

ELMLE presents

Tips for Teachers

... find out how a book changed a life ...

September 2008

A NEW SCHOOL YEAR, A NEW BEGINNING

To welcome us all back to the engaging world of international middle level education, we present guest writer, Dr. Edwin S. Gleaves, recently retired Tennessee State Librarian and Archivist, whose own young life was changed by a friendly educator, serving to remind us that we just never know how our own actions as teachers can reverberate through the lives of students.

HOW A LITTLE LIBRARY CHANGED MY LIFE*

By

Edwin S. Gleaves**

You have often been told that what you do is important. I'm sure that you have many days in which you wonder if that is true. You think of your salary compared to people in other professions; you think of how small your library is, how meager your collection, not to mention your operating budget; you think of the help that you need to do all that you do; and you think inevitably that you are not sufficiently appreciated—all of which, I am sorry to say, can be true to some degree or another. But I am here to tell you that you are important, that you are appreciated, and that what you do makes a difference in the lives of others.

My wife Janey told me the other night of an interview on television with the family of Sargent Shriver, who, you may remember, married into the Kennedy family a

generation or two ago. He and his wife have four children, one of them Maria Shriver, married to a big guy who happens to be Governor of California. They also have three sons of whom they are especially proud, not because they have been elected to some high office, not because they have become filthy rich, but because they have all chosen public service as a career. The oldest, Bobby, works with the rock star Bono raising support for AIDS victims in Africa; a younger brother, Tim, runs the Special Olympics; the youngest, Anthony, heads up Best Buddies, a mentoring program to help the learning disabled. The father, himself the former head of the Peace Corps and presidential candidate, could not be more proud of his sons if one of them were President. Sadly, though, Sargent Shriver now has Alzheimer's Disease and will not always remember how well his sons have done.

Those of you who have chosen careers in libraries are also public servants, and you serve the people in many ways. I'm sure that, given a little time, all of you could think of examples of how your work has helped your patrons young and old, and how, in some cases, the service you provided may have changed someone's life.

Let me tell you about one way in which a little library changed the life of a little boy. That little boy was me.

When I was a young teenager growing up in West Nashville, we had no local public library but we had a bookmobile that came to our neighborhood every Thursday morning. In those days, the bookmobile was more than a delivery van; it was a mobile library with a rich collection. I was not a heavy user of the bookmobile, but I often dropped in if I wasn't playing baseball, my first love, usually looking for books on, guess what, baseball, especially the novelettes by John R. Tunis, such as *Keystone Kids* (1943), *Rookie of the Year* (1944), and *The Kid from Tomkinsville* (1940).

Then one day the librarian showed me another book that she thought I might like. It had a picture of a couple of robins on the cover and was called simply *Birds*, with "A Golden Guide" across the top. It was small and colorful and easy to carry, so I

checked it out and took it home. That little book, checked out of a bookmobile on that summer day, changed my life and that of four generations of my family.

First, I took it home and began to match up some of the 129 birds pictured in the little Golden Guide with those that I saw in my yard. In the first few days I made some amazing discoveries, identifying a number of birds not seen in Nashville before or since. Obviously, my instant enthusiasm for bird-watching, as it was called back then, outran my early knowledge of their true identity. But over a period of years, with the encouragement of my mother (but without the knowledge of my classmates or neighborhood friends), I became a watcher in the woods, a true-blue birder, ready to ride the Kingbird Highway wherever it would take me. I soon became the youngest member of the Nashville chapter of the Tennessee Ornithological Society, of which I later became president and to which I still belong.

Yes, I kept my passion for birds a secret from my peers because bird-watching then was not what birding is today. We were thought to be an odd lot--a little strange, odd, weird, and maybe we were all that for the time. I had one secret sharer of my love for birds in high school and on many a spring morning he and I would arise early enough to spend an hour or two in the woods welcoming the spring migrants—the original tourists to Tennessee, by the way—before getting to school by 8:30. We dared not tell anyone where we had been.

But as time went on birding became not only a popular pastime but a multi-million dollar business here in the U.S. and abroad. In my own family, my mother fell in love with the chickadees that came to the feeders that I put out, and all the family were seduced by the unmistakable redbird, the cardinal, and the never-ending song of the mockingbird. After I left home for graduate school both my mother and her sister fed the birds the rest of their lives, and my brother and his wife, who now live in North Carolina, still do the same. Today, my grandson Reece, who has been alert to the birds in our yard since he was a toddler, is fast becoming an expert on identifying birds by sight and sound.

Now for those of you who may not know, birding is much more than watching wild birds eat up ten dollars worth of food on a winter day, or fighting off the squirrels who know every trick in the business when it comes to stealing birdseed. Birds have enriched my life by their infinite variety—their incredible migrations, spring and fall; their changing colors; their exhilarating songs; their gift of flight; their endearing habits that we come to recognize as typical of each species.

Birds enrich my life in other ways of which you may not be aware. To wake up on a spring morning and to hear, as part of the Hallelujah Avian Chorus, the song of an oriole that I know has traveled thousands of miles in migration to nest in the same place as the year before sharpens my sense of wonder of the natural world. Or to see half-ounce hummingbirds zipping around at sixty miles per hour from flower to flower. Or to watch little wrens learning to fly and to sing with their oversized voices. Indeed, those of us who are attuned to bird calls and songs live in a parallel universe because every bird sound we hear means something to us.

Perhaps best of all, birds are everywhere—even Antarctica has penguins. For a birder, or anyone interested in birds, every vacation is a birding vacation, whether in the mountains, the desert, the beach, or even the big city; birds will be there, waiting for you, daring you to identify them, always inviting you to watch them in all their beauty. There is not a day in my life, wherever I am, that I do not see or hear some bird, somewhere, somehow, and I never take it for granted.

Now, think for a minute. What if I had not gone to the bookmobile that very summer day? What if that librarian had had a sore throat and could not go to work that day? Would I have ever discovered this life with birds? Maybe, but maybe not. Remember how few people were watching birds in those days? It is entirely possible that I never would have found that seed, that spark, that book, that opened the world of birds and the natural world to me. It was a little book in a little library that changed my life in a big way.

Now, think a little more. Has there not been a book somewhere, sometime, that has made a major impact in your life? Yes or no, I can guarantee you that among the people you have served in your careers, there are many whose lives have been changed, enriched, broadened, improved, deepened by the books and other materials that you have provided in your public library.

I've told you my story about me and the birds, but just take my case and multiply it by ten, by a hundred, by thousands and more, and then try to imagine the impact that you and your library have had on the people you serve. Think about the student who discovers art or music or great literature in your library, and goes on to be a teacher or professor; of the future diplomat whose interest in other lands is kindled by your holdings on Spain or India or Brazil; or the young woman who learns about landscape design, and a young man that of fine cuisine, and then follow career paths of their own; of the future traveler, professional or otherwise, who learns living languages through books and tapes in your library; and of those of all ages who have been inspired by the biographies and autobiographies of those greats who have gone before. And the list goes on; I'm sure that you can make your own, and take satisfaction in it.

Public service means service to people, and no service is more powerful than information, and especially books when discovered at a time in life that they are truly life-changing, earthshaking, unforgettable. So—the next time a kid, girl or boy, comes in your library looking for a book on sports, or whatever, think about another little boy who, fifty years ago, found the right book at the right time in a little library, and his life was changed forever.

*This is the text of an address given to an assembly of directors of small and medium-sized public libraries in the State of Tennessee, May 23, 2004, but applies happily to any educator, any child, when a thoughtful kindness from a teacher brings about a lifetime of achievement in a student, and neither of them will know it at the time. -- editor.

**Edwin S. Gleaves, Ph.D., served as State Librarian and Archivist of Tennessee for eighteen years before retiring in 2005. Prior to that, he served as Director of the School of Library and Information Science, George Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, for twenty years. During those years, he taught and consulted in universities in Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Paraguay, and Venezuela. Prior to his retirement, the Tennessee Library Association established the Edwin S. Gleaves Scholarship in his honor, the first of its kind in Tennessee.

While Director of the “Peabody Library School,” as it was called at the time, Dr. Gleaves also had, in his own words, “the honor of teaching Alan Heath, in whose career he has taken special pride.” (Dr.Gleaves, or *Ed* as I still struggle to call him, was an inspiring teacher in both my undergraduate and graduate work, and I have been proud to call him *friend* since I met him in a freshman English survey course in 1964, almost a half-century ago. His influence was certainly one that helped me become an international teacher, and I thank him for that! -- editor)

The European League for Middle Level Education is our local continental affiliate of the National Middle School Association (US). Watch for the ever-insightful and entertaining NMS activist Jack Berkemeyer at the Paris conference this coming January. News of Vienna star, the sex lady Elizabeth Schroeder? Wait for your October **Tips for Teachers!**



January 30 - February 1

2009

The annual conference of the European League for Middle Level Education in the vibrant capital of France!

Paris, indeed a city for all seasons, as recalled by Ella Fitzgerald who, if memory serves, liked Paris in the summer when it sizzles, and *in winter when it drizzles*.

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Check elsewhere on the ELMLE website www.elmle.org for full details of the conference: speakers, wine-tastings, cruises on the Seine, workshops, free Louvre entry, and much much more. Or email conference chair David Lynn dlynn@asparis.fr for a personal tour!