

Remembering Moments Shared With Marie Clay

Marie, the Person

*Billie Askew, trainer emeritus
Texas Woman's University*

You have now remembered Marie Clay as a researcher, as a writer, and as a teacher.

I am privileged to share a bit about the Marie Clay I knew as a person — the unique human being who gave so much of herself to all of us.

This was not easy to prepare. How do you talk about the many personas of Marie Clay? As a person, she was special in different ways to all of us. I'll just share some of my experiences. Think about your own as we remember her tonight.

I guess I was 'almost introduced to' Marie Clay in the latter part of the 1960s! I was a graduate student at the University of Arizona with the eminent reading scholar Ruth Strang as my advisor. In 1968, Dr. Strang was part of a roundtable of researchers and scholars in Copenhagen at the IRA World Congress — with such distinguished scholars as Helen Robinson, Albert Harris, and H. Alan Robinson. Who do you think was invited to present her early groundbreaking research but Marie Clay!

Dr. Strang, who was approaching the end of her career and was in poor health, lamented that she may not be around to see what this incredible scholar from New Zealand would contribute to world literacy. Truly a small world! And how fortunate we all are to realize the legacy of that young researcher who so impressed Ruth Strang.

Family and Friends

Marie Clay had two families — her personal one and her professional one. Her personal family was very important to her. Marie's two talented children and three talented grandchildren were always in her thoughts. At every stop on her international travels she thought of them as she shopped or experienced new things. Small gifts made their way to New Zealand, Australia, and Germany — special gifts selected with the greatest thought and care. And she spoke of the influences and talents of her mother and her brother.

I think we can all agree that Marie's family was much bigger than any of ours. It was a world family — with friends and colleagues across the world. We were all so fortunate to be part of that family. You all welcomed her so warmly when she visited; she felt at home when with you.

And of course, Marie cherished her friends around the world. I would be unable to include all of her long-lasting friendships, but I'll share three that I personally observed:

- She enjoyed her friendship with Courtney Cazden, renowned Harvard professor emerita, with whom she could challenge and debate ideas. Many of us had opportunities to observe the scholarly debates between these two great women.



- And her long-lasting friendship with the late Martha King, professor emeritus at OSU, who was instrumental in bringing Reading Recovery to the United States. Every time Marie went to visit her in Columbus—after a requisite social greeting—Martha would say to Marie, “We don’t have much time, so let’s get the small talk over with. I want to know what you are working on and what you are thinking about. I want to talk about ideas.”
- And Margaret Griffin, professor emerita at Texas Woman’s University, who although an academic, spent most of her time with Marie exploring the real world. They traveled, explored, laughed, and did the ‘little’ things that Marie so much enjoyed.

Interests and Hobbies

Now let’s take a quick look at a few of Marie’s interests and hobbies...

How many of you knew that she

- was a beautiful seamstress and an artist with needlework?
- or that she was a wizard in the kitchen? I once saw her feed a multitude of unexpected guests—reminiscent of the miracle of the fish and loaves!
- or that she had a beautiful singing voice? I discovered this gift when she returned from a Rotary Club meeting in Denton, Texas, chuckling about a song she had learned — *Home on the Range*. She said she had finally learned to use Texas ‘Rs’ as she sang: Home, home on the range. Where the deeR and the antelope play, where seldom is heard a discouraging woRd, and the skies are not cloudy all day!

And now you know that Marie was an honorary Rotarian in Denton, where she was loved by all. Some of the Rotarians called her the “Little Kiwi.” Only they could be so bold and get away with it!

Did you know she had an amazing collection of miniature books from across the world? She loved her collection, carefully cataloging and classifying each one.

And no surprise — Marie was a lover of books! An avid reader, she was always searching for books to read and to share. She read volumes and learned and learned and learned.

Marie’s study of genealogy took her to many places in Europe to discover her roots. As always, her study was comprehensive and enjoyable.

Did you know about her interest in multiple births? She followed quadruplets in New Zealand and wrote an amazing account of their lives and catalogued multiple births around the world. Her interest inspired us to take a trip to Galveston, Texas, to meet Helen Kirk, a woman who had perhaps the most comprehensive collection of information about multiple births in the world. I watched in awe as the two of them went through archived boxes and delighted in recalling accounts of these children. They even shared what they knew about the current whereabouts of these children!

And we all know that Marie became quite a fashion statement. Her wardrobe of spectacular New Zealand fabrics was stunning. And her friend Margaret Griffin took her on wardrobe searches when in Dallas. They laughed and told wonderful stories about their ventures. I joined in one shopping jaunt while Marie tried on and modeled formal attire to wear when receiving a prestigious award in New Zealand. What a special memory that is!

Marie was the consummate traveler. You’d think she would tire of it as much as she did professionally. But she loved it. She savored it because she learned from it. For example, think of her enjoying . . .

- Sharing her beloved New Zealand with friends from the States,
- A Norwegian cruise with friends on a working ship so she could see and enjoy the everyday people and the culture, or

- A trip to the Frank Lloyd Wright museum, or
- Dogsledding in Alaska
- And visits to Williamsburg and Jamestown — learning about **our** history
- Opera tours in Australia and across Europe, or
- Visiting museums and theatre in New York, London, Toronto
- And visiting with friends. She enjoyed sitting on the deck at the home of Carol and Fran Lyons—studying the tides in South Carolina—always observing and learning!
- She was interested in so many aspects of living. She was fascinated by the human brain, the aging process, and the list could go on and on.

To illustrate her interest and inquiry, I will quote from her introduction to *Change Over Time in Children's Literacy Development*: She says

I live in a perpetual state of enquiry, finding new questions to ask, then moving on. I do not have 'a position' or a safe haven where what is 'right' exists. Pragmatism precludes idealism. I search for questions which need answers. (p.3)

With all her interests, I recall only once seeing her lack of interest — in the American music of the 1950s. Carol Lyons and I sat on opposite sides of Marie in the theatre performance of "Smokey Joe's Café." After the performance, she blandly commented, "I guess you had to have been there!"

Maybe most important was her love of children. Of course, we know about her commitment to their literacy successes. But she was simply drawn to children. The magnetism worked both ways. At a university reception for Marie at a faculty member's home, we noticed that she had disappeared. Walking into another room, we found Marie on a sofa with the faculty member's child reading a book to her. I don't think she even knew we were there. What a picture that was!

The Legacy Lives On

In closing I will share a special personal memory I have of Marie — sitting at the breakfast table when she stayed at my house. The first time she stayed with me, I spent a week trying to decide what to serve for breakfast. By the time she arrived, I had enough choices for a full breakfast menu! What I discovered was that it wasn't the food venue that was important — it was the opportunity to talk.

We could look at the little readers on the bench in the back yard and talk for hours about anything and everything. Reading Recovery was prominent, of course, but her joy of living and learning and giving was part of her very being.

She could make you forget that she was a Dame of the British Empire, New Zealander of the Year, winner of every major literacy achievement honor — but she always made you remember what matters most: making a difference for children in this world. She fearlessly sailed in new directions, stirring the waters along the way. She asked the tough questions and probed the uncomfortable issues. Integrity was her hallmark as she changed the world's thinking about the literacy learning of young children.

Marie Clay lived her life according to what mattered most to her. She truly searched for questions that need answers. We are the beneficiaries of a very rare legacy. Our challenge is to ensure that her legacy lives on in us as we work to fulfill her dreams for what is possible for children. Thank you, Marie Clay!

Remarks from the tribute to Marie Clay, June 4, 2007, at the 2007 Teacher Leader Institute & North American Leadership Academy in Vienna, Virginia