

SHE MADE A DIFFERENCE

BY DONALD HECHT

Perhaps because we were all so young, most of our teachers looked so old - old before their time in their black crepe dresses, and laced-up black shoes and attitudes. Yet, to this seeming rule, there was a notable exception. A clue as to whom this special person was can be found between the green leatherette covers of my PS 105 "graduation" autograph book. You know, the book that was dated "until the kitchen sinks" and "Bear Mountain has cubs." As part of the ritual, we would ask six years worth of our teachers, who most often had no recollection of us, to add their pithy comments and signatures to our books for all posterity. The pages were signed by Mrs. Blesh, Mrs. Cahill, Mrs. Weeks and (even to this date) the anxiety and fear generating Mrs. Merlo - all amazingly bearing the identical first name of "Mrs." It was a total mystery as to what their first names were, let alone where they lived and if they had children. They seemingly appeared out of nothingness at the first bell and disappeared at the last. Yet there it was on the page reserved for my fifth grade teacher - "Fondly, Miriam Cramer." Not only a first name but, in lieu of "Best Wishes" or "Sincerely," the unheard of "Fondly."

My memories of Mrs. Cramer were more than fond. I had an immense crush on her and she, in turn, made me her "teacher's pet." It was only in recent conversations with rediscovered male classmates did I learn that each and all of them also believed that they were her favorite. What a woman. She charmed and inspired us all. It was Mrs. Cramer who introduced her students to the joys of traditional folk music, and the strains of "John Henry" and "The Erie Canal" were frequent sounds emanating from our classroom. Again, it was only in a recent conversation with one of my classmates that my eyes were opened to the fact that among these seemingly benign folk songs there were "suspect" labor and union songs which were being taught to us during the McCarthy era. It appears that our education transcended the three R's and facts about the main exports of Bolivia.

It was in Mrs. Cramer's class that I first discovered that learning can be a joyful thing; a lesson well learned which stayed with me for a lifetime. It was Mrs. Cramer who instilled in me a love and enthusiasm for science, inscribing my autograph book "To Donald, a fine scientist and a bright fellow!" How crushing it was when I was promoted to Mrs. Week's sixth grade class instead of Mr. Gimpelson's who was the unofficial school science teacher. Was this perhaps the defining moment which made law my profession and relegated my love of science to an avocation? While many years have passed between the fifth grade and my current reflective thoughts of Mrs. Cramer, it becomes increasingly apparent that, of all the many teachers I've had, she made one of the most significant contributions to my education. I will be forever grateful.