

Dean Nyland, Esther

Grand Haven, Michigan, Junior High School

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I was about to become a ninth grader at Grand Haven, Michigan Junior High School in 1957. My parents, who never interfered in public school issues, asked the principal if I could be assigned to the English class taught by Esther Dean Nyland, because they had heard from other parents that she was a demanding, exceptional teacher. I had heard about her too, from my friends. I was afraid of her and hoping not to wind up in her class. Alas, I was assigned to her classroom.

Miss Nyland was in her early 60's, stern, and devoted to teaching the English language correctly. Behind her back, we referred to her as a dried-up and bitter old maid. She required that, in addition to the prescribed text for the class, each student use *Warriner's Handbook of English*. I still have the handbook in my home library.

Though it was nearly sixty years ago, I still remember clearly that ninth grade English class. We had to study and correctly define difficult words and phrases while standing in front of the class. I dreaded being called on to "perform." Nevertheless, the possibility caused me to study as I never had before.

Miss Nyland required us to locate a senior citizen, interview that person, and write a term paper about that person's life. We were required by Miss Nyland to write the person a thank you note. It had to be perfectly written, including correct grammar and neat penmanship. I wrote my note fourteen times before it met with Miss Nyland's approval. I am really good at writing thank you notes that are grammatically correct and very neat. ☺ I distinctly remember misusing the word "terrific" and being chastised for assuming it meant "excellent" without having looked up the preferred definition in the dictionary. I never refer to something as "terrific" now, unless I mean it is frightening.

All of her students learned to write, rewrite, rewrite, and rewrite, until the finished product was worthy of Miss Nyland's stamp of approval. I struggled that whole ninth grade year with my English class. I got a B in the first semester and I was relieved. My parents were not pleased. They expected me to earn an A grade. I worked on that English class harder than I had worked on any subject and, I was very happy to get an A for the second semester.

Miss Nyland seemed to have a “drill sergeant” mentality about teaching, but she got students to learn. My writing improved dramatically during that year in Miss Nyland’s English class. Her teaching provided me the gift of writing and it has helped me throughout my life. After a year with Miss Nyland, writing the dissertation for my doctorate was not so daunting a task.

My parents decided to take the family to Europe the summer after I completed ninth grade. On the last day of English class, Miss Nyland took me aside and handed me an envelope. I was afraid it was a note to my parents to tell them I had done something wrong. Instead it was a card with \$25 in cash, a handwritten note expressing what a pleasure it was to have me in class, and a wish for me to have a wonderful experience in Europe.

My family moved to another town when I was in high school, but I kept in touch with Miss Nyland by writing occasional letters, all of which were carefully and correctly written. ☺ Later, we only exchanged Christmas greetings.

I graduated from college, got a master’s degree, and then served in the US Navy. When I met my wife, I took her to Grand Haven hoping to find Miss Nyland. I wanted my wife to meet this woman who had so profoundly affected my life. I located her, introduced her to my wife, and most importantly, thanked her for the gift of writing, for her patience and perseverance and her dedication to teaching thousands of students.

In the 1990s, we made a few more visits to Grand Haven and, each time we made it a point to visit Esther Dean in the nursing home where, at that time she resided. Esther Dean Nyland died at 95. Her life touched mine in wondrous ways. My adventure with her began in a “terrific” manner, moved to respect, then to admiration, and finally to genuine affection. This consummate teacher still guides my hand as well as or better than Microsoft Word.