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Ann McGurk Sokan '59

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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A True Classic

Alumni join to celebrate the 100th birthday of Professor Elizabeth Oggel.

By Ann McGurk Sokan '59

*"Whan that April with his showres
soote/
The droughte of March hath perced to
the roote"*

These immortal lines from late 14th-century England wafted through the room on an April-like day in March 2004, as former students of Elizabeth Oggel recited from The General Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. We had assembled in a spacious lounge at Westminster Village, a Bloomington retirement community where Miss Oggel resides, to honor her on the occasion of her 100th birthday. Many of the alumni present at the event had, as students in her class in British Literature, memorized the 18 introductory lines of the Prologue. Some were still able to recite the text from memory, even decades later; others needed a little aid from copies supplied by Larry Uffelman '60.

The former students were joined by Miss Oggel's cousins, colleagues, and friends at the party on March 20. About 75 guests greeted Miss Oggel (she prefers the title "Miss"), who taught English at IWU from 1945 to 1969, and caught up on the lives of friends and acquaintances from college days.

I'd kept in touch with Miss Oggel over the years, and when I realized she was approaching 100 and was in comparatively good health, I began to make plans for a party, consulting with Miss Oggel herself and a few friends along the way. The resident services staff at Westminster Village provided their main reception room as well as coffee and punch. I hired a caterer, who made cake and finger food. Pat Weller Groh '61 collected letters from former students who couldn't attend the party and brought a guest book. Janice Lilyholm '60 wrote many invitations and provided name tags. Char Peine Fesler '69 chose flowers for the tables and a corsage for Miss Oggel. Pat Lashbrook Jordan '59 and Marilyn Braught gave me wise advice and acted as sounding-boards.

Most of the party time was spent in talk, but we did present a short program, including the previously mentioned choral reading. We sang "Happy Birthday," and Eugene Usher, husband of Peggy Storey Usher '64, sang a song to honor Miss Oggel. Though she felt frustrated by how



Ann Sokan '59 (above left) congratulates "Miss Oggel," as she is affectionately known by her former students. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

brief each contact had to be, Miss Oggel clearly enjoyed herself and felt flattered, even overwhelmed, by the tribute. Indeed, as party plans proceeded and cards from friends and former students kept coming, she often expressed wonder at the outpouring of affection and praise.

Why did so many former students honor Miss Oggel by writing laudatory notes and/or traveling from California, Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and many parts of Illinois to wish her well in person? I've asked several people. For myself, doing the party was a labor of affection and appreciation. I learned a great deal from Miss Oggel: how to read poetry, how (not what) to think about poetry, how careful reading of literature enhances one's understanding of life, and the fine points of grammar. At the party, John Remo '57 recalled how he and a fellow biology major "came over from the Science Department" to take three literature courses from Miss Oggel. That was unusual in those days.



Above, the group recited lines from Chaucer that Miss Oggel had them memorize as students. From left are Carol Krueger Culver '58, Donna Benson Uffelman '60, Ann McGurk Sokan '59, and Pat Lashbrook Jordan '59. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Larry Uffelman, an emeritus professor of English at Mansfield University in Mansfield, Pa., was one who followed Miss Oggel in the teaching of college English. Larry writes: "I came to the study of literature an enthusiastic and omnivorous but undisciplined reader. Elizabeth was the first teacher I had who taught me how to read literary texts closely and precisely without losing a sense of their beauty..., lessons (which) proved to be invaluable. Many professors of literature taught me a great deal, and I am deeply indebted to all of them. None, however, taught me better how to open up a poem, how to get 'inside' it, how to begin to understand its verbal texture. In particular, I owe to Elizabeth the first, and in some respects, the best course I had on the poetry and prose of John Milton."

As she caught up on the lives of friends, in some cases not seen for over 40 years, Pat Groh relayed the remembrances of several former students:

"She used the perfect word for any occasion. Sometimes you had to look it up after class."

"She seemed severe at first but the more you knew her, the more her humor and her kindness came out."

"She loved Robert Browning. I would have thought he was too romantic for her no-nonsense self."

"When we were studying Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, she ended one class by saying, 'We'll leave Una sitting on her ass until tomorrow.'" Then she smiled her "sly little smile" while the class broke up. Miss Oggel could scare students a little and was considered "tough" but never unfair or mean.

Miss Oggel's positive influence was perhaps best summarized 10 years ago, on the occasion of her 90th birthday, by a former student who mentioned in a note how much she had instilled in him her own high standards. Indeed, he told her, she was continuing to influence people she had never met. When one of his employees turns in a sloppily written report, he hands it back, saying, "Miss Oggel would not have stood for this and neither will I."

And so, if I may speak on behalf of my fellow alumni: Thank you, Miss Oggel, for your infectious love of literature, your kindness and helpfulness to struggling students, your sense of humor, your unfailingly lofty standards of excellence. You expected our best and showed us how to give it. On your 100th birthday we give you, most of all, our gratitude.