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Grady, Marilyn, "Preparation and Opportunity" (2008). *Faculty Publications in Educational Administration*. 52.
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Preparation and Opportunity

Marilyn L. Grady

Following is the text of the speech I delivered as the recipient of the 2008 Living Legends Award at the annual meeting of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration in San Diego.

The truth is, I've acquired a certain taste for anonymity when I speak to groups. Unfortunately, in this room this evening, I may not have that luxury. I expect I will not be able to embellish as many details tonight.

I get to talk this evening because I have stood in the same spot long enough to have observed a few aspects of being a professor of educational administration. My focus tonight is on my preparation for the professoriate, the opportunities I have had, and the best aspects of my life as a professor.

MY PREPARATION

I believe my preparation to become a professor began in my childhood home. My Dad was 64 years old when I was born. He was a "self-taught" electrical engineer who was born in 1886. He was a contemporary of Thomas Edison who hailed from Milan, Ohio, just down the road from our home in Sheffield Lake, Ohio. I grew up watching my father read hefty tomes. He sat on the corner of the couch reading either huge biographies of individuals like Abraham Lincoln or reading a thick manual of electrical circuitry. My father was the fellow who held the wires together when Cleveland, Ohio, was first illuminated. The mayor stood on stage and flipped a dummy switch, and my Dad made the magic.

My Mom was 39 when I was born. She too was a bibliophile. Our house had books everywhere, and censorship was never considered. At age nine, I read one of A.J. Cronin's novels (1945, 1948). In it the main character was a university professor. The image of the professoriate I drew from Cronin's writing was a life of reading, writing, and teaching. From that book, I knew I wanted to be a professor. Little did I know what it would take to get there.

I had two older brothers who completed our family line-up. One brother was 20 years older than me and the other brother was 13 years older than me. They "set the bar" in my academic life. The older of my two brothers was a student at John Carroll University pursuing law. The other brother was a civil engineer who attended the University of Notre Dame.

My parents were people people. They had what I call the gift of gab. Words, ideas, laughter, and interpersonal relationships were hallmarks of my life in Sheffield Lake, Ohio.

They had many friends. They talked easily to people they would meet in all kinds of settings. They were helping people. They were the kind of people that others could "count on."

I THINK THEIR WAY OF “BEING” IS THE ESSENTIAL IN WHO I AM

My favorite short story, and one I would readily commend to others, is called *Eleven*. When my son, Alex, was in the 11th grade, he came home from high school, and in the usual evening drill of doing homework, pulled out his literature book, brought the book to me, and asked me to read *Eleven*. He had read it that day and really liked it. I read it and have never forgotten it. The story is one of many written by Sandra Cisneros (1991). It is the tale of an 11 year old girl who says, “What they don’t understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you’re eleven, you’re also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two and one” (p. 6). You are not supposed to be surprised if she, on some days, acts as a one, two, ten or nine-year-old since inside she is still that little girl at those ages. She may still feel like an eight-year-old and act like one. So, just because she is eleven today, does not mean she has left those other years and experiences behind her (Grady, 2002).

I want to assure you that I am much older than eleven, yet I have all those other years, experiences, and behaviors of my life with me today. And so, I have within me, my early years of growing up in Sheffield Lake, Ohio.

I am also particularly struck by *Eleven* because of the fact that it was my son Alex who brought the story to me. Alex was born in Moscow. When I went to bring him home, we spent a considerable amount of time visiting the sites of Moscow and Sergiyev Posad (Zagorsk). In Ismailova Park, there is a huge open air market or bazaar on the weekends. We went and milled through endless stalls and tables examining the crafts and art work displayed there. We looked at many displays of matryoshkas. I understood that the value of the matryoshkas was in the number of nested dolls each contained--the more dolls, the more valuable and prized the matryoshka. I, however, was not quite so enchanted with the number of dolls...I was more persuaded by the artistry of the design and the painting of the matryoshkas. So, I returned home with beautiful matryoshkas....not the matryoshkas with fifteen dolls nested inside. Today, I can tell you that I “get” the fifteen matryoshkas better than I did in 1993. Now I can see the relationship between Sandra Cisneros’ *Eleven* and the matryoshkas....since I seem to be racking up a whole lot of years and experiences and certainly know that there are many “people and dolls” inside me.

UNDERGRADUATE

My path took me to Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana. I attended Saint Mary’s because the doors to Notre Dame were not open to women at that time. During my junior year of college, Notre Dame and Saint Mary’s were “combined,” but the good sisters withdrew from the arrangement to preserve the institution they had built.

The school had a strong thread of commitment to social justice issues. All education majors were required to give an evening of reading instruction each week to South Bend’s needy kids. We were all bussed as a group to the AME church and spent our time on the reading initiative. We also were part of a voter registration initiative.

As an undergraduate, I was a history and English major. These subjects were fine training for the professoriate since they involved endless reading (sometimes of excessively boring books) and the writing of many manuscripts. I enjoyed those activities then and I enjoy them even more now.

THOSE EARLY TEACHING EXPERIENCES ARE STILL PART OF ME TODAY

I remember my student teaching experience quite well. I spent a semester at a South Bend high school during a time of great civil rights turmoil. With guards all over the school, it was certainly a great inspiration for students and teachers in training.

I prepared to teach at a time when the Method Du Jour in Social Studies was the Discovery Method. I can tell you that no matter how hard I tried, the Discovery Method was not going to get the tenth grade students to discover the Magna Carta. The students were certainly good sports about the whole process but we shared a common understanding—it was a pointless enterprise. My favorite memory of that experience was the class of boys who were enamored with Swisher Sweets.

My supervising teacher was Eldon Fretz. He was passionate about teaching social studies. He did not use the Discovery Method that was the college's contribution to my pedagogical repertoire. Mr. Fretz loved history—we were together on that page. His parting words to me in a letter I treasure from my student teaching experience mean something to me in 2008 that they did not mean to me at the time. He said that I should love my students. Needless to say, I thought he was daft but excused him for his enthusiasm.

I moved on to a series of positions that had me teaching in a Title program for behaviorally maladjusted junior high students. This meant fish hooks, fishing lines, matches, boats, and a school bus. Yes, it was off to the lake to teach kids outdoor recreation skills. I was solid on the fish hooks, fishing lines, matches, and boats. I did, however, lack the behavioral part of the preparation. What a great learning opportunity for me: How to remove hooks from many parts of the young adolescents' anatomy and how to "right" the boats.

Because I was such a star at the boats' part, I was allowed to spend some quality time in a classroom of special students. This classroom happened to be along the siding of the Illinois Central Railroad—an abandoned warehouse to be specific. That is where the consolidated school district chose to send its pregnant students for their comprehensive education. Each day I was there, I got to teach whoever came to class all of their subjects. The students were in grades 6–12. No student ever managed to show up two days in a row. The students who came cried most of the day and worked on jigsaw puzzles. I have never been good at jigsaw puzzles. My background in the Discovery Method was not very helpful either. I was much better with fish hooks.

While experiencing the drama of the real world, I finished a master's degree in history. Ah yes, Russian and German history in the twentieth century, I love the subject. I discovered a high school teaching position in history that became available in November. I rushed to the job in southern Ohio. I never considered why a history position would open in November. Surprise! The football coach's season was over, and teaching was not his thing. The students shared his point of view.

The year was unbelievable. I remained there for two more years experiencing the joys of teaching and administrative work. I was ecstatic to leave Appalachia and the coal and steel depression along the Ohio River.

I knew that life in the depression of Appalachia was not for me; and, I knew I needed a doctorate to teach at the university level. I also knew that although I love history, universities do not hire many historians.

I WAS ACCEPTED FOR DOCTORAL STUDY AT OHIO STATE

I was admitted to the program in educational administration. I had an assistantship in the College of Dentistry. In dentistry, I worked with faculty as an instructional designer and in test preparation. Another assistantship was with a Women's Educational Equity Act project. The assistantship provided travel around the U.S. and access to some great individuals. A required internship gave me an experience at Perry Middle School considered a lighthouse of the middle school concept. I learned the finer points of staff development while at that school.

My path took me to an elementary principalship as an intern for a year. I stayed an additional year since I enjoyed the work so much.

At the end of two years, I paused to finish writing my dissertation. From that point, I accepted a position at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Champaign-Urbana as Coordinator of Instructional Development. In that position, I learned much about testing and the professions. And, I learned the secret of medicine—"Wash Your Hands!"

Three years later, I accepted a faculty position at Washburn University in Topeka. Within weeks of arriving, I became the co-chair of the department because the department chair had left the university to avoid completing a National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) report. I learned much about NCATE and much about why Washburn probably should not be offering an educational administration program in the same town as Kansas University, Kansas State University, and Emporia State University.

I joined the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. My teaching assignment was organizational theory and internships. Internships were mine because of my work in the medical school and the dental school. Organizational theory was mine because of my studies at Ohio State and my dissertation which was a study in leadership.

I was an affirmative action hire. I was the first woman hired by the department. One of the challenges at the time I became a member of the department was the increasing number of women enrolling in the masters and doctoral programs.

AN EARLY OPPORTUNITY

Miles Bryant—was hired a year before me. Our department travels around the state of Nebraska every fall attending the annual district school board meetings. Miles and I drove to one of the meetings. During the ride, he told me that I was expected to do something about the women. I said "what?" He said he had no idea.

During my medical school tour, I had responsibility for the Continuing Medical Education courses offered by the College of Medicine. Conferences I could do. I planned a Women in Educational Leadership conference. I invited the few women administrators in Nebraska to offer sessions. I also invited some "out-of-town well-known women," and we had a conference. I rejoiced when it was a success (and it was over). I was encouraged to do it again...and again...and again. This fall, we will hold the 23rd conference on Women in Educational Leadership.

The conference started as an event for Nebraska students. It is still that. However, over the years, we have individuals who return every year, or every few years. We now have had attendees from all fifty states and a number of international countries.

Throughout these years, all of the department faculty have attended. Many of the faculty present with their students. Others encourage their students as presenters. Many of you

have attended, presented, and sent others to the conference. Because of this support, the conference continues to grow stronger each year.

The conference has been an opportunity for me that I did not know I needed. Although I was involved with the Women's Educational Equity Act project at Ohio State and had served on the State Equity Committee for the State of Kansas, by the time I got to Nebraska, I thought Title IX had been in place long enough and equity was no longer an issue. I was wrong.

I had not recognized equity issues as a barrier to my getting a faculty position in educational administration. However, at the time I became a faculty member at Nebraska, I knew almost every woman faculty member in educational administration in the U.S. When I was hired, only 2% of the educational administration faculty members in the U.S. were women.

What I Did Not Know—I did not see my work as a faculty member as being a Conference Planner. I saw my work as teaching, research, and service...the Land Grant Mission.

The Network—The conference has provided an incredible network for the conference attendees, for our students, and for me. Although I had been part of the Title IX Women's Educational Equity Act project, I never saw myself as a women's advocate or feminist.

MY GUIDE: DON UERLING

Nebraska had a mentoring program for new faculty when I joined the university. My mentor was Don Uerling. He was an excellent mentor. He had excellent technique. I was the first person in our department to be gifted with the mentoring program.

The tradition in our department when I joined the faculty was for our department chair to march down the length of the hall at noon each day to assemble "his" faculty for the daily march to the union cafeteria for lunch. I believe there was some military precision to this daily drill. I found the formation and pace a bit troubling as we stepped across campus. In the cafeteria, we would sit at our communal table and hear tales of prowess from my colleagues, tales of heroism, and so forth.

Each day as I would lift my fork or spoon to my mouth, all would fall silent as my Mentor would ask, "Well, have you published anything yet?" Amazing how effective that technique is. Not only does it bring out the scholarship in you, it also keeps the pounds off since daily you lost your appetite to the verbal challenge. *In hindsight, the mentoring technique was flawless. I would highly recommend it to others.* When our department chair stepped away from the chair role, and the union remodeled and eliminated the cafeteria, the strength of the mentoring experience was sadly diminished.

ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY

Eight years ago, a publisher approached me with an idea. He wanted to publish a journal on women and educational leadership. He asked if I would edit it. I said, "No, thank you." I suggested some of my colleagues as potential editors. They all said, "Thanks, make Marilyn do it." After several conversations, I relented.

I had no vision, desire, or ambition to edit a journal. I like to write. I edit my doctoral students' dissertations. I edit my colleagues' work when we write together but a journal looked like an enormous amount of work. It is.

The Journal of Women in Educational Leadership has been an opportunity that I didn't know I needed. I have learned much by reading the manuscripts. I have expanded my network of colleagues because of the work. I have learned much about the writing skills of my

colleagues; I've also learned how individuals view a journal on equity issues. I did not realize that I needed to learn these aspects of our profession.

WHAT EXPERIENCE TAUGHT ME—HOW EXPERIENCE AND OPPORTUNITY TRANSFORMED ME

The enduring aspect of the experiences I have had in my trek to and through the professoriate is that on the occasions when I have been inclined to say, "No," or "No, thanks," I was often wrong. The opportunities that I did not anticipate have provided incredible experiences for me. The work I do as a professor is not the work I imagined at the beginning of my quest to become a professor. Although I am engaged in the Research, Teaching, and Service Land Grant Mission, I am involved in many other initiatives that make the work interesting, challenging, and worthwhile. The annual Women in Educational Leadership Conference and BI are but two of the opportunities I did not anticipate; yet, they have been incredible experiences.

THE BEST PART OF MY WORK AND LIFE AS A PROFESSOR

I tell whoever asks, that there are two things that are most important to me—my kids and my doctoral students. My children are Mercedes, Alex, Natasha, Justin, and Elizabeth. All five have been regular attendees at the annual meetings of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration. Mercedes attended her first meeting of NCPEA in Fargo, North Dakota—back in the days when there was a program for the children of professors of educational administration. Alex and Natasha attended their first meeting of NCPEA in Indian Wells, California. Just days before the conference, Alex, Natasha, Mercedes, and I returned to the United States after meeting the new Grady kids (Alex and Natasha) in Moscow. Fair-skinned Natasha suffered horribly from the sun of sunny California at her first NCPEA event. Justin and Elizabeth attended their first meeting of NCPEA in Vail, Colorado. Elizabeth marked the event by being burned by the "baby sitter's curling iron" at that meeting.

My work as a professor has accommodated my role as a mother. My children have been welcomed by my faculty colleagues and by my doctoral students. The profession has been a fine match for my life with these wonderful children. Tonight, you'll see the Bambina Preciosa, Elizabeth, is here with me. You can see we saved the best for last in my sparkly-eyed Guatemalan daughter.

The children have taught me much that I did not know when I became a teacher and a school administrator earlier in my career. They have made me a better professor of educational administration because I now understand the struggles parents have with children and learning, children and truancy, children and motivation, children and illness. I now understand the dilemmas teachers and administrators face as they balance family and professional obligations (Grady, 2009).

When I consider the best aspects of my life as a professor, I want to say the chance to write and I have written many books and many, many journal articles and chapters. But, the best part of all has been advising doctoral students and working with doctoral students (Grady, 2000; Grady & Hoffman, 2007). My career has spanned all levels and ages of students. However, working with students who want to conduct research and write the results of their studies has been most satisfying of all. These individuals who complete their dissertations often go on to have incredibly productive professorial careers of their own. I am pleased to recognize so many of these individuals in this room this evening. The connections formed

with these fine students and graduates from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are the most rewarding part of the work I do on a daily basis.

Recently, I have been aware of the struggles some faculty have as they near retirement. One individual was challenged by a concern about the legacy he would leave following his retirement. I was very interested in this individual's dilemma because he had advised many students during his years in higher education. I was sad for him that he did not see his legacy in the students he had advised.

Our work with the students we advise creates a complex network of enduring relationships. I know that if I draw the genealogy of my path to the professoriate, beginning with my early experiences and branching to this stage in my work, the tree would have many branches. If we were to draw the branches of these relationships, we would each be able to see the legacy we leave through our work. The story, *Eleven*, and the value of matryoshkas with a greater number of nested dolls mean more to me as I consider the value of the doctoral students I have advised. I know that through our work with our students, we pass it on.

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DEStech Publications, Inc.

PRO>ACTIVE PUBLICATIONS

Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Remember Our Mission

ProActive Publications
439 North Duke Street
Lancaster, Pennsylvania 17602 U.S.A.

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Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Main entry under title:
Remember Our Mission: Making Education and Schools Better for Students

A ProActive Publications book
Bibliography: p.
Includes index p. 247

ISBN No. 1-885432-49-6