

Jane Lingo Alumni Outstanding Service Award Speech – Sylvén S. Beck
Marvin Center Continental Ballroom – Wednesday, April 15, 2015

Jane Lingo, recognized as the longest serving employee at GW—50 years in the Office of University Relations, was known as GW’s “grande dame”. I will do my best to live up to Jane’s renown.

I have studied and worked at GW for over 38 years—I started when I was 9. All I ever dreamt of doing was to teach. At age 11, I trapped my 7-year old sister and 3-year old brother in our cramped Chinatown apartment hallway sitting at makeshift desks—and I taught. I will always be grateful to my siblings for being my first students. My father built on that dream by buying me my first red pen—my weapon of choice still, as I continue to grade what has amounted to 43 years of homework, papers, and exams.

Fast forward to 1977—I left Manhattan’s Lower East Side to begin a new life in Washington, DC. I had been teaching 3rd grade in NYC’s politically charged District 1 and amassed 2½ years of doctoral coursework at Teachers College, Columbia U. So I did what grad students still do to this day—I shopped my coursework to DC area universities to see who would give me the most credit for my work. The outlook was grim—4 courses max to transfer, and the remainder of my coursework would have to be repeated...until I arrived on this campus at Education Department Chair John Boswell’s door. I must’ve looked like a street urchin—he unreservedly said to me, “Let’s see what we can do”—and we did, and they did, and the rest, as they say, is history. GW gave me credit for 2½ years of coursework and I gave GW 3½ decades of service. Deal.

After graduation, another mentor Dorothy Moore passed the baton of program leadership to me. I was so proud to be in academia, and brought news home to my parents often about life at GW. But my father didn’t get it quite right. HE pursued his American Dream when he emigrated from China, finished high school, was drafted into FDR’s army, made off with the GI Bill, and enrolled in a place he could only imagine back home in Kowloon, HK—that place was Georgetown University. He graduated from the School of Foreign Service in 1949. Years later whenever asked about me, he told everyone in Chinatown and beyond that his daughter taught at Georgetown. It took a few years, my persistent mom, and repetition—when he was finally able to say his daughter teaches at George...Washington...University.

The evolution of a career is usually marked by personal milestones, like starting my own family. My son Alex had the unenviable distinction of growing up surrounded by elementary teachers. My students watched him grow up from kindergarten to law school, then marriage and family—10 days ago, he and Karen blessed us and Big Brother Noah with a baby girl. Thank you, Alex, for enduring a childhood and “middlehood” with too many teacher moments from your mom. You did it with GRACE and aplomb!

My students are a family of sorts as we share each other’s lives over the years, celebrating life’s events—weddings, children, and career highlights. I told my husband years ago that when he married me, he married Elementary Education. He still married me.

I teach alongside an impressive faculty: Colin, Pat, Kim—you inspire me. Year after year, the best and brightest students choose to come to GW—allowing our faculty to provide them with the finest teacher preparation program around. For me, our graduates span a generation of teaching and I couldn’t be more proud of them, knowing they’ve made a positive and powerful impact on the children they teach. YOU are the reason I am standing here.

One of the most profound events to befall this country almost 14 years ago was the 9-11 attacks. We lost my brother in Tower 2 of the WTC—the American Dream briefly became the American Nightmare. Far from NYC, my church was my sanctuary. Here at GW, GSEHD became my family away from home. But how could I continue to teach one of my favorite courses—the History of American Education and not talk about American history—without tears? I was determined...I taught, I cried...and to my amazement, my students cried with me, and so it has been ever since. Another teachable moment—and their greatest gift to me.

Gifts come in all shapes and sizes—from a 3rd grader’s half-eaten box of chocolates to an endowment in my name created in 1996 by another revered mentor, Gloria Horrworth. There’s a tree in Anniversary Park on F Street from the Class of 2000, two stars named Sylvén Beck from the classes of ’07 and ’09—and from last year’s class, another

star, this one named Stuart Louis, for my brother—we now twinkle together in adjoining constellations.

So how do I give back to my students—who are smart, quick, have great teacher instincts—and who get it. They own the knowledge to write a wicked lesson plan and have classroom management skills that make crowd control look easy. But it's their dispositions that matter and the values that children see in them day in and day out. This is what I can do for them—model kindness, breathe compassion, and whisper humanity. They will teach and touch generations of children to come. Kindness, compassion, and humanity are valuable commodities—our children expect it, today's world hungers for it, and my faith in God demands it.

My tapestry is indeed rich, my legacy is hopefully intact, and my love for teaching—teaching in this place—hasn't diminished one iota. Last time I looked, I still have a drawer full of red pens...38 years and counting. Thank you, GW and all of you, for this tremendous honor.