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Community mourns beloved area teacher

By [Susan Smallheer](#) STAFF WRITER

WESTMINSTER WEST – A woman who taught hundreds of Westminster West children – and their parents – about community and the wide world beyond their small village, is being mourned.

Claire Oglesby, 77, died in Brattleboro Tuesday night after a long struggle with lung cancer, which had spread to her bones and brain, friends said.

Oglesby was a legend not just in the tiny village of Westminster West, where she had taught first- and second-graders in the two-room schoolhouse for close to 40 years. Oglesby had received attention and accolades from the state of Vermont, fellow educators in Vermont and beyond for her at-times unconventional but effective approach to education.

She was named the Vermont Teacher of the Year in 1970, she was the subject of a documentary film, "The World In Claire's Classroom," and received numerous awards and an honorary degree from Marlboro College. She won an award from the Anti-Defamation League because of her teaching about diversity.

Oglesby had retired in 2001, after teaching in the small Westminster West school since 1966. Earlier she had taught at Putney Central School and The Grammar School in Putney. She and her husband, Mac Oglesby, had moved to Vermont in the late 1950s after teaching briefly in New York City.

The Rev. Susie Webster-Toleno, minister of the Westminster West Congregational Church, said Oglesby was legendary in the minds of the people who knew her and loved her.

Webster-Toleno, who came to the rural parish in 2002, said that she learned about Oglesby through stories about her and her impact on the village.

"I knew her a little, but I knew of her more through stories about her and the impact she had on any number of students and parents," she said.

"She seemed to have an unusual ability to really get the sense of who each kid was, and engage a whole school in projects, and develop a sense of community," she said.

Oglesby was famous for devoting the entire school into a project, such as studying one country every year, whether it was India or China. Multiculturalism was her goal before it became required.

Beverly Major, a close friend of Oglesby, said she convinced and inspired her to return to school and get her teaching degree, and Major became one of Westminster's kindergarten

teachers. Major said she and her husband moved to Westminster West in the mid-1960s in large part because of Oglesby's reputation as a dynamic teacher.

"I became a teacher because of Claire," said Major, who said all her children and four of her grandchildren had Oglesby at the small school.

Major said one thing that Oglesby firmly believed in was the power of the individual child. And she was no fan of reading curriculum, Major said.

She firmly believed that children should read the books they are interested in, Major recalled of her friend, even if it meant a first-grader was lugging around a large, heavy book.

"She had just a fabulous way with kids and kids just adored her. She was committed to reading and writing. Kids did a lot of reading and writing. She would never use a textbook — the kids used real books, and, of course, they read their own friends writing. One of my kids was reading 'Treasure Island' in the first grade," Major said.

"She also loved art and she wanted everyone else to be exposed to art, both visual and performing arts. And long before it became fashionable, she was committed to diversity. One spring, there was an Indian temple set up in the classroom," Major said.

Major said Oglesby was never a smoker, and the spot on her lung wasn't properly diagnosed seven years ago.

Mary Hayward of Westminster West taught with Oglesby in the small community school for years.

"Claire was an inspiration to work with, she was a natural-born teacher and she related with ease and deep understand to children," Hayward said in an e-mail.

"She nurtured generations of students and kept up to date with where they were and what they were doing. She was committed to expanding the horizons of the students of rural Westminster West by our annual study of another culture by bringing in many visitors from all walks of life and from many countries," Hayward said.

Despite her retirement and move to Brattleboro with her husband, Mac, a fellow teacher, she remained deeply attached to her Westminster West community, everyone said.

Webster-Toleno and Hayward said Oglesby put the school the center of the community.

"She had a deep and extensive knowledge of the community, positioning the school as its very center, its heart," Hayward wrote.

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