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Women in History— Lyn McNaught: Making a Difference

Mary Ann Welch Bendezu

Although Lyn McNaught retired in 2004 after more than thirty-five years as a teacher and Director of the Horizons Student Enrichment Program, her legacy of community service remains with her successors and the benefactors who continue to support the growing Horizons educational programs in New Canaan, Connecticut, and around the United States.

Horizons was originally designed as an all-day, summer, academic program for disadvantaged city children living in Fairfield County, but it has now expanded to year-round enrichment programs for children through the eighth grade and a high school program that helps Horizons graduates as they prepare for college or vocational training. It occupies offices donated by the New Canaan Country School, using the school's classrooms and other facilities during the six weeks of summer activities and on Saturdays throughout the school year. Lyn and her small, dedicated staff spent many hours throughout the year in preparation for the Horizons program, hiring teaching staff members, organizing the morning academic programs, promoting afternoon athletic activities, and planning field trips. Because she believed that every child could benefit and grow in confidence by learning how to swim, Lyn particularly promoted swimming lessons for every Horizons child, and sent buses and cars full of children to many of the private pools around New Canaan loaned to the program. Early on, Lyn raised the funds to build an on-campus swimming pool so that the children could have swimming lessons in the mornings as well as the afternoons. Upon her retirement, the pool, which had been called the Horizons pool, was renamed the McNaught pool to honor Lyn and her husband, Michael, who had long taken care of the pool.

When asked about her belief in the Horizons program, Lyn always refers to the organization's mission statement:

The mission of Horizons is an important one and helps to address an ever-growing problem in our country. The public schools alone cannot address all the educational needs of our young people, especially those from the inner cities. Horizons is a public/private partnership, and one that truly works. The private school campus provides a summer home (and access to all its facilities) for public school children, who are recommended by their schools. The Horizons

About the Author

Mary Ann Benedezu, Ph.D., teaches fifth through ninth grade Spanish classes at New Canaan Country School. She has acted as head of the department of world languages and led the research task force and hiring committee for the implementation of classes in Mandarin Chinese in 7–9 grades. She is the founder and Director of the Horizons Friends Corps, a mentoring program for New Canaan Country School eighth grade students paired with fourth grade Horizons students. She is a long-time member of Phi Delta Kappa, Lincoln chapter; ASCD; and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language. Email: maryannben@optonline.net.

model is a strong one that has been proven at New Canaan Horizons, which is 43 years old. The other ingredients which lead to success are dedicated teachers, successful fund raising, and a proven track record—all of which Horizons has.

Over a decade ago, Lyn spearheaded an effort to replicate the Horizons New Canaan model around the country. There are now thirteen Horizons affiliates (soon to be fifteen) around the country stretching from Colorado to Indiana and all up and down the east coast from New York state to Georgia. Lyn says, “I am determined to open a Horizons in California before I hang up my spurs.” She adds:

The central core and model of each Horizons program is the same. When one steps into a Horizons classroom, no matter where it is, one sees experiential learning going on. One can see that the teachers really care about the children and give them a great deal of individual attention. All the programs are physically located on a private school campus, each of which has wonderful facilities for the children to use and enjoy. All the programs offer a swimming program, which is a very important part of the curriculum. The basic core curriculum of each program is the same—reading, writing and math are offered at each site. Most affiliates also offer music, art, and other subjects as they can. All affiliates offer recreational and cultural opportunities which round out the Horizons experience. Since the students return year after year, Horizons is able to make a significant impact on their lives.

Oni Brown entered Horizons as a third grade student. She now works for Horizons as the School Year Program Director. Oni remembers Lyn with fondness. “We deeply respected her, and she was able to be caring and nurturing, and yet firm. We always knew she would greet us at the buses in the morning and wave to us in the afternoon. I came back to the Horizons community to give back to the program. I love meeting the kids at the buses on hot summer mornings and waving good-bye to them each afternoon.”

Running this vast program requires money. “Since the children pay only a small registration fee to attend the program,” Lyn said, “I probably spent 60% of my time on fund raising in one way or another. Fund raising plays a central role in each program, a role that cannot be ignored. In each given year, a Horizons program must have an annual giving campaign and put on events that bring in money for the program, as well as introduce new people to the program. If there is a special need, the program should have a capital campaign. As each Horizons program grows, it should be raising endowment funds to protect the program in difficult times. The Board of Directors of each Horizons plays a central role in the raising of money, as does the Executive Director of the program.”

Building this program also required Lyn to be a bit of a rebel. After graduation from Smith College, she married and began a family later than her peers. As a teacher in private schools, she quickly realized that these wealthy children received a fine education that was not available to poor children. She took an opportunity to help these children when she took a position at NCCS in the fledgling Horizons program. “I felt,” she recalled, “that I wanted to do something for children who might not have access to good education.”

When asked about recognition of her work she replied, “I have received several small awards from local organizations, but the three biggest awards came from the Urban League of Southwestern Fairfield County, the Choate Rosemary School Distinguished Alumnae Award and Horizons itself.”

Even now, in what should be a quiet retirement, Lyn remains as committed and busy as ever. She has joined a classics book club, is taking an art course, and travels, but she still finds time to read to local Head Start children, head a local Woman’s Club, sit on the Board of a local educational foundation, and do some consulting work with various non-profits in the area. She also sits on the National Horizons Board, which keeps her connected with Horizons. Characteristically, when she was awarded the 2007 Choate Rosemary School’s Distinguished Alumnae Award, she ended her comments at the ceremony with these words:

My message for us all today is to find your gifts and passions—whatever they may be—and to pursue them relentlessly. Take your gifts and passions and find the life’s work which puts them to good use for you, for your family, but most importantly for others, because at the end of the day that is what is most important. Be open to new opportunities all along life’s journey, because they expand your horizons and add new dimensions to your life. We are all somewhat me-centered in our contemporary culture, but as I sit and look out over Vineyard Sound on a sunny spring afternoon and ruminate about my life, I always think about my family, and then I circle right back to Horizons and all those wonderful kids, and the small part I have played in helping them move forward with their lives.