



Yesterday: ASL in the early 1970s was an eye-opening experience

BY NINA CAMERON '72

EVEN though I attended eight different schools in four different countries, ASL had the biggest impact on my life. I'm a product of Canada, the US, Switzerland and England and all the amazingly different schools I attended in each of these places. But it was the people, particularly the wonderful ASL teachers, I met along the way who had the strongest influence on me.

ASL had some exceptional teachers. Mr. David Campbell (ASL 1967–69) taught Grade 9 social studies. On his classroom wall he posted a giant list of extra things we had to do to complete his course. I remember visiting the Guinea & Piggy Pub for extra credits; it was an early all-you-can-eat establishment where you ate like a piggy for a guinea (1 pound and 1 shilling). My parents might have complained about my traipsing around strange parts of London, but I always said, “I have to do it for a school project!” Other extracurricular activities included seeing Parts I and II of the extra-long film *War and Peace* and visiting unusual museum and art exhibitions. These activities not only got me out of the house on weekends, but also expanded my horizons. I remember seeing extremely weird and wonderful exhibitions in Soho,

at the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park, and in quirky parts of the East End. One avant-garde exhibit I went to in Grade 9 involved taking my shoes off, walking through sand poured onto a concrete floor and colliding into giant mirrors suspended from the ceiling.

I still remember that Mr. Campbell hosted a Friday night “happening” in the Nash Terrace buildings in Regent’s Park, where Grades 6–9 went to school in 1969, before the “new school” was built in St. John’s Wood. Neighbors called the police after hearing a lot of loud music, and I traveled home on the bus covered in paint and laughed at all the funny things that had happened that night. In 1990, on a visit to London en route to South-East Asia, I returned to the “scene of the crime” and found our former school buildings were now the headquarters for the Rotary Club.

Mr. Campbell also devised an exercise to teach us about discrimination. For one week, all brown-eyed students were favored. Those with blue eyes were made to sit at the back of the classroom on cramped benches. They had to carry our books around and were generally treated badly. As I have brown eyes, I thought it was a great week. Then the second week was the blue-eyed students’ turn to get back at us, which they did. It was an experience that has stayed with me.

Paul Morton (ASL 1963–97) was another influential teacher in those years. You didn’t just take an algebra class, but were encouraged to attend an evening opera or two to gain extra credits. I’m not sure if our parents ever knew that if someone’s grades were hovering between a B+ and an A– Mr. Morton gave them the higher grade if they’d attended three or four opera productions, but I remember hearing parents bragging about their teenagers taking an interest in opera, all thanks to Mr. Morton.

If anyone messed up on their algebra calculations, Mr. Morton pointed out that if we had been working for NASA, we’d have sent our astronauts to the wrong planet. Or worse, they’d missed their intended destination and were now sentenced to a perpetual life in outer space. It definitely made me double-check my math after that!

Excellent classes taught by superb teachers made learning interesting. Added to this were the fabulous ASL library where I spent many hours reading and the field trips we took to Stonehenge, Canterbury Cathedral and other locations in and around London, which also contributed a lot to my education. These elements all made me the questioning and curious person I am today.

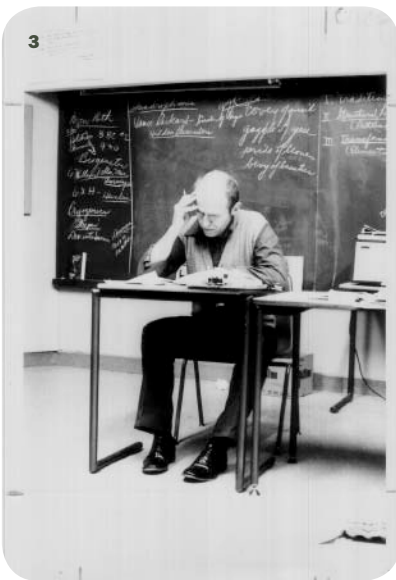
Then there were the unexpected



experiences at ASL that altered my view of the world. Most of the ASL teachers working in those years had great reputations. I didn’t have Don Jesse (ASL 1964–91) as a teacher, but I had heard about him doing creatively crazy things to encourage learning. As ASL classrooms in those days were truly open-plan, with no doors or walls, I often listened in on his classes and overheard him reading aloud some very interesting texts. One day he came to school with half his head and half his beard shaved and I believe he did it because he lost a bet against a student.

On a December afternoon, Mr. Jesse organized an “Orphan’s Christmas Party.” I helped raise the money for presents and wrapped the gifts. It was great to see the children’s wide-eyed excitement as they opened their presents and enjoyed afternoon snacks. During the festivities, one little girl tugged on my sweater and asked, “Could I take some milk home for my mum?” I was shocked. Were there children in London who worried that their mothers couldn’t provide milk for their families? I found a bag for the little girl and put a couple of full milk bottles inside. I can still hear those heavy bottles clinking together as she walked out of the room.

It’s easy for all of us to live in our own sheltered cocoon and forget that most of the world—and many in our own backyards—don’t share such comfort. That simple experience was a real eye-opener for me. How could I have been so blind to inner-city poverty? I guess, like a lot of upper-middle class teenagers, I was completely wrapped up in my own world of social activities and getting good grades. I hadn’t realized how fortunate I was living in Kensington, taking the Underground to school in St. John’s Wood, and not



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worrying about having enough food on the table every day.

My veil of naivety was completely lifted. There’s a tragic assumption among many of us that people who visit food banks or who are on welfare aren’t trying hard enough. Many people just aren’t lucky enough to have a good education, and misfortune can strike anyone at any time.

During my adult life I’ve spent a lot of time fundraising for different organizations in my community. Mother Teresa believed that we should help those in our own neighborhood, rather than worrying about people on the other side of the world so much. She would agree that it’s important to send aid to China or Myanmar, but not to forget those less fortunate ones living in your neck of the woods. Whether it’s donating time or money, it’s important to give something back to our communities. The rewards are so immense.

Whether it’s buying a homeless person a pair of winter boots—something I did when working in Ottawa—or donating cans to the food bank, keep the less fortunate on your mind and in your heart. A pair of gloves, shoes, a business outfit

to wear to a job interview or a package of spaghetti can make such a difference in a person’s life. When my Lioness Club (part of Lions Clubs International) was collecting food for the local food bank, one of our members said not to donate a macaroni-and-cheese dinner because some families couldn’t afford to buy the milk to make the mix. What a fascinating insight and again, we’re back to the milk!

Thank you Mr. Jesse and all the creative teachers at ASL for opening my eyes to so much, so many years ago. ■

Nina Cameron '72 attended ASL from 1969–1973 (for an Ontario grade 13). She graduated from York University in Toronto, Canada in 1977 with an Honors B.A. in English and history. For the next 20 years she and her husband of 30 years, Bob McClelland, published a restaurant and hotel newsletter, wrote columns in more than 30 trade journals and gave seminars around the world. From 1996–2006, she worked with Elections Canada as a Federal Returning Officer in Toronto and at the Ottawa headquarters. She was also an election observer with the Vienna-based OSCE. Nina continues to write and lives with her husband on the edge of a UNESCO Biosphere in Long Point, Ontario, Canada.

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2 Paul Morton
3 Don Jesse