



Beloved teacher Claire Oglesby loses battle with cancer

By HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN

WESTMINSTER WEST -- Claire Oglesby spent much of her teaching career fighting racism, fighting administrators and fighting canned curriculum.

She won most of those battles.

For the past year, she fought the cancer that formed in her lungs and spread to her brain, and on Tuesday she lost the fight.

Oglesby, who taught at the small, two-room schoolhouse in Westminster West for more than three decades, and became a mentor for teachers across Vermont, died at her home in Brattleboro. She was 77.

Oglesby came to the Westminster West School in 1966 and included multicultural studies as an important part of the learning in her classroom.

While her class was made up largely of white New Englanders, she never let them forget about their place in the larger world.

Interns from the School for International Training were frequent visitors.

For one project, she turned the small Vermont grade school into an Indian temple and led numerous class trips to a sister school in Puerto Rico, while hosting Puerto Rican families in Vermont, sometimes during the snowy winters.

When Bev Major and her young family decided to

move to Vermont in the mid-1960s, she largely chose Westminster West because of Oglesby's reputation.

Oglesby would go on to teach her four children and four grandchildren, and even encouraged Major to get her teaching certificate while in her mid-30s.

Major went on to teach pre-kindergarten and kindergarten for decades.

"She was a fabulous teacher. She instilled a love of reading and writing in many, many students," Major said Wednesday. "She really opened the world up to her students."

Oglesby would often be at odds with administrators who wanted to control the curriculum in her classrooms, Major remembered.

She was fiercely opposed to standardized reading programs and believed that children should choose the books they wanted to read and which interested them.

In a 2001 interview with "Teachers Talking," a UNICEF project, Oglesby talked about state education requirements.

"I've found that if you look closely at these requirements, you can fulfill the required curriculum in your own ways," she told the author of the article. "You don't have to teach in a standardized way, as long as your children are successful."

"She made life for many administrators extremely difficult," said Major. "She had her own teaching methods she believed in and she did not like to be told what to do."

Oglesby also stressed the importance of including the whole family in a child's education and she is

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remembered for her knack of getting parents involved in the classroom and raising money for after-school activities.

"Claire had the ability to open the classroom for parents, and you had the feeling that it was not only for the children, but that parent involvement was critical to the learning process," said Sean Long, who had two sons go through Oglesby's class.

"When I would go pick up one of my sons, Claire would say something about them that let you know she had dug in deep. She wasn't just teaching. She was learning about your child."

Lois Barber worked in Oglesby's class for 12 years and her two daughters were students there.

Barber watched countless parents come in to share everything from their farming skills to carpentry to music and art.

"She had a love of learning and she really believed that everyone had something to teach," Barber said. "There was no negative strong arming, because that wouldn't work. She had a way of making adults feel like they had something to share with the students. Her love of learning was infectious."

Claire Marion Hildebrandt was born on Feb. 5, 1932, in Montclair, N.J.

She first taught at the Brooklyn Community Woodward School in Brooklyn, N.Y.

On Jan. 27, 1956, she married Albert "Mac" Oglesby, who was also a teacher, and the two moved to an old farmstead on Windmill Hill in Westminster West in 1959.

In 1960, they both were offered jobs at the Grammar School in Putney, which was just opening, and Claire Oglesby later worked for a few years at

Putney Central Elementary School before taking the job in Westminster West.

One of her students at The Grammar School, Sen. Peter Shumlin, remembered Oglesby as a teacher who made a lifelong impression on her young students and was able to make every student feel as though he or she had greatness within.

"She was one of the best teachers I ever had in my life," said Shumlin, who remained close to Oglesby and her family for more than 40 years. "She was able to teach to students who learned differently and get extraordinary results from everyone. She connected with children in a way that should be a model for educators. The community has lost a true friend and a true hero of education. She will be sorely missed."

Oglesby was the 1970 Vermont Teacher of the Year, won the World of Difference Award from the Anti-Defamation League and received an honorary master's degree from Marlboro College in 1996.

Her teaching was the focus of a 2000 documentary film, "The World in Claire's Classroom," by Vermont filmmakers Lisa Merton and Alan Dater.

After Oglesby retired from the Westminster West School in 2002, she remained active in local educational projects.

She helped establish the Southeast Vermont Community Learning Collaborative, organized a retired teachers group that met and volunteered in classrooms and worked with the Ennis William Cosby Foundation to deliver libraries to under-served schools all over the country.

"Her determination to help educators and support children was unstoppable," said Casey Murrow, director of the Southeast Vermont Community Learning Collaborative, which is a center for

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teachers to work together and share resources.
"Claire never retired really."

When Cosby Foundation Education Director Carolyn Olivier found out that Scholastic Books was offering 25,000 books to be distributed to school libraries, she knew who to call.

Oglesby rounded up volunteers, found available space at Green Mountain Orchards, and for nine years helped read, organize and pack thousands of children's books that are now being used in more than 13,000 school libraries from the Bronx to Los Angeles.

"Claire saw that this was an important project and she was one of the first to say it was possible," Olivier said. "She had an incredible faith in human nature and an ability to inspire people."

Details of the memorial service were still being made Wednesday.

The family is asking that money be donated to school and public libraries in lieu of flowers.

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