Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 10

Issue 2 *Focus: Tearing Down the Walls.
Connecting Students with the World Beyond the
Classroom*

Article 3

1994

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Recommended Citation

Sauer, Eileen (1994) "Ninety-Nine Years of Living Comes to Ninth Grade," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1563>

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Ninety-Nine Years of Living Comes to Ninth Grade

Eileen Sauer

"... The Kaiser boat (which we had captured) was a big one. . . , his private boat, ours was the Mt. Vernon. . . I went up into the roost and got bread. I got a loaf of bread and some slices. (To find a spot that was quiet) I went out on the life raft. They jumped up . . . not sharks but (dolphins) . I'd say they jumped 7 foot and got the bread. I was all alone. I wanted to get away from everybody. I was 24. I wasn't lazy. . ." (Mr. Beauchamp, 1993).

These words describing his trip to France as a medic during World War I were recorded during the last interview with Mr. Beauchamps, just 100 years of age. Ms. James, my co-teacher, and a student from our Basic English 9 class were the recipients of that story. It serves as a starting point for my writing. I want to spread the word that the walls of the classroom need to be scaled from time to time to allow exploration. I have found that group projects, such as the one I am about to describe, are worth the work and the risks. Let me convince you!

The beginning of this project came from a desire of mine to incorporate the experiences of the older residents at the Ingham County Extended Care Facility, a mere mile and a half down the road, into the curriculum and thus the awareness of the younger people in the high school. I wasn't sure how the fit would be made, but I knew that with time and planning the link ups would appear. I called the Extended Care Facility to find out what options were available. The volunteer coordinator, Ms. Karen Harsh, spoke enthusiastically about a 99-year-old gentleman who was a veteran of World War I, with stories to tell. *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Remarque

was one of the first titles our students needed to cover. Could the students interview this veteran concerning his experiences in the war? Would words like trench warfare, gas masks, k-rations, the Kaiser, and even the concept of war be more personal? Could this project help deliver the classic curriculum to these fifteen students who did not have great expectations of school?

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My own interview with Mr. B confirmed my notion that here was a valuable resource; he was gentle, articulate, and above all a storyteller! I started to map out a written proposal with goals, lessons and procedures. I really wanted the visits to stay within our class period of 50 minutes. That would mean a 30 minute visit with 10 minutes on either side for transportation. It seemed like a reasonable plan until I tried to get a school bus. I would need to book a driver for a

minimum of two hours thus making this option cost prohibitive for just one visit. The school van was suggested as an alternative, if I had a chauffeur's license and permission from the sports department then I could transport my students to the Extended Care Facility. I could get neither requirement in time, so I was left with my personal vehicle which required permission from the assistant superintendent. Permission was obtained with the provision that each student's parents sign a form stating that my car was being used as transportation with me as the driver. A volunteer application sheet was a prerequisite of the Extended Care Facility and included information about the residents and requirements for dress and behavior. I created a contract for the students that outlined the goals and agreements I expected from them. After they signed these contracts, most of the paperwork was in place and I could turn my attention to the lessons.

I introduced the unit with some materials aimed at sensitizing students to stereotypes of older people. I wanted them to think and evaluate their own experiences and attitudes toward the elderly.

As I started thinking what specific outcomes I wanted students to learn, some other curricular concerns came to the front. First in the area of reading, with the new definition of reading stressing life experiences as essential for successful comprehension, allowing students access to a veteran of the very war they were scheduled to read about seemed a direct link. *All Quiet on the Western Front* could have a more informed audience of students if this project worked. Finally, I introduced the unit with some materials aimed at sensitizing students to stereotypes of older people. I wanted them to think and evaluate their own experiences and attitudes toward the elderly. Another unstated goal of this class was to attack stereotyping attitudes and behaviors whenever stereotyping converged with the curriculum. Challenging stereotypes was possible as we discussed a movie that stressed the problems faced by a

concerned family for the elderly grandfather because many students had positive experiences with grandparents. Students were ready to talk of their own families and grandparents. Some students had been part of a program in middle school that had done some volunteering at the Extended Care Facility; a few students said they had visited grandparents. Another tact was to prime the students with excerpts from *Our First One Hundred Years*, a biography of the Delany sisters. We watched the black and white movie version of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Another source to help the students was a 75th Anniversary of World War I article in the *Detroit Free Press*. This account included pictures and historical information written at a level easily understood by the students. The author was a granddaughter interested in the experiences of her grandfather. Finally, I suggested that the opportunity existed for students to interview a veteran from World War I. The interest of the students was strong, and we went forward with the planning of the sequence of visits.

The Volunteer Coordinator at Ingham suggested that we use the conference room just off the main entrance for our sessions and that she would reserve the room. I asked if we could video tape but that was not permitted. So I suggested audio taping and she agreed. We were just about over the top and it was now November.

In the car on the way to the Extended Care Facility the students expressed a worry that Mr. B might get sick or die while we were there. We talked about emergency procedures and how we could get help. Another concern was, what was a 99-year-old really like?

The two students who volunteered for the first visit met with me for the last ten minutes of class time to devise the questions and use the tape recorder and microphone, while the rest of the class worked with Ms. James. We went out into

the hall with the equipment for some privacy and practice. We discussed possible questions and agreed on five or so for each student to have on a 3x5 card. The first questions dealt with the clothes, sports, and experiences way back when he was their age. Then I suggested questions about World War I and they were edited and included in their lists. We role played the interview and practiced with the tape deck. I put the tape recorder in front of the students on the table and asked them to assume I was Mr. B. They had to rehearse what they were going to ask him. We also talked about the kind of questions that would be appropriate for a first interview. The students understood that we would be able to ask more private questions after Mr. B got to know us. We felt we were ready.

In the car on the way to the Extended Care Facility the students expressed a worry that Mr. B might get sick or die while we were there. We talked about emergency procedures and how we could get help. Another concern was, what was a 99-year-old really like? Here is a description written as a rough draft by a student on a subsequent visit:

When I first found out that I was going to meet a man that was 99 I was thinking that he was going to be all ugly and nasty looking. When Thursday came I was trying to ask everyone how did he look and everything but they wouldn't tell me. So I went to class Thursday and they were already waiting for me so we left. It felt like the shortest ride I had ever been on, because before I knew it we were there, inside waiting for him to come down so I finally could hear something coming and a lot of talking. I saw a shadow then the shadow appeared and I closed my eyes because I felt him entering the room. I finally opened my eyes and before me sat the prettiest old man I had ever seen and his eyes were baby blue. I touched him and he had the softest skin. It was as if I was touching a new born baby. (Jolanda)

Upon arrival we checked in at the reception desk and went to the conference room. Then I introduced the students to Mr. B. After a handshake we sat around the table. Mr. Beauchamps was able to pull his wheelchair up to the table and we began. The students started asking their

rehearsed questions and the half hour flew. Soon it was time for good-byes and "see you next Thursday" but with two different students. His parting words to the students were, "Now you mind your teacher." I loved it! In the car we talked about what their impressions were of what they had seen and heard. They were excited about his stories and the interesting facts he told about life long ago. One student suggested that we write about it so that we could share the interviews with others. Another curricular link up before my very ears! Yes, that would keep the stories for another telling. Back at school, I found myself floating.

All the interviews met with similar results. Each session had Mr. Beauchamps willingly imparting answers and stories to sometimes repeated questions. Here is another example of student writing from this experience:

I learned a lot of things from Mr. B. He talked about trench life during World War I, the food he ate during the war, the machinery he used to make bridges, the weapons and the cyanide pills given to him. The trench was a long hole dug so that the soldiers were safe from gun fire. The soldiers slept on one blanket and used another to cover up with. They had no pillow and sometimes they slept on the floor. The soldiers had to eat, sleep and use the bathroom in the trenches. The bathroom was in a separate part of the trench from where they were fighting.

Life in the trenches was cold, damp, and smelled terrible....It is nice to learn about history from someone who was there. (Abel)

Other stories had to do with slavery, learning to read, schooling, segregation in the army, Jim Crow laws, building houses, knowing Malcolm X, and the Sears Roebuck automobiles, just to mention a few. He put his spin on history, and the students caught a glimpse of reality they could not have seen on their own. I'll let the students say it themselves:

Our teacher started to talk about how he learned to read and it was odd how a man that he worked for, had a wife that helped him. Then he started on the war and how he was a medic and about one of his friends that was a spy. That was interesting, but as we closed our conversation, we shook hands

and stood up, as we left he said he hopes to see us again. I think that Mrs. Sauer should take people to see Mr. Beauchamp, for it was a learning experience for both parties. (Curtis)

All the students took part in at least one interview with one exception. This student did have a change of heart at the end, at least in the story he wrote. As I mentioned earlier these interviews were taped. I made duplicate tapes of all the sessions. I borrowed the equipment for this task and the headsets for listening to the individual tapes as a whole class from the foreign language department. They have a mobile unit with 25 working headsets for language practice. I got the tapes and headsets set up ahead of time so that each set of students could listen to their own session. The plan was for the students to take notes while listening so that their writing would be enhanced. The one student who chose not to go listened on with others. One problem with the effectiveness of this lesson was that the headsets also had mouth pieces for responses. Of course the students were more than willing to include a bit of role playing with the headsets. In the end I would do it again but with some more time to rehearse with the equipment.

This experience reaffirmed for me the belief that education comes from within a person and outside of school.

As I said at the beginning of this paper, we need to scale the wall between school and community with projects like the one I have described that allow both students and teachers to work on the reason they are in school. In his last interview session with us Mr. Beauchamp said:

"Abraham Lincoln didn't free the slaves, the slaves helped free themselves."

He then told the story of his grandfather Mitchel, one of 1200 slaves on a farm in Tennessee. A unit of Union soldiers was in the nearby swamp. He took food to them each day and eventually joined the northern army to become a sergeant.

In each interview session we certainly got more than we anticipated. The value of this project went beyond the bridge between school and community, although it did give the students and Mr. B. some positive experiences from which both profited. Additionally, the storytelling just enhanced the history and sense of place for several students. All of us have a better understanding of war, segregation, racism, and a sensitivity for older people that we could not have gotten another way.

This experience reaffirmed for me the belief that education comes from within a person and outside of school. There are always risks involved when new ideas are tried out, but the thirst for relevant education which will catapult my students into the educational program within a classical curriculum continues to challenge our daily work at school. That this profitable experience will only increase the education of those students in their other classes will not be completely appreciated until some time has passed. It is with the future that we need to remember the past. Perhaps my students will tell someone the story of Mr. Beauchamp and the dolphins.

Mr. Beauchamp died on May 20, 1994 after living to be "a full 100 years old." (Lansing State Journal). Ms. James and I with several students went to the services. We were just another small part of the full and varied life of this gentle man.