

'Teacher Of The Year' Puts Emphasis On Thinking Skills



CARING, a sense of humor and sincere joy in watching young minds develop fuel 1987 Teacher of the Year

Helen Laugisch as she continuously challenges herself as an educator.

BY SUSAN USHER

A faculty listing says Helen Page Laugisch teaches English and civics; but what she really teaches her South Brunswick High School ninth graders is how to think.

According to Brunswick County's 1987 Teacher of the Year, "You can't memorize all the things you need to know, but you can teach students the process of thinking."

During nearly 21 years of teaching, that has been her overriding goal—regardless of the age group or subject matter. And she has taught all ages, from second grade to adults, gifted children and students whose native language was something other than English.

"My goal is to teach them how to think and to solve problems," she said.

Essential to that are basic communication skills—reading, writing and listening. She starts with the basics and moves forward, until students are thinking analytically.

When teaching writing wasn't as popular as it is today, that's what was taught in her classroom—even if it meant more time was required for preparing or grading assignments. Why? "Because in order to write you have to think," she explained. "If you can teach them to do that, you can teach them anything."

Laugisch shares her experiences readily with other teachers, including her methods for teaching writing "across the curriculum," in classes other than English. Since 1982 she has presented more than 200 hours of staff development workshops on various aspects of writing, as well as numerous publications. In previous years she has been selected twice by school faculties as teacher of the year and was selected as an outstanding writing teacher by the National Writing Project.

In addition to teaching she also serves as chairperson of the English Department and of an interdisciplinary team working with ninth grade students and as a mentor for beginning teachers.

Last week she was selected to represent Brunswick County in regional Teacher of the Year competition; a committee that included last year's Teacher of the Year, SBHS's Meg Poe, made the selection from nominees representing ten county schools. Educational portfolio in hand, Laugisch will be interviewed on Jan. 7.

"Being chosen by peers to represent them is the real honor in the process," she said. "The public needs to know the positive things about the teachers and students in our schools. I know that the people with whom I work are outstanding."

"It's almost too easy to teach students the process involved in writing," she said, demonstrating with the model each student first works from. A model for a recent essay on the most important thing about the U.S. Constitution, for instance, gave the basic structure—opening thesis statement, body with supporting statements and closing summary statement. "By the end of the year," she predicted with confidence, "all of them will be able to do a pretty good essay."

Laugisch used that same practical approach three years ago when she joined the faculty after moving to Boone's Neck (Gator Grant subdivision) with her hus-

band, Henry, a retired U.S. Army career man. She developed a program to prepare students to pass the writing portion of the N.C. Competency Test. That first year, only five or six students didn't pass; the second year, only one didn't pass—a record she's proud of, just as she says she is proud to represent her fellow teachers and the county school system.

During a civics class after lunch one day last week, she stood at the front of the room in a cheerful red tent dress, only slightly taller than her ninth-graders. She led what turned out to be a lively discussion, stopping to laugh at an occasional joke then calling the class back to task.

The teens in her sixth-period civics class had definite ideas about what their rights and responsibilities are as students. And they didn't always agree with hers.

Basis for the discussion was a handout that asked students questions such as whether they have a right to skip school or a responsibility to report student smokers.

"I know you're not going to report them, but I think you should," she noted.

Laugisch developed the handout, she said, in response to things that have happened at South—from smoking in the bathrooms and skipping classes to students coming to class without even basic essentials such as paper and pen.

Discussion over, she summarized for the students, "You realize you don't have a right to do a lot of the things I see you doing."

The session, she said later, showed progress. During their first class discussion, few students expressed opinions and those were all "No's". Now, she noted, there's more debate, more honest discussion. The challenge is teaching them to think through how to best express themselves—even in challenging a grade or defending an answer.

During the discussion, for instance, if a student disagreed with Laugisch's answer, she'd sometimes offer, "If you can justify your answer in a few lines on the back of your paper, I'll give you credit for it."

In addition to teaching a full load of three English and two civics classes, she also has extra responsibilities as chairman of the English department and of an interdisciplinary team working with ninth graders.

And then there are the students who seek her out for advice, encouragement, praise.

After her sixth period civics discussion, Laugisch's planning period passed rapidly. She met first with a student having problems in advanced English, offering to work with him on interpretive skills after school. Then a former student dropped by to share the good news she'd won the first round of an essay competition.

What is it they're drawn by? Perhaps by Laugisch's own philosophy of teaching.

The one thing a teacher needs to leave with each student, she said, "is the fact that she truly cares whether they learn or not."

"If they believe that you can get them to do almost anything," she said. "That's worked for 21 years now."

"They can spot a phony in an instant. If you're not sincere, if you don't care, there is no point in being here."

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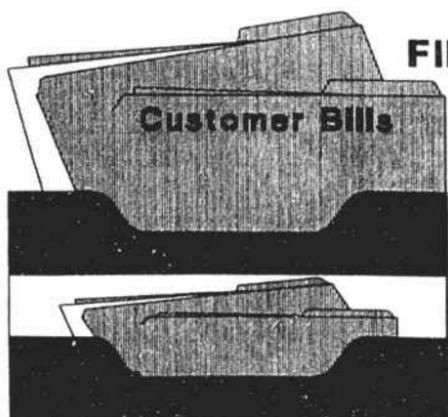
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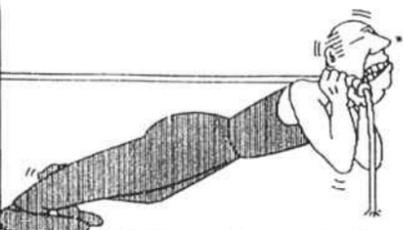
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