

My Liberal Arts Education

By Ellen Apperson Brown '72

I was a voice major at Sweet Briar, which meant that I gave two recitals, sang in the choir and in the Sweet Tones, and dreamed of living, one day, in Vienna, Austria, where I could absorb all that fabulous classical music and culture. My decision to major in music, arrived at rather by default, can be traced back to my lack of self-confidence in English class, though I sincerely loved literature. Sophomore year, my overall GPA was too low, so I wasn't eligible to apply for the junior year abroad program. I was intimidated by math, biology and chemistry and avoided history classes, sadly, thinking they required too much memorization - of names, dates and other useless information. I didn't figure out the real appeal of critical thinking until late in the game, listening to lectures in Comparative Government, taught by Milan Hapala.

My interest in singing had been nurtured by participation in music programs in high school and at church, exposing me not so much to Chopin and Rachmaninov, but to chorales and organ pieces by Bach and Buxtehude, as well as madrigals and Broadway musicals. During our four years at Sweet Briar, I remember hearing Alfred Brendel, who played a magnificent concert for us on the eve of Beethoven's 200th birthday. It sticks in my mind, perhaps, since my birthday happens to fall on the same day (December 16th). Mr. Gilpin, who must have stood barely five feet tall, always grinning ear to ear, directed the choir freshman year, with John Shannon playing the organ accompaniment. Unfortunately, Mr. Gilpin fell ill during sophomore year (I cannot remember if he had a stroke or heart attack) and they had to scramble to find a replacement (Janet Stewart). He did return eventually, and coached me through my senior recital. The chapel looked so beautiful, with sunlight streaming through those tall windows. There was a huge flower arrangement on the piano, too, effectively hiding Mr. Gilpin from view. I credit him with helping me understand what it would mean to "find my voice."

My senior year left me feeling sad and isolated. My father died just a few days before Christmas, and when I came back to school in January, to prepare for my comprehensive exams, I spent hours and hours, alone, listening to classical music. Maybe it was a good thing, since it gave me space to mourn, but I can still remember how my friends (in the Sweet Tones, or in the dorm) were very uncomfortable to be with me, and fearful that I might want to talk about my loss. I began to dream of starting over, in a new place, where I could reinvent myself.

Off to Europe...

Shortly after graduation, I found a way to fulfill my dream, about traveling to Europe, and landed in a scene straight from the *Sound of Music*, in Strobl am Wolfgangsee (Austria). After a wonderful summer there, learning German along with students from scores of other countries, I was invited to share an apartment in Vienna with Valerie (a native who had also become good friends with Laura Mink '71). My command of German was shaky, at best, having never taken a course at Sweet Briar, but Valerie and her friends helped me expand my vocabulary through conversation and practice. I found a voice teacher, Professor Kolo, and rode across town every week for a lesson in his studio, but soon discovered that the poor air quality in Vienna was causing me to wheeze (asthma), making it nearly impossible to accomplish even the most basic vocal exercises. I gave up on the lessons (and on the idea of being an opera singer), and tried walking dogs for a living, but finally decided to go back home to Charlotte.

Wondering what to do next...

I found a job in a local bank, in customer services, but felt like a duck out of water. No one in Charlotte, it seemed, had ever dreamed of living in Europe, of speaking a foreign language, or of traveling through Europe by train. Fate intervened, however, when I got a letter from the Fulbright Commission, offering me a year's teaching assignment, as a Fulbright Teaching Assistant, in Austria!

Gänsendorf, Österreich

I can think of no better teacher training experience than the one I had, assigned to assist several teachers in two very different schools: one a Gymnasium (high school for university bound students) and a Händelsakademie (geared more for the general public). My command of American English and culture was my greatest asset, giving me an opportunity to teach kindergartners how to say "cocka-doodle-doo" and then lead discussions, with ninth or tenth graders, about novels (The Old Man and the Sea) and politics (a debate about conflict in the Middle East). I began to realize that my education had only just begun. There was so much to learn... about literature, language, and culture.

Thinking about graduate school...

After my idyllic year in Austria, I came back again to Charlotte, and charted a new course. I enrolled in teacher education classes at UNC-Charlotte, sang in the chorus of the Charlotte Opera Association, and applied to be a special student at Davidson College, to learn German in a more structured way. One professor introduced me to classic German literature, along with the art of reading Fraktur - that old fashioned style of writing, with capitol *s'es* that look like *B's* (ß). I accepted an invitation to play Ilona, in a play by Schnitzler, called *Anatol's Hochzeitsmorgan*. That is where I met my future husband, Kirk, who played Anatole, and who, as it turned out, had a sister at Sweet Briar. We took a road trip to Virginia that May, where his sister, Carrington '76, had helped organize a Sweet Tones reunion.

Some of those Davidson professors must have pulled some strings or something, for I somehow managed to be accepted at UNC-Chapel Hill, as a graduate student in history, and was even offered a teaching assistantship in the music department (!), teaching German diction for voice majors! How about that? Once again, however, health issues intervened, landing me in the hospital over Christmas break, with bronchitis and pneumonia. I had not found much success in the German classes, and noticed with chagrin the scornful expressions on the face of one leading professor, from Hamburg, who didn't approve my use of colloquial verbs and vocabulary (instead of Hochdeutsch). I panicked every time a professor mentioned a grammatical *exception to the rule*, whispering to my neighbor – "What is the rule?"

Transfer to the University of Virginia...

I decided to transfer to the German Department at U.Va., and life became much more agreeable, especially since the emphasis there was on literature instead of linguistics and grammar. Walter Sokel, who taught German Intellectual History, was rumored to be the nephew of Franz Kafka, and he seemed to know all the intellectual giants (Nietzsche, Niebuhr, Kant, etc.) on a first name basis. The best thing about U.Va., from my perspective, was its policy of requiring grad students to teach sections of beginning German. Kirk (who had already started there in the fall of 1975) was a graduate teaching assistant, and I soon was accepted into the ranks. Of course, there is no better way to learn a subject than through teaching. It felt like I had found my niche, my calling.

After earning my Master of Arts in Teaching German...

Despite my late start in the field of German, I successfully completed all the courses, as well as a stint of student teaching, in Northern Virginia, and turned my attention to our wedding plans. In the spring of 1978, I joined Kirk at the Virginia Episcopal School, in Lynchburg, where he was already teaching German and coaching tennis. I began adapting to my new role, as a faculty wife, and started looking for employment off campus. Jobs were scarce, however, for German teachers, and the closest I came to an offer was from a public school superintendent, who advised me to brush up on my French, explaining that he might be able to find a placement for me if I could teach the two languages, back to back. It sounded like a nightmare to me. Instead, I found a job in the school's alumni development office, stuffing envelopes, keeping the addresses up to date using the antiquated addressograph machine, and helping to proof-read the alumni magazine. The school's history fascinated me, especially after discovering some old archival storage boxes on one of the back shelves of the closet. I could not resist reading through all the old letters, many of them written by mothers, to Robert Carter Jett, the school's first headmaster,

asking him to make sure *Johnny* remembered to wear his overcoat. Jett must have been an inspirational leader. He later became the first bishop of the diocese.

I persuaded my boss to let me write an article for *The Old 160*, the alumni magazine, and eventually started a series called *Looking Back*, with stories about faculty, students, women, architecture, and more. After Kate was born, I gave up the development job, but couldn't let myself stay idle for long. When the editor of *the Old 160* left for another job, I took over, despite considerable misgivings from the Director of Development. I still have some copies of those early publications. They show clearly an evolution - from a magazine celebrating football and other athletic teams, almost exclusively, to one filled with human interest stories, about people in the community.

I finally had a chance to teach at VES, but only after several years, when our children were about 2 and 4 years old. My husband was tapped to be the next college counselor, making it necessary for him to relinquish a class or two, in order to keep up with his new responsibilities. So, I had a meeting with the headmaster, showed him my credentials (MAT in German, from UVA) and watched his face to see what he might say. I'll always remember his look of uncertainty, saying, "Well, you do have a master's degree. I suppose we could let you do this one class, if it will not interfere with Kirk's job. We have invested quite a bit in Kirk, and we wouldn't want him to be prevented from attending faculty meetings, or keeping up with his other obligations. I suppose we could try it, and see if it works out."

Of course, this was becoming a source of frustration for me, and stirred up my rebellious spirit. It was hard finding a satisfactory career path at a school that was so stuck in this sort of paternalistic (and misogynistic) attitude about women. I responded by searching for a new project, off campus, that could offer more affirmation and challenge. I found such a project at my church, in an effort to start a free health clinic. We soon started getting things organized, and I became the president of the board. Miraculously, within five months, we had secured start-up funding from the United Way as well as a spacious facility (in the basement of a Presbyterian Church). Also remarkable was the response from the medical community. In no time at all we had recruited a long list of doctors, pharmacists, nurses, and dentists who were willing to volunteer their services. We even had donations of examining tables and dental chairs.

Perhaps the most exciting thing, for me, was the experience of channeling my organizational skills into the creation of a non-profit board that became successful, beyond our wildest expectations. The Free Clinic of Central Virginia has continued to thrive and prosper for the past 27 years. This exciting accomplishment probably didn't make much of an impression back on the boarding school campus, but it helped me feel confident...and competent, as a leader. I don't suppose I'll ever find a board as effective as ours was. It spoiled me, creating unrealistic hopes and expectations for other boards and other organizations, many of which have turned out to be flawed, by comparison.

Leaving Lynchburg...

After 12 years in Lynchburg, Kirk decided to follow his call to ordained ministry, by enrolling at the Virginia Theological School, in Alexandria, VA. Our two children, Kate (8) and David (6) were leaving behind a campus (much like Sweet Briar) where they were known and cared for by other faculty families and students. Adjustment to life in Northern Virginia wasn't easy. They started out at a local elementary school, but when we noticed problems with Kate's teacher, a wealthy friend from Lynchburg offered to send both children to private schools. So, Kate enrolled at the prestigious Potomac School, and David at St. Stephens/St. Agnes. After months of perseverance, I found a job as Director of Sarah's Circle, a ministry for low income elderly in the Adams Morgan neighborhood, in D.C. Those were truly hectic and stressful years, for all four of us!

Sarah's Circle had a staff of eight, including several residents of the neighborhood who worked in clerical and social services positions. This work environment exposed me to important issues, such as diversity, race relations, poverty, aging, and so much more, while offering me a crash course in board development and some serious fund raising. Elizabeth Dole, for example, was on our advisory committee. I look back with pride to what we accomplished: the opening of a senior center in the basement, the purchase of a van for transportation, and the establishment of several social services

programs provided through a partnership with the AARP. Sadly, when Kirk's three years as a seminarian ended, so did my stint as an executive director. We moved to Roanoke, Virginia, where Kirk became assistant rector at a local church, and I began adjusting to my new role, as clergy spouse.

Roanoke...teaching public school

That first fall, I tried teaching at Fleming High School, where I had a dual assignment: German (3 levels) and English as a second language (2 levels). I was delighted to have a chance to teach German again, but soon discovered that these students had not learned much of anything from the previous teacher. If that were not troubling enough, I came to realize that the ESL students, mainly from Vietnam, were floundering. There weren't enough text books to go around. An influx of Haitian students added to the excitement, and I soon began thinking of ways to help them...perhaps forming a summer tutoring program? My initiatives did not play well with the school administrators, however, and they did not renew my contract.

The following year I found a temporary assignment, filling in for a teacher on maternity leave, at Salem High School, teaching German, and at Andrew Lewis Middle School, teaching Introduction to Foreign Languages. Eventually, I gave up on teaching and took a job, part time, as a clerk at Ram's Head Book Shop, one of the nicest book stores I have ever seen. In my spare time I reached out to a huge Haitian family, enlisting help from parishioners at church, and from my children. My efforts at outreach were not universally popular at church, however. I often overheard unfriendly comments about the dozen or so refugees who were showing up at church each Sunday morning. I must have ruffled a few feathers and caused some to complain.

Moving to Asheville...and starting over

Kirk decided to leave Roanoke, and parish ministry, to become a school chaplain, so we moved, in 1995, to Christ School, in Arden, NC. About six months after settling in there, on the campus of a boy's boarding school, our marriage fell apart, with talk of separation and divorce. He must have known what he wanted and needed, for he is still there, still serving as chaplain, but our divorce brought wrenching changes to my prospects and plans, and forced me to reconsider all of my assumptions - about a career, about my relationship with Kate and David, and about my identity. I have been on a convoluted journey, ever since.

One Sunday morning, at a local church, someone invited me to come to the pot-luck dinner later in the day. I remember thinking, "How should I introduce myself? Should I say that *I used to be* a clergy spouse? ...*I used to live* at Christ School? ...or, *I used to have a home* with two children?" It was a tough time for me. Fortunately, I found a job with a nice salary and challenging responsibilities, as director of a meals-on-wheels program, and plunged into a new career, as administrator in the social services sector.

Another distraction, and a healing experience for me, was the situation with my mother's declining health. She was living in a continuing care facility in Charlotte, about 2.5 hours away, and she suffered from dementia. I began making frequent visits on the weekends, often taking along one or both children. They needed some encouragement and coaching, however, in order to connect with Mama Kitty, who was often confused and disoriented. Looking back, I have fond memories of the silly books we shared with her, and of our many awkward, or funny, conversations.

One Saturday, Kate and I took her a present, a pillow I had made, featuring an arrangement of pansies. We had to coax Mother each step of the way, first showing her how to unwrap the gift, and then giving hints as to what she should say. We reminded her that the fabric would go well with her afghan, a pretty periwinkle blue, and she agreed. But she looked puzzled about the flowers. Finally she exclaimed, "Oh, I see now...those are baboons!" Kate quickly caught on... that the black spots on each of the pansies made them look like faces! So Kate smiled, hugged her grandmother, and agreed with her. I was impressed to notice how well Kate adapted to the situation, and proud of her intuition and her capacity for empathy.

David, at age fifteen, was not very comfortable on these visits, or in trying to converse with his grandmother. (I noticed how much he enjoyed being with Kirk's parents, who were younger and much more interesting to talk to.) Just before Thanksgiving, as the three of us were paying Mother a visit, the

activities director came into the room and coaxed Mother into remembering what special day we were celebrating. Her response was slow in coming, but she finally offered, "Easter?" No, that wasn't the right answer. Then she proudly announced, "gobble, gobble, gobble!" and we all laughed together, even David, who finally relaxed and enjoyed the moment. It was his last visit to Sharon Towers before she died.

New chapter...

By the time of Mother's death, in March, 1998, I had lost my job at the Council on Aging, and was struggling to keep up the mortgage payments on my house. It was a welcome surprise to learn of the inheritance she had left to us, my two brothers and me. It is funny, though, how the sudden acquisition of money can leave one feeling a bit lonely and confused. My first decision, and a good one, was to enroll in a Master of Liberal Arts program at UNC-Asheville. I had already taken up a renewed interest in writing, wood carving, quilting, cooking and gardening, but the graduate classes gave me a chance to think more seriously about my creative gifts, and to develop them further. Over the course of the next two years I wrote papers on Mozart, Thomas Jefferson, religion, family history, parenting, and aging...and began to find "my voice" in a new and different way.

I am particularly proud of the paper I wrote concerning my mother's illness, called *Missing Ingredients: A Thoughtful Look at Elder Care Institutions*. I still hope to get it published. I have long believed that it could become the jumping off point for a non-profit organization, training people to become friendly visitors to shut-ins and dementia patients in nursing homes and other facilities. Even today I am thinking of combining this idea with something I now call "history therapy," one of my many pet history projects.

It became more and more apparent, however, that my deepest passion was for writing (and researching) history. I wanted to become an historian. UNC-A did not offer an MA in History, so I sent out applications to several schools, including UNC-Chapel Hill and the University of Virginia. Of course they are among the most competitive history departments in the country, so my credentials were not quite enough to impress them. I did get accepted at my third choice, however, and enrolled at Virginia Tech, in Blacksburg, in the summer of 2001.

This new chapter of my life seemed perfect. I was delighted to be moving back to Southwest Virginia, where so many of my ancestors had played prominent roles during colonial days, and I could hardly wait to start visiting all the local museums and archives. Back in 1755, my mother's ancestor, Mary Draper Ingles, had escaped from captivity among the Shawnee Indians and had walked home through the wilderness, from Big Bone Lick, Kentucky to Virginia. It was a popular story, with several novels and plays already written, so I could hardly wait to find out how I could contribute to her story. My father's family also hailed from this part of Virginia, and I hoped to learn more about the childhood of his uncle, who grew up in Chilhowie. He left Virginia in 1900, and spent the rest of his life in Schenectady, New York, working as an engineer at the General Electric Company. He devoted all his free time to the protection of Lake George and other beauty spots in the New York Adirondacks, becoming a leader in the preservation movement. I was determined to write his biography!

Graduate school...as a fifty something year old...

Many of the faculty in the history department were about my age (or even younger), and the graduate students were mostly in their early twenties, so I had to work hard to earn their respect. The latest advances in computer technology were intimidating and totally unfamiliar to me, but we were all required to explore this new frontier - learning about digital archives, websites, and zip drives. I doubt if I would have learned these lessons anywhere else. My academic projects and accomplishments included three publications - an article about Virginia Tech in the 1890's ([Journal of Social Sciences](#)), and two about Mary Draper Ingles ([Smithfield Review](#)). I handed in a thesis proposal, about William Ingles, and Ingles Ferry, but was never successful in pulling together a suitable group of faculty advisors. My favorite professor, Peter Wallenstein, encouraged me to concentrate on writing, and warned that if I were to go on to enroll in another university, for a Ph.D., that there were slim prospects of me finding a position as a

professor. The trend was already evident, even 12-13 years ago, for universities to rely on adjunct professors, and to avoid hiring faculty on a permanent basis.

Best thing about this degree program, I suppose, was the exposure to great historical writing. I loved the seminar format, allowing us all to review books and have our reviews critiqued and edited by our professors. I have saved copies of all those books, and take great delight in pulling them off the shelf from time to time, to reread them at leisure. I feel pretty well versed in topics such as slavery, civil rights, technology, the colonial period, and the settling of America. I have often wondered how it might be possible to provide this sort of education to more people. One could argue that such education, in learning the basics of historiography, could be a great way to strengthen our democracy.

How to earn a living...

Now armed with three graduate degrees, my strategic plan, for my career, consisted of a vague and optimistic hope of finding an administrative job in a museum or historical society, and eventually work my way up the ladder into a statewide position, perhaps at the Virginia Historical Society, or Preservation Virginia. I also planned to continue to work on my great uncle's biography, about the NY Adirondacks, and perhaps write a book about Ingles Ferry. I heard of an opening as director of Glencoe Museum, in Radford, and jumped at the chance. During my time there we sponsored an exhibit about the Christiansburg School; we strengthened our relationship with the local schools, arranging tours of a renovated school house; and we developed internships with Radford University, for students interested in art and museum studies. All well and good, but board members (at the Radford Heritage Foundation) had conflicting ideas about priorities, eventually deciding to try running the museum without any paid staff, and laid me off.

I landed on my feet, however, securing a new job at the Reynolds Homestead Continuing Education Center, in Patrick County, Virginia. This facility was owned and operated by Virginia Tech, established through a Reynolds family endowment, and also included a forestry research center, run by the College of Natural Resources. I set to work organizing the archives, training tour guides, creating a gift shop and book store, and starting a group called *Friends of the Reynolds Homestead*, as a way to engage with the local community. However, as so often happens to me, I discovered there were forces at work to disrupt my careful plans. Local politics, being rather conservative and decidedly unfriendly to outsiders, especially those with several advanced degrees and big ideas about changes, turned against me. Somehow they were able to convince my boss, back at Virginia Tech, that I was not the right person for the job. I don't feel too bad, however, since I happen to know that they ran the previous director off, in an even shorter frame of time. She received threatening phone calls from the clan!

So, continuing my bumpy ride...

I moved back to Radford, where I launched my own business, called Community Archives of Southwest Virginia, LLC, and started offering my services as a consultant, writer, editor, and researcher, with a special interest in family and institutional history. After a few years there I moved to Roanoke, finding more potential customers in that area, and found a number of nice jobs along the way. I coordinated a project at the Virginia Museum of Transportation, overseeing several college students as they collected oral histories from WWII pilots. Another nice assignment I found... was as archivist for Lutheran Family Services, scanning the old scrap books and papers from the Lutheran Children's Home, started back in the 1880s.

I especially enjoyed working with the Roanoke Kiwanis Club, as part of their 90th anniversary celebration. I interviewed many of their older members and helped them search through the club's archives, stored in the Virginia Room of the public library. That project led to an invitation to serve on the Board of the Roanoke Valley Speech and Hearing Center, and eventually to be hired to develop a quarterly newsletter. I had a great chance to develop my editing skills when asked to take over as editor for the Greater Raleigh Court Civic League's bi-monthly newsletter, and it became a wonderful creative outlet. Too bad the organization could not offer to pay me for that work!

Ever hopeful, yet ever poorer...

In the 7-8 years since starting my business, I have continued to work on the biography of my great uncle, John Apperson, and have even approached the Smithsonian to see if they might like to publish my manuscript. Undaunted, after hearing bad news from the Smithsonian, I applied for a large grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities Public Scholar Program (to be announced in August, 2015). My son and daughter have encouraged me to move from Virginia to Asheville, and be closer to their homes. In fact, my son has managed to secure a nice little house for me to live in, rent free, until I can find a better alternative. Since moving to Asheville, in September, 2014, I have started taking classes at the Osher Life-Long Learning Institute (OLLI) at UNC-A, along with about 1,200 other seniors who enjoy the lively exchange of ideas. I'm scheduled to teach a class there myself next Fall, called *From Forts to Ferries on the Virginia Frontier*. And, I'm exploring a different sort of teaching opportunity in the Asheville public schools, offering 6-8 week classes to 4th graders, called Surviving on the Colonial Frontier. And, my dream of starting up a ministry, or non-profit, to provide friendly visitors (and history therapy) to shut-ins and dementia patients...is still close to the top of my list.

About my liberal arts education...

I guess one could say that Sweet Briar prepared me well for life, not so much in terms of being successful, in the conventional sense of the term, but for becoming a fully engaged, creative, and well-rounded person. I have found my voice, I am blessed with happy and healthy relationships with my children and grand-children, and I am hopeful that I will find a way to continue to "follow my bliss," as Joseph Campbell would say, but to function independently, without being a burden to anyone. As for the current crisis at Sweet Briar, I hope to be able to offer my knowledge and expertise to help bring about healing, and to develop good strategies for moving forward, into the next 114 years! I hope we will all find a chance to "tell our stories" as a sort of "history therapy" for all of us who value our special memories and hope to pass along some of our wisdom to future generations.