

Karen A. Thomas
Even Shakespeare Can Be Fun

Karen A. Thomas

Even Shakespeare Can Be Fun

As a teenager growing up amid the tobacco fields of Bath, North Carolina, Claudia Alligood promised herself that she would "never be a teacher, never marry a farmer, and never live in Beaufort County (NC)". She ended up doing all three - and influenced thousands of young lives. In 2001, Alligood completed her odyssey as a high school English teacher, retiring after 32 years.

Alligood grew up literally in the Bath School playground. Her parent's home was next door to the school, where her mother taught third grade. As a five year-old, Alligood would sneak across the ditch separating her yard from the school to join the first graders at the swing sets. During the next twelve years, chalk dust, wooden desks and class rooms became as comfortable to her as sipping hot cocoa or hugging a favorite stuffed bear. School became a familiar, second home.

College offered Alligood the chance to get away from Bath and Beaufort County - but she didn't go far. She attended East Carolina College (later to become East Carolina University) in Greenville, North Carolina - a mere 35 miles from her home in Bath. Alligood had been inspired by her aunt to pursue a career as an editor and she planned to earn a degree in English in order to do so. She dreamed of working in Europe as an English teacher for a few years after graduation before settling down to life as an editor. She did earn a degree in English, but she never made it to Europe.

Karen A. Thomas
Even Shakespeare Can Be Fun

In 1969, she graduated from college, married local farmer, Larry Alligood, moved into a home on Bath Creek in Beaufort County, and began teaching language arts to eighth graders at John A. Wilkinson Junior High School in Belhaven, NC. Her enthusiasm for teaching was soon put to the test.

"It was not an easy place to start," she remembers. Alligood was not prepared to deal with the emotional eruptions and discipline problems of preteens. Her education had been geared toward teaching high school students.

"I went to the principal to resign after the second week but he begged me to stay. I went home and sat on the pier and cried every afternoon until Larry came home," she says, slowly shaking her head. But she finished the year and then approached Jack Wallace, principal of Bath High School, asking him to "please find me a job doing anything". Her urgent plea was timely.

The junior and senior class English teacher was taking a one year leave of absence and in 1970, Alligood took her place, beginning a career that would continue for the next three decades. Making good on her promise to do anything, Alligood agreed to be the varsity cheerleader advisor - a position she held for 28 years. "I think that's a world record," she says. It was an appointment that suited her effervescent approach to life.

Alligood taught five classes of English every day and during sixth period, served as the school guidance counselor. She was also the senior class advisor and it was her role to direct the senior play, oversee the class fund raising activities, and organize the homecoming and graduation programs.

2003 Karen A. Thomas

Karen A. Thomas
Even Shakespeare Can Be Fun

Bath High School became part of the new consolidated Northside High School in 1989, blending the students of Bath, Pantego and Belhaven in northern Beaufort County. Alligood continued all of her activities and also tackled the advisory position to the Northside Fellowship of Christian Athletes. She particularly enjoyed working with the athletes and was proud of their ability to speak openly of their faith in God.

Officially, Alligood was the English teacher, but her students remember her most for the time that she spent with them outside of the classroom. Debra Woolard, a 1982 graduate of Bath High School, recalls that "Mrs. Alligood was always smiling. She had a good rapport with the students. She made things fun - even Shakespeare. She was our teacher inside of the classroom and our buddy outside of class."

David Elliott, Northside class of 1994, has a special perspective on his twelfth grade English teacher - the Alligood's son, Chad has been his best friend since before kindergarten. Elliott, now in his third year at the University of North Carolina School of Dentistry, spent as much time at the Alligood's home as he did his own while growing up in Bath.

"I can't think of anyone else outside of my immediate family who means more to me or has done more for me," Elliott says of Alligood. "She was 100 percent committed to the school and her students. Her life exemplified Jesus'. She gave of her time and I know that she gave her own money to students when they otherwise would have gone without. By her example, she quietly advanced the kingdom of God. If I can bring her attitude with me into my career, it will make dentistry a better profession."

© 2003 Karen A. Thomas

Karen A. Thomas
Even Shakespeare Can Be Fun

"When I was having a tough time getting accepted into dental school, Mrs. Alligood wouldn't let me give up - and I was about to," Elliott remembers. "She was always there - for any of us - to listen and offer advice.

Betty Gurganus, recently retired after years of devoted service on the principal's clerical staff at Bath High School, agrees. "She has helped many students. She is a very generous person with unlimited abilities." Indeed. Alligood coached both the girls' volleyball team and the golf team during her last two years at Northside. "I'm not that great at either sport but they needed a coach so I volunteered," she says.

Recalling her 32 years of teaching, Alligood reflects that during her first few years, she "...would use the shotgun approach and teach a lesson to the entire class utilizing one method. I never considered the varying abilities of each student. Everyone approaches a subject from a different learning level. For instance, I am lost when I read a science article the first time. I have to go over it more often than someone who is adept at the subject. I had to learn this about my students. I had to learn to meet their individual needs. At the end of my career I felt that I was a much better teacher because I taught to those needs. If students don't have a rapport with the teacher, they won't want to learn from her and I think that treating each student as an individual helps to establish that relationship."

Although she would like all of her students to "have a control of their own language," Alligood recognizes that there are more important mandates to learn in life. Her greatest wish is to impart to each student a sense of responsibility - the recognition that they are a part of a bigger society - and a full understanding of the necessity of treating others as

you would have them treat you. She emphatically believes that each student should graduate with the ability and confidence necessary to contribute to their world - whether they remain at home in Beaufort County or glean experiences from cultures around the globe.

How does a teacher reach a student who asks, "If my friends understand me, why should I bother to learn to speak better?" Alligood countered by teaching her students unexpected skills such as how to conduct themselves in a five star restaurant. She taught them etiquette and how to properly set a table. She taught them how to tie a tie and when not to wear the one featuring Sponge Bob Square Pants. She showed them that at some point in their life, they might one day *want* to "speak better".

But teachers also learn from their students. Alligood says that her students have taught her several important lessons. They have taught her that everyone needs respect and everyone wishes to be treated equitably. They have taught her to be real and sincere. They have taught *her* to treat others as you would have them treat you. They have reinforced life's lessons for each other - lessons that she considers vital. Lessons that she will pass on to her one year-old grandson, Caleb, for the desire to teach never completely retires.

Alligood remains a busy woman. She is still teaching - but she is now teaching teachers. In her retirement, she works with the North Carolina Teacher's Academy conducting staff development workshops. Her favorite lesson is in helping teachers understand the difference in their students learning styles, the skill she eventually found

to be her most important asset. She also instructs a substitute teachers class and gives calligraphy lessons at Beaufort County Community College.

When she is not teaching, Alligood is active in her church. She has been a member of the First Christian Church in Bath since she was twelve. She and her husband Larry were married there and she now enjoys serving as director and decorating for weddings. An artistic person, Alligood participates in a monthly meeting of women who create gift items for the annual church bazaar fund raiser held each November.

With more unstructured time, Alligood is able to visit with her son, Chad and his wife, Melonie and play with Caleb. Having more time for her family is one of the joys of retirement and Alligood and her sister, Alice have spent leisurely afternoons shopping together. Alice, however, has noted one disadvantage of teaching 4700 local residents - it is impossible to go anywhere with Alligood without running into one or more of her former students, and they all want to stop and talk with her. Alice has told her popular sister, "I would rather be shot than go shopping with you."

Alligood takes her sister's joking in stride.

" I'm so glad that Providence saw fit to put me where I needed to be as a teacher. I feel that I have made a difference for somebody," she says. "Now the farmer thing, I don't know....," she remarks with a mischievous glance at her husband.

Larry Alligood smiles at the comment. "Claudia has done a lot for her students. She has encouraged many who otherwise would not have gone on with their education. She is devoted to me, her family, and the church. But she was a disgruntled farmer. She never did like chasing the hogs when they would jump over the fence."