

Entitling the Poor

by Joseph DeGweck

In February of 1994, at Buffalo State College, an apparition began to appear. Like so many, it was sown in the earnest of a hopeful dream, and a response to a need. Unlike so many, it did not possess the same spiritual semblance that is often associated with such eminent revelations as those of Our Lady of Lourdes or Fatima. It had no religious significance. Nor did it possess the mystical characteristics connected with the ghost of Scrooge or Harry Potter. There was no intention of channeling the realm of the living with that of the dead. It had no cultural connotations attached to it; such as Santa Clause or Irish Leprechauns. Rather, this apparition was distinctly defined. From within the walls of Room 312-B of Bacon Hall, two women collaborated, with an empowered spirit and a vision of fortitude, to create an initiative that would impact the victims of poverty throughout the world.

Dr. Betty J. Cappella and Dr. Geraldine E. Bard, both literacy professors at Buffalo State College, began laying the ground work for Project Flight: a family literacy program focusing on the needs of impoverished families trapped in a cycle of under-education and illiteracy. Together they recognized the importance of education and how it could be used as an “entrée out of poverty.” They began a grassroots initiative that over the next 13 years would evolve into a “community jewel” recognized internationally as an effective strategy to combat the social byproducts of illiteracy. This is a story of their passion. It is an account of how the schools, government, businesses and people of Western New York have responded. Together they have embraced this enterprise. Together they have become advocates that envision the goals and mission of Project Flight. Together they recognize that it is everyone’s responsibility to assure, for all people, the opportunity to read, communicate and productively function within our community.

Dr. Geraldine E. Bard

As I sat across from this humble yet strongly impassioned woman, I could sense within her a hunger to teach and to empower to others that with which she herself has been so blessed with receiving. As a young child, raised by her mom in Chicago, she was instilled with a “love of reading.” Her life at home was papered with books. Her family did not have a lot but “we always had books in the house.” This afforded Geraldine with an opportunity to enhance her education and to achieve what she has thus far accomplished in her life.

Dr. Bard is an anthropological linguist. She claims that she became “arrested” in undergraduate school when she encountered linguistics. To her, this science of language became a culmination of all the knowledge she had so far encountered. It worked for Geraldine. Linguistics presented her with a “cultural-logical perspective” that seemed to give her a direction to follow throughout her career. Aside from teaching full time, and from her volunteering as co/coordinator for Project Flight. Dr. Bard has had the opportunity to assist in the decoding of ancient languages throughout the world. Her early exposure, in the 1950’s, on phonemic awareness in literacy helped her to develop her approach toward developing strategies for reading and comprehension. Her expertise and experience has enhanced her skills and talent and she now dedicates much of her time to our community. Geraldine has not only tutored our children, ages from pre-school to college, but she has also worked directly and trained many of

the reading teachers in school districts throughout WNY. She feels that education and the ability to read is “the one way in which our playing field becomes level”.

My brief and enjoyable encounter with Dr. Geraldine E. Bard had left me with a sense that she is a gentle spirit with an impassioned devotion toward empowering women and families with the same opportunity she had growing up. Her commitment to our community is eternally fostered with the thought that “when someone knows how to read, we open a door that no one can close”. Geraldine has stood post at this doorway. Steadfast and deliberate she has helped so many to pass through into a new beginning; into a future of hope.

Dr. Betty J. Cappella

As I was taking the time to interview Dr. Bard, I could not help but notice the assertive purpose of Dr. Betty J. Cappella. She moved about her office as intent on accomplishing a mission as a worker bee is intent on harvesting honey. In a natural flow she continued on her task. In a sequence of motion replicating that of a dancer rehearsing her routine Dr. Cappella seemed to glide from computer to printer to computer and back to the printer. Several times she repeated this and by the time I had concluded speaking with Dr. Bard, Dr. Cappella was finished and ready to share her life with us.

The spirit and purpose of that life mirrored that of Dr. Bard’s but the journey was different. Dr. Cappella was raised by a single parent, her father Eugene. Together they lived with her grandmother and sixteen siblings. She affirmed that she spoke Italian before she spoke English. Much of whom she is today, she insists, is a result of the values instilled in her by her father and his family. Raised by a migrant family Betty joyfully states that “even though we didn’t have much, we had each other”. The life they shared together was filled with the “love of family”, “a love of learning”, and “a love of striving”. Eugene also instilled in his daughter the importance of “giving back to the community. During the depression years her father was engaged in the activities of the CCC, Conservation Corp Camps. These were a Presidential initiative that helped the country during a sad economic crisis. Betty compares them to the modern term “service learning”.

As Betty Cappella continued her transformation into Dr. Betty J. Cappella she held tightly to the values that made that all possible. She entered college on an athletic scholarship. Betty took with her the thoughts of her father as she pursued her future. “Education can never be taken away from you”. Dr. Cappella began to recognize the reality of our social deficiencies. That family literacy, the foundation of our educational system was facing a crisis. This crisis was fueled by the reality that the resources needed to foster family literacy were missing. Our major metropolitan centers of public education serve a population that was often 85% impoverished. She explains it this way. “If you are given a choice to buy a loaf of bread or a book, and you can’t do both, you buy the loaf of bread”. She now recognized a new purpose. She developed a resolve to bring books to those in need. To create learning opportunities for those in need. Her continued quest for learning had finally brought her to this destination. Together, Dr. Betty J. Cappella and Dr. Geraldine E. Bard would use their knowledge, their expertise and skills to establish an agency defined by the vision and mission of Project Flight.

Project Flight

As I entered their office on the second floor of Bacon hall I felt the energy of two worlds merging. On one side of the room, modern style mahogany desks reflected the sunlight.

Computer monitors and printers, books and documents, notepads and phonebooks shrouded their façade; creating a perception of efficiency and verifying the value of the work that transpired within these mundane walls. The other side of the office reflected the persona of its occupants. In the center was a round table, representative of the certainty that collaboration at equal levels occurred around it. It was covered with a silk leopard skin design cloth. The walls were adorned with multi-cultural masks of shamans, the teachers or educators of their culture. Relics of the American Indian decorated the corner next to the bookcase behind me. Upon it were a few plaques honoring these two women. Most prevailing were the pictures of family and friends as though representing their home, their resolve, their solace.

This was the home, the base camp of Project Flight. Strategies are mapped within these walls. Resources are secured and distributed. Goals are determined and missions are established. Then I began to realize that the energy I felt was of all of those who have entered this area before me. All of the people from community centers, educational institutions, government agencies and the private corporate sector of WNY, that have supported and enriched the efforts of these two women toward literacy. The mothers and fathers, family members, teachers and friends who, together, instill in those around them, the stance of bettering themselves and their neighbors. Project Flight had evolved into a social phenomena. It had become the prodigy of its community. Living within the book-nooks of our neighborhoods, it had become a friendly acquaintance to all of those who strive for a better tomorrow.

Shortly after its inception, these two women joined a delegation of seven people that went to the United Nations World Conference in China. They were the only “community collaborative” at the conference. Through this effort, the conference adopted three of their strategies toward overcoming universal deficiencies in literacy. Since then the untiring efforts of Dr. Bard and Dr. Cappella have advanced the programs of Project Flight to a new level. They collect and distribute 250,000 books annually in the Western New York Area. They have established a variety of programs such as The Books for Kids Program and Reading for Results Program. They work with the Buffalo Bills and Buffalo Sabers to reach our children and to meet their literary needs. Internationally they have been instrumental in establishing schools in such areas as Guyana, South America and Cameroon. The accomplishments of Project Flight are far too many to mention in this article. The supporters of this phenomenon are also far too many to mention. The spirit in which this program has been nurtured is immeasurable. But still there is a need. I invite you to visit their website and to find out more about this living entity of our civic community. Go to www.projectflight.org and find out more.

It is not just the persons of Dr. Betty J. Cappella and Dr. Geraldine E. Bard; but it is all of those who have come before them and all of those who will follow in their footprints, that cultivate and care for our youth. Together they share in the challenges that we face every day. Together they will raise the quality of life in our community. Together they will “overcome”. On March 13, 2007, a consortium of women from throughout Western New York will meet to honor eight women who in their lifetime have also traveled down the path of social reform. We invite you to join them at a luncheon that will recognize their accomplishments. For more information please contact Melissa Blattner at 878-5829 if you wish to attend or to support their efforts.

I would like to leave you with a final thought. These are two of the mottos or truisms of Project Flight “If you can read, you can dream”. I invite you to help others dream. “The Legacy of Literacy is Democracy and Freedom”. I invite you to help free others from the chains that lock them within the cycle of illiteracy!!!