

Eulogy to May Markham

Last March a dedicated teacher died. But that in itself is not newsworthy, because teachers differ in dedication only in degree and some die every week. This eulogy is being written for all unnamed and unimmortalized teachers, but it is especially written for one who might otherwise, too, go unsung. A pioneer in the area of Special Education was May Markham of Eagle, Wisconsin. An untimely death came to her at the age of 50.

To know May was to know the stuff that Joan of Arc, Eve Curie and your favorite aunt, who washed dishes at the church bazaars, were made of. She combined the character essentials of all three. Although she never married she was mother to half a generation of retarded children.

May was a teacher in a one-room school in Waukesha County in 1947, when I first met her. In her little school at that time were a seriously disturbed child, a grotesquely deformed by who had been completely rejected by his classmates in another school and two mentally retarded children. Here with a group of so-called normal children, these four were learning to live, enjoy the companionship of others and feel love and acceptance for the first time. I worked with May as a supervising teacher that year and in our conversations an idea germinated that grew to fruition. What rural areas in the state of Wisconsin needed were special rooms where slow learners could set their own pace and have the type of education that would prepare them for a fulfilling and self-sustaining life in society!

The details of the conferences with the Bureau for Handicapped Children, the endless testing and sifting, the agreements of Boards to pay transportation, the bookwork, the frustrations, the difficulty in meeting parents and getting their consent need not be elaborated on here.

When May was offered the position of teaching, no other rural teacher in Wisconsin had been confronted with such a decision. The project was unproved. No one knew what the reaction of the community, of parents, or of educators would be. May never hesitated! Her classroom opened in Eagle in September, 1948, with 17 mentally retarded boys and girls aged 7 to 15. It was the first of its kind. Children were transported to it from all over Waukesha County. During her brief 13 years, May saw all but one of Wisconsin's 71 counties accept its responsibilities in the care of the mentally handicapped.

Through her room passed the brain-injured, the aphasic, arrested hydrocephalics and epileptics, and many children whose scars of rejection showed in their emotional disturbance. Only those who have taught the mentally retarded know what days she lived, but during that time she never suspended a child from her classroom.

Her room was a joy to visit. Here was warmth and love and welcome even to the morbid curiosity seeker. Temperament played no part in her nature, only a maternal instinct to defend her young when they were unfairly put upon.

There was nothing superficial about May. Though always neatly and appropriately dressed, she cared little about fashionable attire or an unusual coiffure. Her delights were her friends, her nieces and nephews, her books, her cats (sometimes more than 20) and sundry small livestock and flowers that she raised on her little farm. It was here that some of her "children" spent weeks at a time.

May never taught for money; she spent all she had on others. Nor was it for fame, her tributes have come since her death. If she subscribed to any orthodox religion she never preached it. Truly May Markham used the Sermon on the Mount as her philosophy, her objectives and her daily lesson plans. By her deeds and works she will inspire those who labor in her chosen vineyard.

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