City Final

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Front Page Story

Exceptional teacher leaves her mark

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Her students lean forward in their chairs, trying to get chances to speak. She slowly raises her eyebrows and asks a student to consider an additional factor. Hands wave like flags. Her lips press together when she isn't speaking; her hair is pulled back into a bun; her clothes are neatly pressed; her spine is rigid. She expertly steers the discussion through waves of enthusiasm she has set in motion.

This is how Elizabeth Palmer taught. She is dying now of cancer, but her lessons continue to echo through her students.

"If I had a model of what an English teacher should be, it would be Liz Palmer," said Jack Kean, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor of curriculum and instruction.

Kean is not her only admirer. In 26 years of teaching English at Madison West High School, Palmer has earned the admiration of students, colleagues and administrators and received recognition from numerous groups such as UW, Scholastic Magazine, Phi Kappa Phi, the University of Chicago and Rotary International. Madison Mayor Joseph Sensenbrenner proclaimed April 23, 1985, to be "Elizabeth Palmer Day" in recognition of her contributions to local education.

"You must lead subtly, so as not to look as though you are demanding," she said in a recent interview. "Do not lecture. Listen to yourself, to the kids, to see what you can find."

Former student Dan Schultz describes the subtlety of her style like this: She sets the tone for the discussion by wearing an expression only Buddha or Palmer could have — not smiling or scowling, but at peace. If someone starts to ramble down the wrong track, she raises her eyebrows, looks down at her nails, and says, "Well, Tom, I don't think so." Then, Schultz recounted, "she lowers her eyebrows and Tom knows he's had it."

Last October, after a trip to the doctor to find out why she felt so tired, she learned she had cancer that had spread through her body, and that it is terminal. She's now confined to her bed at home.

Please see TEACHER, Back Page

Elizabeth Palmer HILDEGARD ADLER

"I cried," said former student Rika Kaestle, now a freshman at Yale, describing how she felt when she heard the news. "It was hard for me. I wanted to come back and talk to her. ... She's my favorite teacher I ever had.

"She taught me that you can always deal with the situation. Even now, when she's really sick, she accepts what is happening and makes the best of it. She inspires you," Kaestle said.

"When a person is consistently perceptive, understanding, and inspirational year after year, that is an accomplishment," said Betty Perergo, who was a guidance counselor at West for 37 years.

Teacher

From Page 1

Beside teaching literature and creative writing, Palmer also edited West's literary journal and the literary/photography journal for Wisconsin high schools put out by the Wisconsin Academy review. She also helped so many students win national writing awards that she has earned a wide reputation for this talent.

Coe Williams, former co-chairwoman of West's Parent Teacher Student Organization, described how Palmer gave extra time to help one of her sons write a scholarship application. "Both of my boys planned their schedules around her classes."

"I have total admiration for her accomplishments over the years," said professor William Lenehan, associate chair of UW-Madison's English department. Palmer was asked to teach a section of Composition for English Teachers at the university in 1986, and did so until special funding for that position ended.

Students and former students say the same things.

Fred Dick, now a UW-Madison student, said, "I like her teaching methods. Instead of telling you, she would lead you." According to Dick, one day Palmer had the class count all the modifiers in two paragraphs of "To the Lighthouse" to show how seldom professional writers use adverbs and adjectives. "I've applied what she taught me. I'm much more critical of my writing."

One student from the class of '83, W.P. Norton, sees Palmer as a continuing source of inspiration. "When one is 15 or 16 years old, and a teacher like Elizabeth Palmer shows you the fundamental truths expressed in literature, you begin to feel that many others have experienced what you have. You feel that there is meaning in life."

That kind of energy requires dedication, and according to Arnold Chandler, Palmer's dedication is legendary. Now the director of elementary and secondary education at the Department of Public Instruction, Chandler has known Palmer personally and professionally for 25 years. He tells of the years that their families would go to a cottage in northern Wisconsin to relax — and she would bring stacks of papers with her to grade. "We never saw her without stacks of papers. Even at parties. If, by chance, she'd come without them, we'd all say, 'Elizabeth, where are your papers?' "

Palmer was born in 1931 in Urbana, Ill., where her father was the dean of the school of fine arts at the University of Illinois and her mother was active in the League of Women Voters. She received bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Illinois in English and started teaching in 1957 in rural Indiana. She moved to Madison to teach two years later, took a year off when her son Tom (who now is a librarian in Chicago) was born, and began teaching at West in 1963.

She rapidly made a name for herself as a teacher who did not lecture, but who led students to discover ideas for themselves.

She explained her purpose in teaching literature during a videotaped interview that is part of a nationally marketed teacher training course produced by the UW System. In it, she said, "Literature has all the answers to all the questions we could ever ask. More than just a record of our heritage, it is a very pleasing art to participate in as a reader. We learn to think about ourselves through literature."

"She never lost sight of what education is all about," said Chandler. "That is: making people better than they were."

C-T article honored deserving teacher

. **THANK YOU** for the recent front page story on Elizabeth Palmer, the extraordinary West High School teacher. We applaud the article and its placement in the paper.

Elizabeth Palmer has always been front page news. Her influence on her colleagues and her students is ever expanding.

Donna Rae Clasen
Robert E. Clasen
Madison