

Profile

Alvina Treut Burrows

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"On my first day in first grade, I decided unequivocally that I would be a teacher when I grew up," states Alvina Treut Burrows.

Such resolve characterizes her contribution to education and accounts in some measure for her most recent honor—becoming the first recipient of the National Conference on Research in English (NCRE) Research Award. It is given for lasting contributions and is to be presented at the NCRE breakfast meeting in Anaheim, California on May 5, 1983.

Alvina's gift of intellect and vision enables her to recognize ideas of worth. She has the dedication to pursue ideas through research and study, to application. Ideas she developed regarding children's writing and reading in the 1930s are being rediscovered in the 1980s.

Early Life

Born in Sunnybrook, Maryland, Alvina

was the youngest of George and Sophia Pausch Treut's nine children. When she was quite young, the family moved to Manor Glen, Maryland where memories of childhood center around a one-room schoolhouse. In this rural community, every neighboring family was represented in the school, including two of Alvina's older brothers. She recalls the double desks, how the teacher wrote words on the blackboard, drilling the four or five beginners by pointing to each word with a ruler, pronouncing the word, and having the children repeat in chorus. The teacher pointed to the words out of order so students would not remember them merely in sequence. Alvina recalled them from their position at first, and soon began to recognize them in other contexts.

Her father played the classic violin, her mother the piano; both parents read aloud to the family. This model reinforced some of the behavior she was to emulate in her adult life. Her strong



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interest in music, especially the piano, and her advocacy of reading aloud stem from these early experiences.

All six elementary school years were spent in that one-room school in Baltimore County where older children helped the teacher with the younger ones. Learning to get along with peers of different ages had its value. Listening as the teacher taught the older classes was another kind of learning for younger pupils.

A choice memory stands out when one day the teacher, Miss Betty Wilkinson, announced that new books had arrived. Alvina, in second grade, helped unpack and pass around the new treasures—\$100.00 worth of books bought with funds contributed by the parents and the county. Alvina clutched Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit*, making sure it was placed upon her own desk. Miss Wilkinson often read to the entire group on late afternoons, while everyone, aged six to sixteen, listened. Alvina still remembers the spine tingling chill of "Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anyone coming?" from *Bluebeard*, and her approval of the two evil brothers' just punishment in *The King of the Golden River*.

High School and College

At twelve, Alvina was a freshman at Towson High School. She, along with several other students made a fifteen-mile trip on Monday morning, returning Friday evening by Model-T Ford. High school days saw the waning of horse and buggy society and the beginnings of an automobile culture.

Later, Alvina attended Maryland State Normal School, presided over by a fine educator, Dr. Lida Lee Tall, one-time principal of Lincoln School, Co-

lumbia University, and a true pioneer in the education of teachers.

Early Teaching

Alvina's first job was teaching at the Sweet Air School in Baltimore County. Driving from her home in Manor Glen to Sweet Air, particularly in winter, offered frequent challenges due to deep ruts in narrow roads. Gradually dirt roads gave way to concrete, but deep snow on a narrow road, even a hard surfaced one, made it necessary to carry a shovel and tire chains in the Model-T.

She taught at Sweet Air School from 1923-1927, a period of hard but rewarding work. There were about forty pupils in seven grades. At the time, Alvina was eighteen years old; her oldest pupil was seventeen. The Baltimore County Course of Study, a pioneer in curriculum development, became a daily reference. Preparing lessons for the next day's classes in all subjects so that pupil secretaries could write the assignments on the blackboard was laborious and time consuming. Correcting papers meant long hours of burning midnight oil—literally—for many homes did not have electricity. The satisfaction of seeing growth in her students from year to year, the knowledge that a child's lack of progress could not be blamed on any *other* teacher, and the emergence of parents' confidence in her work were important lessons for a young professional. Conducting PTA meetings and directing school social activities—Halloween parties, strawberry festivals, Christmas entertainments, and end-of-year celebrations—provided invaluable experience.

The sense of community that came from families living on farms for years or generations contributed essential sta-

bility to the constructive spirit of the school.

Parental kindness and generosity were offered in many forms. During bad weather, neighbors sent word for her to stay with them overnight and not to try hazardous driving. If she had a flat tire and started to change it, someone going by stopped to finish the job for her. Invitations to Sunday dinner, a piece of cake, or an apple brought by the children to add to the teacher's lunch were commonplace.

In 1923, when Alvina arrived at Sweet Air, the library was largely reading matter for adults: Scott's *Complete Works*, Longfellow's *Poems* (bound in leather), Dicken's many volumes, and other Victorian novels. She kept all that she thought any of her pupils could possibly read, cleaned out mouse nests and damaged books, and sold usable volumes to a second-hand book dealer in Baltimore. She bought new books with monies raised at school festivals. Promoting the library tradition in every community and school where she lived and worked became a Burrows' tenet.

She left Maryland in 1935 to teach fifth grade at Bronxville, New York.

Later Life

Alvina pursued her Master's degree at Teachers College, Columbia University, attending summer sessions from 1924 until she received the degree in 1933.

Her belief in the Progressive Education movement was bolstered by a John Dewey lecture. Later, she quoted him in *They All Want to Write*. Dewey wrote to compliment the authors, and she still has the penny postcard written in his own hand. Hughes Mearns, a prolific author of books dealing with children's creative power, was another educator at

Teachers College who left a lasting impression on Alvina. She passed his philosophies along to hundreds of teacher education students.

They All Want to Write, first published in 1939, written with Bronxville co-teachers, Doris C. Jackson, Dorothy O. Saunders, and June Ferebee, illustrates the landmark research honored by the NCRE Research Award. The documentation of six years of children's writing in progress is a forerunner to much of the study of children's writing today.

Alvina married Gordon Burrows in 1940. In 1946, in the midst of writing her dissertation at New York University, her son, Bruce, was born; study was set aside until he was older. From an early age, Bruce was taught never to throw away any scrap of paper with writing on it for fear it might contain some irretrievable shred of data from her dissertation. All the shreds survived; her dissertation became the basis for *Teaching Children in the Middle Grades* (D. C. Heath, 1952).

A number of scholars have known Alvina as their teacher, primarily at New York University but during the summers at the University of Hawaii and University of California, Berkeley. During other summers, Alvina taught at the Chief Sequoyah Reservation at Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Teaching Native American children left a lasting impression on Alvina and shaped her ideas about children's right to their own language and literary heritage.

Alvina has been recognized by her colleagues as a leader in research in the language arts. A research library in the language arts at New York University was named in her honor in 1974. Her willingness to try new ways of storing and retrieving information led her to ac-

cept microfiche and computer retrieval systems before most people knew what they were. Colleagues from nearby institutions, H. Alan Robinson of Hofstra, Martin Kling of Rutgers, and Bernice E. Cullinan of New York University, organized a nonprofit institute for dissemination of research collections, naming it the Alvina Treut Burrows Institute with Dolly Svobodny as Executive Director. The complete text documents on microfiche of more than 100,000 research studies is the result. Alvina serves as ex-officio adviser to identify needed collections in the related language arts.

Alvina's vision and dedication to the quality of children's lives led her to propose the National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. She recognized the need for such an award to stimulate and cherish children's living poets. Finding a permanent place in the Special Collections of the Boston Public Library to house the complete works of the award winners (David McCord, Aileen Fisher, Karla Kuskin, Myra Cohn Livingston, Eve Merriam and John Ciardi) was next on the agenda. Alvina participated in the dedication ceremony at the Boston Public Library in 1981. Her history of the poetry award appears in *Language Arts* (October 1981).

Alvina's career began in 1923, the same year *Language Arts* (then *The Elementary English Review*) was born. In the 1930s, Alvina described writing as a process. In the 1940s, she called the typical three-group reading structure a questionable caste system. In the 1950s, she focused on reading in the content areas and researched teachers' values about reading. In the 1950s, she evaluated research on composition with other NCRE members; she summarized for teachers what research says about

the composing process. In the 1960s, when the great debate about code versus meaning raged, Alvina was in the thick of it; she held a conference in New York City so that people on all sides could debate face to face. In the 1960s, the third edition of *They All Want to Write* was published. Also in the 1960s, Alvina was focusing on how children learn language and the need to respect children's speech patterns. In the 1970s, Alvina was writing about children's composing processes, their creativity, and their use of computers. In the 1970s, she summarized the research on teacher effectiveness in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In the 1980s, she devoted her energies to the promotion of poetry, the highest form of literature.

Students and colleagues across the nation regard her with respect and love because of her abiding good sense and good cheer. Her research has spanned literature, reading, writing, listening, and speaking without ever ignoring the interrelationships. The NCRE Research Award is well deserved.

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