

Nelée's Service – October 12, 2010

My name is Kathy Richman, and I was lucky enough to meet and make friends with Nelée when I came to teach French at Stanford. It is a tremendous honor to represent the tribe of French instructors in this celebration of Nelée's life. We're a quirky bunch, with many different styles and strengths. But any teacher worth her salt aspires to do what Nelée did: welcome students to a different language and culture, and inspire them to do their very best to master the keys to a new world. Nelée approached teaching the way she approached life overall. She saw the very best in people, and that let us, her students and her friends, be our best selves. Nelée was an overwhelmingly positive person. The harshest thing I ever heard her say was "That's crummy." Or maybe, if pressed, "That's really crummy."

Before I came to Stanford in 2004, I had heard about Nelée for 10 years -- "Mme Langmuir this" and "Mme Langmuir that." A close friend in graduate school had studied French with Nelée here and remembered her as one of the very best at Stanford. Her memories of Nelée's class reveal a lot.

The first had to do with my friend wanting to say that she had strep throat. Only in language teaching is "circumlocution" considered a positive thing. If we teach well, our students feel confident and playful enough to get their idea across. So, in Nelée's typically lively, relaxed class, my friend got around her vocabulary problem by saying that her throat looked like the flag of Japan. That is success for a French instructor.

The second story involves what was perhaps Nelée's most remarkable gift: her ability to connect with all sorts of people and bring together people who might never have met. This talent carried over into the classroom, too. My friend recalls Nelée

giving her and a young man in the class a “special assignment” to see a film together. Off they went, obedient students, and there was Nelée at the movie, sitting 3 rows behind them, making sure that all went well, then politely waving goodnight at the end. They completed the special assignment and, indeed, wound up dating for a few years. Twenty years later, she was still in touch with both of them.

With stories like these, I just had to meet this “Mme Langmuir.” Nelée immediately welcomed me into her sparkling world of humor and warmth. She wove a rich, dense fabric among students, friends, colleagues, and strangers -- though no one stayed a stranger for very long. Even in her hospice room, which felt more like a salon, Nelée was still bringing people together and introducing friends. With her enormous heart, Nelée taught by example, in class and out. The greatest professional compliment I’ve ever been paid was that my teaching style resembled Nelée’s and that maybe some day I would be as successful and beloved a teacher as her. When I teach, I keep weaving people together, too, expanding the community Nelée created. The fabric she began continues on in us, and we are here together to remember her work and to say thanks.