I haven't because there are some useful apps out there that haven't been tweaked to work yet. Rumors of the arrival of something like a netbook from Apple [this is the inside word on what would be called the iPad] have friends already standing in virtual line -- and will undoubtedly send Apple stock over 200. (My investment counselor, nagged into

buying me some stock in early 2000s -- at 20! -- has finally admitted that, dumb as I am about money, that was a good thing!)

Marilyn loved everything -- students, colleagues, dogs, cats, and birds. Many of you knew of Harley. This e-mail captures both her love for him and her sense of humor.

After years of basically a too-small cage, Harley now has a "palace" and is one happy camper, playing with all kinds of toys and talking / singing a blue streak. He LOVES Whitney Houston -- all you have to do is play songs from the "Bodyguard" and off he goes, including singing sustained notes along with her that surprisingly often are on key.

And she never lost her enthusiasm for learning. When I wrote to her in late August that Janna and I were about embark on a trip around the world with Semester at Sea, and asked if she wanted to be included on my blog list, her hilarious response was simply, "Gee, ya think?!"

Marilyn was simply the best. She was energetic, generous, talkative, passionate, and dedicated to her students in ways that most of us can only dream of. "Señora," as she was known by generations of students, was a member of Phi Beta Kappa and numerous professional organizations. She served on the Executive Council of ACTFL. She presented dozens of workshops and seminars over the years, and received recognition for that work in the form of the Yorktown Faculty Award for Work with Students (twice, in 1983 and 1985), the Greater Washington Association of Teachers for Foreign Language Award (1984), and the Distinguished Educator Award from the Governor's School in Richmond (2000). And I was honored to be in the audience when she was inducted — much to her surprise and, I think, embarrassment— into the National Teachers Hall of Fame in 2005.

Reading the on-line condolence book following Marilyn's death, I noted several sentences and phrases that shine through as tropes of her life:

"She knew I could do better."

"She supported me each time I reached out for help."

"She is one of the most influential people in my life."

"I can't imagine how many lives she touched and transformed."

"She was truly my most memorable and inspiring teacher."

I think I could have written all of those sentences, for they certainly capture what I thought of Marilyn as well. I was enriched by my friendship with her and I am a better person because of that.

The world, however, is a slightly dimmer place now that she is gone. Please join me in a moment of silent remembrance for our dear colleague, Marilyn Barrueta.

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