

My English teacher Muriel Allison taught me that I had 'it'

THE
HOME
FRONT



SHARON
O'DONNELL

She showed her students that it was OK to show their feelings.

I was relaxing on my couch one day last week, perusing a copy of The News & Observer, enjoying some rare free time. When I turned to the obituary page, I saw her picture immediately. Right at the very top of the far left column; I couldn't miss it. I sat up straight, my hands clutching the paper, my heart jumping into my throat.

The photo was from a time in her life before I had known her —

maybe 30 years before I first stepped into her classroom. But her face was unmistakable — her kind eyes, her familiar, encouraging smile. The obituary gave her age as 77, about what I thought she would be by now, though I'll always imagine her the way she was in 1980 when she was my high school English teacher. The paper also said she died after an extended illness, and I felt terrible that I hadn't known she had been sick. Disbelief set in. My eyes darted above the picture to double-check the name: Muriel Waters Allison.

The newspaper collapsed in my

hands, and my tears came suddenly and unexpectedly, emptiness welling up within me. It hurt to know I would never hear her voice again, never be encouraged by her optimism or inspired by her impassioned ranting and raving. During my junior and senior years from 1978 to 1980, I was in Mrs. Allison's English class at Athens Drive High School in Raleigh, but I had kept in touch with her many years after that.

Genuinely excited

I had never had a teacher quite like Mrs. Allison. I could see in her

face and hear in her voice how genuinely excited she was about teaching. Suddenly English wasn't just grammar and literary terms, though she was the one who made it clear to me how to use semicolons and commas to avoid run-on sentences. English became so much more — philosophy, imagining, caring, believing and sharing. In her class, I discovered I could actually express emotions that others could only feel. It felt good when I began to see that I could touch my parents and my friends with my writing.

SEE O'DONNELL, 5B



Muriel Waters Allison

The reason I began to feel things so deeply was because I could see that Mrs. Allison felt things deeply, too, and she wasn't afraid to show it. I didn't feel as vulnerable anymore because I knew she understood me, that it was OK and even good to express emotions and thoughts in words. She used her sensitivity to inspire me. Her enthusiasm was contagious. I always looked forward to sitting at my desk listening to one of Mrs. Allison's lectures about *Antigone* or "Death of a Salesman" — lectures she managed to turn into lessons about life — filled with her boundless wisdom and easy-going humor.

Sometimes my classmates and I would come into the room, ready to take notes about Joseph Conrad or metaphors and then we would quickly realize there had been a change in plans: Mrs. Allison wanted to talk about a current event or a past experience that was on her mind, and she would get on a roll, almost as if she were on stage doing a monologue. Sometimes she would walk out of her class and across the hall to the supply room to get a book or another item, continuing her impromptu lecture all the while. She would step back into the room, never missing a beat; her mind always went a million miles an hour in different directions, but she kept us on our toes. As she went on with her "lesson about life lecture," my classmates and I would glance at each other and smile, maybe shake our heads in awe, knowing how blessed we were to be sitting in Muriel Allison's classroom.

'This is it!'

There were many times something she would say would move me to grab my pencil and start scribbling in my English notebook. Class notes often had some of my own poetry written around the edges. It would feel so wonderful to capture something I was feeling at the moment and put it in writing. I had felt like that before but not

to the extent Mrs. Allison made me feel it.

One time during the first weeks of my junior year, Mrs. Allison put all other class activities on hold until someone in the class came up with a thesis sentence for an analytical paper we were all writing. She said someone would write a creative thesis sentence that would knock her socks off; but, until someone came up with it, nobody could write any further.

In the quiet of the room, students would walk over and show her their sentences. Mrs. Allison would read it and then shake her head "no". "That's good, but that just isn't 'it' yet," she said. I'll never forget my own slow walk up to her desk. I showed her my thesis sentence and prepared myself for constructive criticism. She read the sentence, let out a war whoop, grabbed the paper out of my hand, and literally danced across the room, waving the paper in the air like a flag. "This is it!" she yelled. "This is it!"

I had never known that "it" was somewhere inside of me waiting to get out. Mrs. Allison is the one who found "it" hiding behind my protective wall. With Mrs. Allison, I felt confident enough to take down my wall and let "it" out.

One more time

Another time that stands out in my mind was when Athens, a new high school at that time, had to be officially accredited. A committee of VIPs visited our school to sit in on some classes and to talk with students and teachers to see if Athens was worthy. The day before the committee's visit, I had to give a presentation in Mrs. Allison's class — an oral analysis of a Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem — something about a daffodil, if I remember correctly. I gave about a 25-minute speech, aware that Mrs. Allison liked my presentation because she was nodding her head in approval as I spoke.

When I sat down, she told the class that the accreditation committee would be visiting our class the next day. Then she turned to me and announced, "Girl, you're going

to get up there and give that analysis again and act like it's the first time you ever gave it." She turned to the rest of the class. "And everybody else is going to sit here and listen and act like they never heard it before." So the next day, we re-enacted it, and though I was nervous, things went well.

Personal attention

Muriel W. Allison taught English for a phenomenal 56 years — phenomenal not just because of the quantity but because of the quality. She was one of the first African-American teachers in Wake County's desegregated schools, having to prove herself to a lot of doubters. And prove herself she did, as she always earned a stellar reputation and teaching record wherever she taught, with her students routinely winning writing contests and scholarships. She had found "it" hiding somewhere in other students, too. In April 1982, she was named Tar Heel of the Week by The News & Observer. She also won a state humanities award and was featured on a WTVD-TV public affairs show.

When my classmates and I were applying to colleges in the fall of our senior year, Mrs. Allison helped each of us craft what she called a "personal essay" to submit with our application. This, she advised, would increase our chances of getting into the college of our choice by showing them we could write. With my barely passing algebra grade, I needed all the help I could get. My essay was entitled, "To Grow in Spring," comparing growing up and leaving the nest to springtime, which Mrs. Allison went absolutely nuts over, particularly a phrase I used I still remember today: "the nectar of my soul." I have a copy of it somewhere in a file cabinet in my office, and I still believe it's the reason I was admitted to UNC-Chapel Hill, where I later received my degree in journalism.

Not afraid

At the end of my senior year, our English class went to a dinner theater to see "Camelot" because we had studied King

Arthur and his round table. Mrs. Allison was sitting at the table beside mine. If I was particularly moved by a scene in the play, I would glance at her to see her reaction. The play was marvelous! The beautiful concept of Camelot came to life right before our eyes. In one of the final scenes of the play, King Arthur tells a young boy to never let Camelot die. He tells the young boy to say it loud, and the little boy shouts, "Camelot!" Then King Arthur passes "Camelot" to him, in hopes that the boy will keep it alive.

"Run, boy, run!" Arthur tells him. "Run and tell the story of Camelot and then all the generations after you will know that once there was a place called Camelot."

The scene is a spine-tingling, soul-bursting one for me. As the boy was yelling "Camelot!" and running off stage, I looked over at Mrs. Allison. She was sitting there with tears streaming down her face, with the palm of one hand pressed against her forehead. She kept shaking her head in disbelief and fidgeting in her chair. She couldn't sit still. I felt the same way. That scene inspired me so much that I wanted to jump up and make everyone in the world experience the same emotion I felt. I wanted to tell the world how I felt — to share it with the world and then surely there would be no more wars. I knew what Mrs. Allison was feeling. I looked again at the tears on her cheeks and her hand clinching a tissue, wiping her eyes.

That May night in the dinner theater was the time I was proudest to call her my teacher. She wasn't afraid to show her students how moved she was, to show us how touching art can be.

Higher and higher

Mrs. Allison signed my senior high yearbook by using a famous quote from poet Robert Browning: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp — or what's a Heaven for?"

This quote was definitely food for thought for an 18-year-old setting off on college adventures. I suppose people inter-

pret the quote in different ways, but to me then and to me now, it means this: while a person is on Earth, he should always strive, will always keep reaching, will always be yearning — and all that reaching is good for us and makes us better people. We strive to do something and we do it — or grasp it — and then we reach even higher. And higher. And higher. But our yearning will never really be fulfilled on Earth; that's what heaven is for. I've thought about that quote so many times over the years.

A 'dose' of wisdom

During college, sometimes when I would come home for the weekend, I would stop by Athens on a Friday after school to chat with Mrs. Allison, knowing she would understand my feelings, knowing I would come away refreshed and motivated. She never failed me. Sometimes we would talk for an hour or two, sitting there in her empty classroom when she could have already left for the day.

College was, at first, very disillusioning to me, and I needed a "dose" of Mrs. Allison's wisdom to get by. Once we went out to eat when I was brokenhearted over a romance break-up, and I spilled my heart out to her, even let her read an emotional letter he had written to me. She was such a good listener and knew about "people" in general so much that she was like my own personal psychologist.

I remember well the time she told me that when a person goes to college, he must have both feet planted firmly on the ground. "If one foot is on a banana peel," she said, "then the person will slip and fall. And I don't want to even talk about having both feet on a banana peel."

I saw her words firsthand as so many people in college cared more about getting drunk than achieving their dreams or keeping their integrity. I often silently wished that those students could spend 10 minutes in a Muriel Allison classroom because it would change their perspective.

Losing touch

As happens over time, I lost touch with Mrs. Allison, about the same time I started raising a family, which probably meant I was too busy. We used to send each other Christmas cards until about eight years ago. My last correspondence from her was in 1992, when she had sent a note to say the photo I had sent of my toddler was "beautiful!"

I hadn't been aware of any severe health problems. I thought she was still living in her home in Garner, enjoying her golden years, reading poetry, maybe going to a play every now and then that would touch her soul. "Call Mrs. Allison" was on my perpetual "to do" list.

Then came her obituary in the newspaper. A few memories in this column I jotted down about 10 years ago and sent to Mrs. Allison, but I wish I would have had the chance to tell her one more time how I felt about her. I hope she knows I hadn't forgotten her.

I'm glad Mrs. Allison found the elusive "it" inside of me. She made me realize that as long as I'm living, I can't settle for less than what I can dream. Along the way, maybe I can pass "it" along to someone else, just as King Arthur passed Camelot to the boy and Mrs. Allison passed "it" to me.

In Mrs. Allison's obituary, there was a list of survivors, including her beloved daughter and many friends. Her husband of many years died a while back. At the end of the list is printed "and ALL her students." She really did care about those she taught, about those she met along the way. I ache knowing she is no longer on this Earth.

When I sent flowers to her funeral, I paused, struggling to decide what to write on the small card. What few words could possibly describe the depth of my feelings about this person?

And then it came to me, and I wrote: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp — or what's a Heaven for."

Contact Sharon O'Donnell at
sjo@intrex.net

^{former}
From: William Crockett [REDACTED]
Sent: Sunday, September 16, 2012 8:53 AM
To: sjo@nc.rr.com
Subject: Re: FW: FW: Muriel W. Allison, former Athens teacher

Greetings Sharon,
I apologize for not responding in a timely fashion. Actually, while in the middle of writing a response after receiving this message, I was interrupted and just never got back to it. First, I want to again thank you for speaking to the faculty. Your talk produced the result I had hoped. Our teachers felt affirmed and inspired. In addition, I also was able to point out that those characteristics of Mrs. Allison that we associate with effective classroom teaching. "Firm, friendly, and fair"; high expectation; equity; and at the top of the list is genuine love for the children. I will take you up on the generous offer of the DVD. I have spoken to my library staff, and they would love to have a copy.

William Crockett, Principal
Athens Drive High School

From: Farrall Hilton [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, June 11, 2014 12:52 PM
To: sjo@nc.rr.com
Subject: Comments regarding Opening Speech at Athens Drive High School

Your speech was a wonderful way to start the year. Your words cut through the logistics, the policies, the curriculum expectations, etc. and reminded us of what our job focus should really be about, i.e. making connections with students so they in turn could make connections to the subjects we teach. Thank you for your inspiring words.

Farrall Hilton
Art Teacher
Athens Drive High School

From: Margaret T Baber [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, June 11, 2014 11:00 AM
To: sjo@nc.rr.com

Yes, I do remember your speech and you made Ms. Allison come alive in your presentation. I think that tributes to people that have an impact on oneself is always emotionally gripping to the receiver.
I have been at Athens Drive since 1998 and I do remember this one speech.

■ Margaret T. Baber, Ph.D., MSA, LPC, NCC, NBCT
Athens Drive High School
Dean of Counseling and Student Services
1420 Athens Drive, Raleigh, NC 27606
[REDACTED]