

The Tar Heel of the Week

News and Observer, Raleigh

Passing the torch of learning

to a new generation



Staff photo by Thomas Babb

Muriel Waters Allison

By ANN GREEN

Staff Writer

At the front of her classroom, there's a lectern, an electric typewriter and a bulletin board sporting the words "Nothing But the Best."

If Muriel W. Allison were a work of great literature instead of head of the English department at Athens Drive High School in Raleigh, those three things could be viewed as symbols — nuggets waiting to be mined by some student who has a critical essay to write before next Thursday.

The lectern, that symbol of the teaching profession, is a bit dusty because Mrs. Allison rarely uses it. A lectern makes the teacher behind it seem somehow impersonal, she said. She'd rather be closer to her students, one-on-one.

The typewriter, however, gets plenty of exercise. Her students work on poems there and prepare papers they will enter in writing contests — contests Mrs. Allison's students frequently win.

The bulletin board's message sums up Mrs. Allison's teaching philosophy. Students usually know what to expect before they enter her classroom. But just in case they forget, "Nothing But the Best" is a gentle reminder spelled out in huge pastel letters cut from standard school-issue construction paper.

Frank S. Worthy III, a Raleigh alumnus of what might be called the Muriel Allison school of writing and now a reporter at Fortune magazine, put it another way.

"About the best thing Mrs. Allison did for me was to insist my first draft was not my final draft, nor was the fifth draft," he said in a telephone interview from New York.

"A good writer eventually learns that the final piece is the result of revision after revision after revision."

A Baltimore, Md., native who started teaching in 1948, Mrs. Alli-

In 1969, she moved to Broughton High, where she taught English mostly to seniors, including Frank Worthy, who graduated in 1974.

One of Mrs. Allison's colleagues on the faculty at Broughton, Sally W. Smisson, recalled her "knowledge of the subject matter and her enthusiasm."

Mrs. Allison has been at Athens Drive since 1978, steadily adding names to a long list of winners of students writing contests. This year, for example, one of her stu-

son, 56, is regarded as one of the Wake school system's top writing teachers.

Teach a student to write and you teach him to think, she said in a recent interview in her classroom at the end of another long school day.

"Our society is leaning more and more toward oral communication," she said. "But I try to teach my students that while oral communication is effective, it's also flexible. Writing is permanent. It gives a clarity oral communication just doesn't have."

Mrs. Allison's teaching career began when, fresh out of graduate school, she taught seventh and eighth graders in Chestertown, Md.

Her father, who was a worker in the Maryland shipyards, had never gone beyond the seventh grade in school. Her mother, who was a "fancy" cook specializing in catering for large parties, had never gone beyond the eighth.

Mrs. Allison traces her love of writing and reading fine literature to her childhood in Baltimore. Her father used to spend hours reading the newspaper. So she became an avid reader at an early age, kept journals and loved it when her teachers asked the class to write descriptive paragraphs.

In her own family, teaching is a family affair. Her husband, James, is a social studies teacher in the Wake school system. Her daughter, Rolanda, is a violinist working on her second master's degree in music. Rolanda, now at the University of Wisconsin, probably will eventually teach at the college level, according to her mother.

Mrs. Allison came to Wake County in 1963, when, in pre-integration days, she set up a program for gifted and talented students at Ligon High School.

Students won first prize, \$100, in the Raleigh Fine Arts Society short story contest. The school also will receive \$100.

She estimated that in the 19 years she has been teaching in local schools, approximately 100 of her students have received writing awards.

"I always tell my students they can make money writing," she said, noting that it's part of her job to make students see writing as something that's practical. "It's

not just something you do in an English class.

"My students will be writers no matter what field they go into. They end up writing all the time."

Currently at Athens Drive, she works mainly with seniors in advanced English classes and classes for the gifted and talented. She also teaches a speech class.

But students at all academic levels have to get over a "reluctance to write," she said, adding that writing is hard because it forces students to make choices, to select or reject ideas.

Mrs. Allison said she refuses to allow students to be lazy and simply regurgitate ideas about literature they have picked up from her in class.

Former student Worthy testified to that aspect of Mrs. Allison's classes. "So many teachers encourage you to produce ideas that reflect their own ideas," he said. "But she had a capacity to encourage you to summon your own intellect. She was one of the first teachers I had who really was very demanding on that score."

She works with students before school, during her lunch break and after school. She gives them her home phone number because she knows writers can run into writers' block, and she doesn't want students to use what she calls "the frustration level in writing" as an excuse for not writing.

"I tell them not to stew for an hour when we can talk about it on the phone and get it resolved in five minutes," she said.

Others who have had contact with Mrs. Allison talk about her ability to transplant in students her own love of literature.

Charlotte M. Martin, chairman of the Wake school board, said her oldest son, Roy, a Davidson College sophomore studying to be a chemical engineer, traces his love

of Shakespeare to one of Mrs. Allison's classes.

"She did that for him," Mrs. Martin said.

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Allison named Shakespeare as her favorite author in the classics. As for the modern era, Saul Bellow took top honors. "I like his anti-heroes," she explained.

Mrs. Allison declined to name her favorite students. But she was quick to point out how important students are in the life of a teacher.

"The credit belongs to them," she said. "If you get no cooperation, you can't get the job done. If they believe in you, they produce good things for you."

"We do it together. I want them all to be better than I am. That's what teaching is all about — to make a generation better than your own generation."

For the record

MURIEL WATERS ALLISON

Born: Sept. 7, 1925, Baltimore, Md.

Family: husband, James Wesley Allison Jr.; Daughter, Rolanda Lynne Allison.

Education: bachelor's degree, French, Spanish and English, Virginia State College, 1947; master's, English, Pennsylvania State University, 1948.

Career: teacher, Garnett High School, Chestertown, Md., 1948-50; teacher, Clinton city schools, 1950-59; English and dramatics teacher, St. Paul's College, Lawrenceville, Va., 1959-63; head of gifted and talented program, Ligon High School, 1963-69; teacher, Broughton High School, 1969-78; teacher, Athens Drive High School, 1978 to present.

Organizations: member, NAACP, NEA, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, St. Ambrose Episcopal Church.

The Raleigh Times

Informally speaking

Mrs. Allison proved them wrong

The purpose of the heart-warming photo of the teacher and the student saying goodbye in Saturday morning's News and Observer was to call attention to the end of school and, in this case, to salute second grade teacher Naomi Avery's retirement from 35 years of teaching.

Mrs. Avery, the first white teacher to complete a year of teaching at formerly all-black Fuller School, and an unidentified black child were locked in an embrace. The child's smile and her tight hold on her teacher illustrated her love for her. The teacher's tears streaming down her face spoke of her affection for the child—and all children.

Many of us who have been around Raleigh for quite a while saw something deeper in the photo—how far we have come since school integration began here in the late 1960's, far enough that love and respect is now a two-way street between the races, a street that once dead-ended when it came to interracial communication.

The photo had special impact for me because just two days earlier I had been a dinner guest at the home of friends whose graduating daughter, Lisa Parramore, had cooked a splendid meal to

A.C.
Snow



honor her favorite teacher at Athens Drive High.

She is Mrs. Muriel Allison, one of the first blacks to teach integrated high school classes in Raleigh.

Mrs. Allison, who this year received the North Carolina Association of Educators' annual Human Relations Award, recalled how she had cringed at the prospect of her new assignment teaching English at Broughton High, then probably the county's most prestigious high school.

"I had around 150 students on my rolls when I walked in that first day at Broughton," she recalled. "By the end of the week that total had dropped to around 70. You see, white parents were saying, 'No way, black teachers just can't teach English.'"

It took only a year for Mrs. Allison to prove the parents wrong. The next fall, white kids were standing in line for Mrs. Allison's English classes.

She is one of the best. And she symbolizes, we fear, a dying breed—experienced, highly motivated and dedicat-

ed black teachers who are well grounded in grammar and literature.

Until we pay teachers salaries that can compete with the industry that today gets first crack at bright black graduates, and until our colleges, especially our black colleges, demand more academic achievement from teacher graduates, we will not be getting many more Mrs. Allisons.

We need them, because parents finally have learned that quality doesn't come in colors; it comes in individuals.

Needham B. Broughton High School

Class Of 1972

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Forum: General Discussion

TOPIC: My Favorite Teacher, Mrs. Muriel Allison

Created on: 07/15/09 10:35 PM

Views: 1909 Replies: 2

Kenneth Moncol

Joined: 07/15/09

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My Favorite Teacher, Mrs. Muriel Allison

Posted Wednesday, July 15, 2009 05:35 PM

This grand lady was much more than an educator; she was a friend and mentor. I looked forward to her class 1st period every morning and my expectations were always met and then some! I remember her telling a story about a trip she took with her daughter, Rolanda to the UNC campus. They had an encounter with a long-haired hippie on the way to the Planetarium. She was walking through one of the grassy spots during the Spring when they were approached by the student. He had something in his hand and was focused on her daughter as he walked up to them. She said she was glad she had her big pocketbook as she was getting ready to hit him with it! The dude came up to Rolonda and reached out and handed her a dogwood blossom. Mrs. Allison was quite relieved at the outcome and said they kept the flower dried and pressed in their family bible. It was a good story by a great teacher!

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Gay Butler Murphy

Joined: 07/17/09

Posts: 1

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RE: My Favorite Teacher, Mrs. Muriel Allison

Posted Thursday, July 16, 2009 08:37 PM

There were 3 teachers that have influenced my life : Ms. Alison; Ms. Gealy; and Ms. Fisher. What great educators they were. I have retired now and I hope some of my students remember me with that kind of respect. Gay Butler Murphy

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Haywood Poole



Joined: 07/15/09

Posts: 1

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RE: My Favorite Teacher, Mrs. Muriel Allison

Posted Monday, July 20, 2009 10:57 AM

Mrs. Allison stands out as one of my favorites also. I remember my senior year, walking in to her class the first day and being relieved it wasn't Mrs Peacock!! Mrs. Allison stood up and asked us "Who is going straight into the work force after graduation?"... a few people raised their hand. Then she asked, " Who is going to tech. school?"... again a few others raised their hand. Then she asked, "Now, who is going to a 4 year college?" The rest of us raised our hands... She said "OK, I want the work force folks on the back row, the tech school folks in the middle rows, and the college bound folks on the front rows... I got to teach y'all some english!!"... and she meant it!

This lady ended up teaching each of these three groups what they needed to know for where they were headed in life. She somehow managed to keep us all focused and challenged in our own way. She said to the work force people... "Y'all don't need to spend the year learning how to write a reseach paper and a proper bibliography and interpreting literature. You need english for life skills."