Impossible? Impossible Things Are Happening Every Day!

Editorial Note: In noting the passing of Jeanne Varney Pleasants who until recently lived among us, the Editors do so not to mourn the deceased, but to mourn for all of us who are left behind; we mourn *our* loss. As solace, we remember the many good things about Jeanne Varney Pleasants. We are moved to emulate a life well-lived, a time on earth well-spent, and a heritage of lasting meaning left behind. We have chosen to remember the best of a life past, and thereby, we salute the indomitable spirit of Jeanne Varney Pleasants; in so doing, we pay tribute to the most powerful thing on earth—the lasting impact of one life on the lives of others.

The Editors wish to thank and acknowledge the following persons for sharing with us their fond memories of Jeanne Varney Pleasants: Helen P. Bailey, Doris-Jeanne Gourevitch, Bernard L. Varney, and others who wish to remain anonymous.

It seems fitting and somehow strangely prophetic that the birth of Jeanne Varney Pleasants in 1898 should be preceded by an event that rocked and dramatically changed the government and military establishment of her native France. The event that so aroused the French and the rest of the world was the publication of Emile Zola's "J'accuse," an article in defense of Alfred Dreyfus who was being set up on treason charges. Before the case was over, not only was Captain Dreyfus vindicated, but France was forever changed.

As Zola exemplifies, the most powerful thing in this world is neither bomb nor chemical reaction; the most powerful thing in the world is the impact of one life on the lives of others. Although life as we know it does not last, the ideas that possess the person who lives it are immortal, and often their concrete expressions, like the tombs of pharaohs, last for centuries.

As is the case with Zola and others, the ideas that possessed Jeanne Varney Pleasants during her lifetime found concrete expression in many shapes and forms, not the least of which are the printed and spoken word.

Inspired by heroic literature—which she loved with a passion—and believing that "literature in the learning experience stimulates students' interest and promotes cultural values," she naturally found herself strongly opposed to the mechanical exercises of conventional foreign language learning programs; she insisted on introducing literary texts into language study both in the classroom and in the language laboratory. Said a former student, "Professor V-P believed that language *could* and *should* be taught through literature, that from the beginning students should hear and read *good* French." Perhaps, this belief more than any other formed the foundation of TEACHING LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE, a journal she founded in 1961. In 1986, the year of her death, this publication is as strongly committed as ever to the "interrelation of language and literature in foreign language teaching" and stands as a living memorial to an idea that possessed Jeanne Varney Pleasants throughout her life.

If TEACHING LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE is not to be found on periodical shelves in *every* college library, it

would be almost impossible *not* to find at least one of nearly a dozen books and twenty articles (THE FRENCH REVIEW, THE MODERN LANGUAGE JOURNAL, THE NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, etc.) by Jeanne Varney Pleasants somewhere in the card catalogue or in the stacks. More poignantly, it is still possible to find men and women who, between 1934-1960 at various national conferences and conventions (The Northeast Conference, The Modern Language Association convention, etc.), had the opportunity to see and hear Jeanne Varney Pleasants read papers on subjects ranging from the principles of French pronunciation to the use of audio-visual materials in foreign language teaching and learning.

Although not all of her former colleagues and associates found themselves possessed by the same ideas that possessed Jeanne Varney Pleasants, most of them would agree that she made contributions to the profession; many would accept the list of contributions enumerated by Helen Bailey who first met Jeanne Varney Pleasants at a staff meeting in 1933 and maintained both a personal and professional relationship with her until the end.

When asked to list what she considered to be JVP's major contributions, Professor Bailey replied, "I consider her classic textbook, PRONUNCIATION OF FRENCH, her promotion of teaching language through literature, and her determined search for and use of new techniques and technologies that might help her students learn languages . . . these I consider her major contributions to education; perhaps, most important of all, however, was her extraordinary concern for and dedication to her students."

Perhaps, no single issue is as much talked about as the issue of concern for students—an issue that is surely as old as the profession of teaching. Is Helen Bailey correct? Was JVP's extraordinary concern for and dedication to students her magnificent obsession, or in the words of a former student, her "raison d'être?"

"We identify in life or in war or in anything else," said Dwight D. Eisenhower, "a single overriding objective, and make all other considerations bend to that objective." Although there is disagreement about numerous aspects of her educational philosophy among professionals in the field (a discussion of the virtues and vices of literature in beginning language courses is always good for heated and passionate debate), there is virtually no disagreement about Jeanne Varney Pleasants' concern for her students; so overriding an objective was this concern that she is remembered as bending the impossible into the realm of possibility in order to allow learning to occur in her students.

There are those who knew her well who go as far as to say that she eliminated the word *impossible* from her vocabulary and replaced it with one much more to her liking—a word that stood her in good stead when she found herself face to face with the seemingly impossible: "OR-GAN-I-ZA-TION! We must get organized!"

Said one of her former colleagues, "Talk about getting organized . . . first, she would confront the problem in order to determine just exactly what the problem was. To get to the heart of the problem, she would try to find out how others might of dealt with it in the past; then, she would research and assemble all the materials necessary to solve the problem. Having done that, she would work on it intensely—she did everything with great intensity—until the problem was solved. She used this approach with everything, especially with something that would help her students learn—anything that would train them to become educated men and women. On that score, she always brought to mind something Mark Twain said: 'Training is everything! The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education.' If anybody could turn an American-speaking cabbage into a French-speaking cauliflower, JVP could and would do it; there are any number of French-speaking cauliflowers out there who have JVP to thank for it."

If concern for her students, their training and education were Jeanne Varney Pleasants' magnificent obsession, it would help to explain why she, a phonetician trained in French Literature, Linguistics and Comparative Linguistics at the University of Paris and Greek at the University of California, would become a pioneer in developing audiolingual techniques in foreign language teaching, would establish the first Barnard and Columbia language laboratories in 1954, and become director of the Columbia language laboratory from 1955-1969, a time during which it was considered to be one of the best in the country.

In addition, she gave many lectures and laboratory demonstrations at conferences and meetings throughout the country; she was instrumental in highlighting what had been done, could be done, and would be done in language laboratories to help students learn languages.

The language laboratory at Columbia which she designed became, in the words of a former student, the "practice room where thousands of students actively worked and trained with programs designed and developed by Jeanne Varney Pleasants and her colleagues—all designed to help students perfect their French." Those nearest and dearest to Jeanne Varney Pleasants go as far as to say that, next to her family and students, the language laboratory was her prime interest in life, a useful thing—if properly used—to help students learn.

If concern for students is much talked about today, even more talked about is the issue of teaching. For Jeanne Varney Pleasants the issue of teaching was simple enough: teaching's existence was due to students; without them, there would be no need for teachers.

Said one of her former students, "Whenever Professor Varney Pleasants 'looked over' something I did—no matter how small—her corrections were meticulous, thought out, and very constructive. There were hundreds of such incidents . . . when we discussed her suggestions, she was very 'serious' about her job and the responsibilities of her profession; she was a professional in every sense of the word. I admired her integrity, her enthusiasm, her sense of humor, her understanding, and her love of people, especially her students; she was always willing to 'lend a hand.' She was patient, kind, and very demanding; her students adored her."

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said something to the effect that teachers can only highly serve their students—and society—when they aim not to drill but to create . . . and, by concentrated fires, set the hearts of their students on flame. Was Jeanne Varney Pleasants one of the few who succeeded in setting the hearts of her students on fire?

There is no greater tribute to a teacher, perhaps no more convincing evidence of a heart on fire, than to have a former student declare, "I became very interested in language laboratories and designed and set up several in the course of my career. I learned a great deal from Professor Pleasants, both in knowing her and working with her. Her knowledge and expertise in educational techniques were superior, and she shared her knowledge most generously and freely with me and all of her students."

To the colleagues and the many students who knew her, Jeanne Varney Pleasants was a professional in every sense of the word, but what of the private, personal side of this public educator? What was Jeanne Varney Pleasants like as a person?

If it is true—as some theorize—that a teacher, *any* teacher, teaches herself or himself first and the subject secondly, then undoubtedly, hundreds of former students already know the private Jeanne Varney Pleasants.

"What was Jeanne Varney Pleasants like as a person?" repeated Doris-Jeanne Gourevitch who, at the age of 17 and a student at Hunter College, first met Jeanne Varney Pleasants while enrolled in her phonetics course. "She was a perfectionist and demanded high standards from everyone around her; she loved people, loved music, loved reading. She was

interested in everything; she loved the theatre, loved the movies . . . She was a wonderful cook and, at Thanksgiving and Christmas, often invited students and friends—who were alone in New York—for dinner . . . I seem to be saying she was a perfect human being. No, that's not true; she was human with all the insecurities, strengths, and weaknesses common to us all, only hers were felt more intensely, perhaps. . ."

Her only son, Bernard Varney, has many memories of his mother. Perhaps, one of the most telling is the following: "As her son, I always thought my mother was rather special. But, during her last few years, when I had to do all of her corresponding and telephoning, I was truly moved and awed by the depth of feeling her friends and students had for her—the many who felt compelled to express how much she had changed their lives."

In concluding our tribute to Jeanne Varney Pleasants, a person who filled her life with a cornucopia of achievements and accomplishments, we are tempted to wonder, "Yes, but . . . was she happy?

"In order for a person to be happy in their work," said John Ruskin, "three things are needed: they must be fit for it; they must not do too much of it; and, they must have a sense of success in it."

There is no doubt that Jeanne Varney Pleasants was fit for the work that occupied her until the day she died. Educated at prestigious universities, she shared her knowledge, understanding, and expertise with students and colleagues at the renowned schools where she taught, the conferences and meetings she frequented, and the many books and articles she wrote; yet, she was not entirely overwhelmed by it all and made time for family—the son, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren whom she adored—and the many friends, students, and colleagues she so cherished.

As for Ruskin's last ingredient of happiness, namely, a sense of success in her work, permit us to re-phrase the famous words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as Jeanne Varney Pleasants might have thought his poem should end: The lives of great heroic figures all remind me/I can make my life sublime/and, in departing leave behind me/students with their hearts on fire./

We end our tribute to Jeanne Varney Pleasants at the point where we began. In the musical, "Cinderella," lyrical tribute is paid to the Impossible: it is impossible for a plain yellow pumpkin to become a golden carriage; impossible for a prince and a country bumpkin to fall in love and marry; and, four white mice will never become four white horses—such falderal and fiddle-lee-dee, of course, is impossible . . . but, as the song reminds us, in the end, impossible things are happening every day because some people ("incurable dopes") just don't believe what "sensible people" say is impossible.

Jeanne Varney Pleasants must have been one of those rare individuals who, when confronted with the seemingly impossible, replied, "Impossible? Impossible things, my dear, are happening every day!"