

Reminiscent Teacher Essay
LaRee Mayes
3203 Meadowbrook Drive
Rapid City, SD

It's a "snow day;" no school in session for 100 miles in any direction, a perfect day to write a Reminiscent Teacher Essay for the South Dakota Retired Teachers Association. Retired, I wouldn't be in school anyway of course, but the snow keeps me home reminiscing.

As a sophomore at Redfield High School, I was registered to take a German language class. It was a perfect fit for my strange enjoyment of grammar, even diagramming sentences, and a newer interest, that of my German heritage. However, over the summer the teacher who signed the contract to teach German and English classes broke his contract and moved on. In his place the district hired a Spanish and English teacher. I then was taking a Spanish class; and, I guess, that is how I eventually ended up becoming a Spanish teacher. My education at Yankton College also enabled me to teach English or art, and I did some of that along the way, but my love was always the many years I led students in repeating "¿Cómo está usted?". When the Soviet Union orbited the first Sputnik satellite it triggered the National Defense Education Act, and foreign language teachers along with science and math teachers were awarded grants for graduate study. It made possible my only experience of living outside of South Dakota. I never did finish master degree work at the University of Minnesota, however, even with a grant. I don't regret ceasing those formal studies since I couldn't see how struggling to understand Golden Age Spanish literature was going to make me a better Spanish teacher or improve the defense of the USA against foreign treats.

Married to a South Dakota Highway Patrolman meant that our family moved to four different communities in the state. We spent 10 years in Sturgis, and I taught in

Brown High High School, two years in Mobridge, and I taught in Glenham High School, less than a year in Sioux Falls, and I sold shoes in a children's shoe store, and 30 years so far in Rapid City, and I taught in nearly all the district's secondary schools. The teaching added up to 28 years including experience at the smallest high school in the state at the time, Glenham HS, and the largest, Rapid City Central.

The 28 years could be divided into the "lean years" and the "fat years." During the earlier years offering Spanish language classes as electives in the high school curriculum was regarded as a frill, and they were always only two steps away from the chopping block, right behind French and German classes. The state's Foreign Language Association existed to give us language teachers courage to fight to keep our jobs by attracting students and keeping students and impressing administrators, schools boards and parents. This led to Spanish Club activities galore, like piñatas and taco feeds back when South Dakotans hardly knew what a taco or a piñata was. The fight for language teachers to maintain jobs goes on today too in these times of low school funding.

The fat years came when Governor Janklow convinced the state legislator that foreign language should be required of students to enroll in South Dakota colleges. (I don't think they weren't all called universities then yet.) This led to my no longer selling shoes in Rushmore Mall and resuming my teaching career. And, it led to my toughest teaching year ever, back after a three year layoff with two classes in Steven High School, two classes in Dakota Junior High and only 20 minutes between to drive across town, eat on the way, climb three flights of stairs and be ready to "habla español." How had I lost ability to manage junior high students in just three year's time as well? It was a survival-only year, full of horrors to painful to tell. But, the job was there for me each year as long as I was willing to travel from school to school where ever there were enough students for another class. Looking back, I know it was good to be working only part-time during those lean years while our children were young.

When Rapid City created middle schools and ninth graders were crowded into the high schools, my teaching days were to be forever more in big ol' Rapid City Central. (Once a Cobbler, always a Cobbler.) I still go there several evenings during the school year to teach adult Spanish classes through Community Education as well as teaching some occupational Spanish in other locations as a Command Spanish® Instructor. (Once a teacher, always a teacher.) My most memorable classroom of various in the Central's huge building, as I traveled from room to room with everything on what was called a projection cart, was the one in a wide place in an open hall way above the entrance to the gymnasium. I wonder what the very polite exchange student from Germany really thought about the learning environment of that noisy situation.

World language teaching (Spanish is no longer a foreign language) has always included teaching the target language culture. This can easily be done, of course, through "fiestas." Since parties in classrooms were against school policy, a fiesta often went by the title "cultural encounter." More than once before Christmas break, a German teacher and I would combine our classes for one period when possible. The lesson plan was simple and meant to be enlightening: some German students would tell of some German Christmas customs, some Spanish students would tell of some Spanish Christmas customs. There were always many to choose from since Spanish is spoken in 20 countries and a Spanish teacher must surely be knowledgeable about the differing holiday customs of all those countries. Students would share some simple German and Spanish Christmas treats and then the bell would ring and we all would be 50 minutes closer to winter vacation.

One year my students' choice was to share the New Years Eve custom in Spain of eating a grape for each chime of the plaza clock at midnight marking the end of the old year and beginning of the new year. Each grape consumed in time with the chiming clock meant a month of good luck in the coming year. The plan was for a German student volunteer to eat grapes while the Spanish students said "bong" twelve times.

Fun, ¿no? Twenty minutes before bell time I realized I had forgotten to bring grapes that morning. I made an unbelievably mad dash to a nearby grocery store for a purchase of green grapes, washed them in the girls' bathroom, slapped them on a paper plate (always in supply for "cultural encounters") and tried to catch my breath. After the explanation and the "bonging" began and the German student tried to eat the grapes as he had been directed, is when we discovered that, although they were green grapes, they were not seedless. The student choked, the students all laughed, and the German teacher didn't forgive me for a long time. Luckily no parents sued the school, as would probably happen today.

I tell that story and remember the hectic days. I know I should say I miss it all, but really I am a very happy member of Black Hills Retired Teachers and currently enjoy church activities, traveling, sometimes to places I can actually learn more Spanish on the spot, and acting in Black Hills Community Theatre productions. Following in my mother's (Ione Roeber's) footsteps in becoming a teacher was the right career choice for me and being a member of Retired Teachers, as she was, is right as well.

Thank you to all who make this a great organization.