

Marcella Oberle, Candidate for President of the Speech Communication Association, 1977

Contributed by Jane Blankenship

One of three children, Marcella was born into a farm family near Prophetstown, Illinois. Her younger sister recalls that their house had no electricity, but that they were “connected” to the outside world via a crystal set radio. Marcella read by the time she was four, and went to a one-room schoolhouse where all eight grades were taught.

A “quiet and introspective” child, Marcella was “a wonderful big sister – kind and gentle. Always number one at what she set out to do, [she was] a little bit of a ham who liked stand-up things (to recite poetry, and officiate at funerals for cats.)” She shared her brother’s interest in theater. Marcella graduated from high school in three years at age 16. In school, she was on the debate team and was editor of the school newspaper. The drama club also kept her busy. Her small high school never staged a play...that is, before Marcella matriculated!

A “serious student,” she did not take part in “too much social activity,” rather, she “liked a quiet time with a book.” This might have come as a personal challenge, because she placed herself in one of the most active social hubs in town – working in a local soda shop.

Marcella received the B. E. degree in English and teaching from DeKalb State Teachers College in 1942. After teaching English and theatre in Hooppole, Ill. high school (1942-43), and English, speech, and forensics at Dwight, she taught English in the Chicago Public School system. Marcella received both the M. A. and Ph. D. degrees in 1948 and 1965, respectively, from Northwestern University, where her dissertation was directed by Karl Robinson. She joined the faculty at Northwestern as an Instructor in the School of Speech, remaining there until 1960. There, she taught oral interpretation of children’s literature, methods of teaching speech in elementary schools, and developing speech programs in the elementary schools. She also supervised the visitation of secondary school teachers (Grades 7-12). At that time she was one of three faculty in the Speech Education Division in the School of Speech, headed by Robinson. Doyle McKinney was the other member.

Kenneth Brown, one of Marcella’s graduate students, recalls that, as a teacher, she was “Excellent... (1) extremely well-organized, (2) skilled at constructing discussions, and (3) skilled at establishing a very close relationship with her students,” who later became her colleagues. Ken succeeded her when she left Northwestern to take a faculty position at California State University, Los Angeles. There, she taught Communication Competencies in the Classroom, Instructional Theories in Speech Communication, History of Speech Communication, Reader’s Theatre, Storytelling and the Oral Tradition. She also supervised secondary school student-teachers in speech communication.

She became very active in advancing the speech communication discipline “not only in California, but also in the western states and nationally” (Kully, 1984). He notes: “Of particular importance were her contributions to the papers on preparation of classroom teachers for the California State Department of Education,” her work on in-service workshops, and resources for elementary school teachers, her work on teacher licensing, and much more.

Rose Irvine Abernathy, one of “Marcie’s” longtime friends, recalls that she was “such a lot of fun” (a description I can verify, because I heard it over and over). Marcella and Rose were road

buffs, who traveled extensively in this country and overseas: “Marcie loved to travel,” and for each trip, she “thoroughly studied...like a tour guide” before setting out. She was a frequent visitor to Palm Springs, the home of Rose and her husband. Rose remembers that she was a strong Catholic and an “ardent Democrat” who “loved to handicap the horses!”

Marcella is remembered as a “political person...very much involved in campus politics.” Clearly “extremely active in governance and unions,” she was “determined and articulate,” a “major campus leader.” She served as chair of the Academic Senate.

Beverly Hendricks, who taught high school in California in the early 60s, and who later shared an office with Marcella, at CSU, describes her service: She was a “terrifically hard worker” whose “notion of service was extreme.” She “was always willing to come out to the high schools,” for example, to act as the keynoter at forensic tournaments. It seems clear that Marcella encouraged professional association and activity. More than a few associates noted that “she got [me] interested in going to Western and to SCA.”

Very active in the Western Speech Association, she was its President in 1970 and, in 1985, won its Distinguished Award. She also was active in the American Theatre Association, Secondary School Theatre Association, Children’s Theatre Association, and the Association of California State University Professors.

At the 1974 SCA convention, Marcella was nominated for the Second Vice-Presidency. The other nominee was Wallace Bacon, a distinguished teacher and scholar of theatre and performance studies at Northwestern University.

Why was she nominated? Speculation would include her visibility, and extraordinary service to the Association. She was respected nationally for instructional development, very active in the Instructional Development Division, serving as chair in 1972, and was known to be “an ardent spokesperson for traditional speech – oral interpretation, public speaking, rhetoric.” Further, she was from the West, and Wallace was from the Midwest. The gender difference may also have generated interest. More than one good friend advised her that “it would not be a wise choice to run for the presidency against Wally,” but she reasoned that her nomination “gave K - 12 additional visibility.”

Clearly, Marcella taught many of us important lessons about the critical importance of speech communication in early education, of clear goals concerning competencies, methods, and teacher training. Her energy and exuberance helped enormously in her constant outreach advocating life-long learning. I got to know Marcella early in my own professional life partially because I started my career teaching in public schools, and she sensed an ally. Here, also, she had a strong sense of the politics of getting on the agenda and advancing causes. Like many who pursued a career predominantly of teaching and service (despite being one of six people to receive her campus’ Outstanding Professor Award) toward the end of her career she “found great difficulty getting promoted.”

Recalling her acceptance to run, one colleague noted that Marcella “published some, but would be the first to admit she was not perceived as a scholar....She put most of her eggs in the teaching basket.” Some eggs; some basket! Small wonder that in 1989 SCA/NCA renamed the K-12 Outstanding Teacher Award “The Marcella Oberle Award for Outstanding Teaching in Grades K - 12.”

The Communicator, the student newsletter produced by the Department of Communication Studies, carried this remembrance in 1987:

“WE WILL MISS...

her commitment to speech as a field of study, to teaching, to life-long learning for all who seek it; her commitment to the liberal and performing arts, to rigor, standards and quality education; her loyalty to faculty, to staff, and to students, her pride in Cal State, Los Angeles, and the department; her ability to cut a problem down to size, to see an authority as just another human being; her caring and concern for people who have difficulty with the system, who were naïve, who were in need of an advocate; her devotion to democracy, to public discussion, the right to be heard, to integrity and values, her respect for tradition, for procedure, for collegiality, for fairness; her admiration of a good story, a good performance, a good argument, for talent and hard work; her enthusiasm for a new plan or project, for a job well-done; her sense of humor, her smile, the sparkle in her eyes; her air of acceptance and warmth as she would put down her books and folders, settle into her chair, and get ready to listen....”

I wish Marcella were here to let you hear her own voice in telling her own story. In a memo to the department in 1987, Keith Henning recalled her extraordinary “dedication and commitment to the discipline and to CSULA,” and how “fiercely loyal [she was] to her department and to us, her colleagues.”

A passage written in her honor soon after her death resonates with the way contemporaries felt about her:

“...WHEREAS: Her style of communication and conduct, whether personal or professional, was always one of dignity, grace, decorum, tact, patience, sensitivity, and caring – along with an infectious, delightful sense of humor – except when she faced or suspected infringements upon academic freedom, academic governance, academic standards, or unfair attacks upon her discipline, her colleagues, or her students in which cases she was unrelenting, tough, and intense in her defense of ideals, principles, values, and friends; and

“WHEREAS: Marcella was a very special person to us all – our model, our mentor, yet our peer – who taught us that dedication, conviction, loyalty, and courage are not old-fashioned qualities, but values that can exist and do survive in the academy; and...therefore be it

“RESOLVED: That the Academic Senate of the California State University, Los Angeles, extends to Marcella Oberle’s family and friends its sympathy and deepest regrets that she did not survive to enjoy her retirement; and be it further

“RESOLVED: That the Academic Senate recognizes Dr. Marcella Oberle posthumously and extends with deepest respect and affection its appreciation for her many contributions to the Senate, to the University, and to her colleagues, and in its sadness the Senate can take comfort in the knowledge that her life and memory will be an inspiration for her students and their students and for her colleagues now and long into the future, and for this Senate as the representatives of the faculty on the California State University, Los Angeles, campus will always be indebted and grateful to Professor Marcella Oberle. Approved Unanimously, April 21, 1987.” (Resolution of Appreciation).

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