

Marguerite Navarrete: A Teacher Ahead of Her Time

written by Mike Sonksen | October 12, 2016



Some people are so influential and instrumental in our development that we do not even recognize their magnitude until they are gone. I first realized this when my grandfather died in 2002. A huge core of my value system, attitudes about life and personality came from him. This piece though is not about my grandfather. I have written and spoken about him on many occasions. This essay is a tribute to my 3rd and 4th grade teacher, Marguerite Felice Navarrete. The seeds she planted in me over 30 years ago continue to sprout and there are not enough kind words to express how exemplary her teaching skills were and my deep gratitude to her.

Ms. Navarrete, as we called her, was an award-winning teacher and highly skilled in her vocation. She worked at three schools in the ABC Unified School District in Cerritos and Hawaiian Gardens from 1974 until her retirement in 2010. I was enrolled in her class for two years in a row at Patricia Nixon Elementary, which was the first of three schools she taught at. I was blessed enough to have her two years consecutively because I was with a cohort of students that all stayed together over those two years because she had been so successful with our class. In my third grade year, it was combination class of grades two and three. In the following year, it was a combination of grades three and four.

The UCLA Writing Project

The summer before I entered Ms. Navarrete's class she was one of the Fellows in the distinguished "UCLA Writing Project." Founded in 1977, this annual 4-week program mentors teachers in a number of techniques on how to teach all aspects of writing. Each year hundreds of teachers from all academic levels apply for the program and only a select few are chosen. One of their core concepts is that teachers must learn to be great writers themselves in order to teach the craft. It is a testament to her veracity as a teacher that she was selected to participate in this program. As one of her students, I can testify that she effectively shared with us all of her knowledge about writing and self-expression.

I entered Ms. Navarrete's class in the 3rd grade in the fall of 1982, just a few months after her time in this program. She was a charismatic teacher that inspired us every single day. I remember her mentioning UCLA and how she had studied there, but obviously at 8 years old I had no idea about how influential and groundbreaking the program that she was enrolled in was. After I got my Masters' degree about 30 years later, I learned about the UCLA Writing Project and its storied history.

I remember doing a lot of writing in the two years I studied with Ms. Navarrete. We kept journals religiously, wrote many short essays, brainstormed, created clusters and did free writes. She taught us a strategy called, "the Power Paragraph." She also taught us reading strategies and applied them in class when we read Shakespeare. We read *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar* and *A Comedy of Errors*. She taught us how to read these texts by breaking each section up into small chunks and we would read it as a class. She made sure we understood everything. There were some that thought she was crazy to teach Shakespeare to 3rd and 4th graders, but she knew exactly what she was doing.

To make a long story short, her teaching skills were so incredible that our class was on television. We were featured in a segment on a local ABC show called, "Eye on LA." The word had quickly spread around our school, the district and Southern California about what Ms. Navarrete was doing with our class. I still remember the day when the camera crew came to our classroom. They filmed her teaching and also interviewed many of the students. I watched the segment when it aired back in 1984, but I do not have a videotape copy of it. Perhaps one day I can come across the footage, but for now the memory is firmly embedded in my mind.

Years later when I was in graduate school at Cal State L.A. in Dr. Christopher Harris's class, "English 504," I studied writing theorists like Mike Rose, Peter Elbow and Don Murray. I learned about how in the 1970s, these thinkers and several other writing theorists revolutionized teaching writing. I also learned that UCLA and their Writing Project program had been one of the epicenters of this because of Professors there like Mike Rose. After learning about Peter Elbow's ideas about free writing, I realized that I had already been exposed to these exact concepts from Ms. Navarrete in the 3rd and 4th grade. She figured out how to take these ideas and work them into our curriculum. There was a collective consciousness around America of progressive writing teachers during this time and she was at the forefront applying these ideas with us.

The Spirit of Los Angeles

I was in her class from the fall of 1982 to the spring of 1984. The spirit of the Los Angeles Olympics was in the air. We would often talk about Southern California and current events. I even remember her showing us a short documentary about "Being Chicano." Our class was very multicultural and she epitomized the optimistic spirit of not only the 1984 L.A. Olympics, but the collective consciousness that Southern California was becoming during the era of Mayor Tom Bradley. Her persona epitomized the spirit of Los Angeles and

multiculturalism.

One of the highlights of my second year with her as a 4th grader was a class field trip we all took to UCLA. My mom took the day off from her own teaching job in Long Beach and came with our class. We toured the campus and had a magical day there. That was the day I decided I wanted to attend UCLA and sure enough, 8 years later I did.

In the fall of 1992, I entered UCLA as a freshmen. This was the first big dream of mine that came true. Furthermore, this was also the period in my life where I decided I wanted to become a writer. I began writing poems about the city, neighborhoods and the social issues following the 1992 Rodney King Rebellion. Though I had written poems way back in Ms. Navarrete's class and had enjoyed writing essays and poems in high school, it was really my freshmen year at UCLA where I took the initiative and started writing earnestly. It all unfolded very quickly and before I knew it, I was filling up multiple notebooks with poems, essays and various rants. The concepts she had planted in my consciousness early, manifested in a big way during this time.

I had excellent English teachers in high school and I even kept in touch with a few of them in the following years; nonetheless I never kept in touch with Ms. Navarrete after I graduated from elementary school in 1986. It was not that I did not want to keep in touch with her, it was just that at such a young age, I was not as conscious of staying close with former teachers. Nonetheless, I have thought about her many times over the years and even looked her up on the internet in 2010, but I never did make contact with her.

A Trailblazer Ahead of Her Time

In early June 2016, a friend of mine from my elementary school days that I have not seen in 15 years sent me a text message saying that Ms. Navarrete had just died. She was only 66 years old. I never did get a chance to thank her for all of her help and inspiration. She planted the seeds in me so early that I did not even realize that I owe so much of my writing and teaching career to her. The values and techniques she taught me were so deeply embedded that they were second nature. I had been practicing them and living them for so long that perhaps they were even taken for granted.

As I mentioned above, after studying some of the history of Writing Theory in English 504 in 2013, I began to realize just how groundbreaking Ms. Navarrete was. I knew way back when I was in her class that she was great, but now I realize how she was among an elite group of trailblazing educators pushing forward new ideas about writing. Moreover, she was doing this with us in the 3rd and 4th grade. She made writing fun.

Years later when I had moved away from home for the first time and was attending UCLA, I remembered all of the early writing techniques she taught me and I began to write compulsively. By the time I was 23 in 1997, I was a published poet and my work was being read across the Los Angeles basin. Around this same time, I started freelancing as a journalist and by my mid-20s, being a writer was a central layer of my identity.

Flash forward to June 2016, I heard about her passing just in time to attend Ms. Navarrete's funeral. It was held at Rose Hills Memorial Park and I saw several teachers from my elementary school there. I had been out of touch with all of them since at least 1986, but ended up speaking to my first grade teacher for close to an hour at the reception afterward. There was even a brief open mic at her service and I said a few impromptu words. I was looking for other students that had been in my class with her, but I did not see any. There were other former students, but it seemed as if they were from her later years.

I came to find out from what everyone said that she was a private person. I affirmed this further when I was unable to find much about her personal information online. One of the only stories I could find on her was connected to the UCLA Writing Project and it was an article from when she was there in 1982. I was able to find out that she was born in December 1949 and that she graduated from Lynwood High School in 1968. She started teaching at Nixon Elementary in 1974 and was there until 1987 when she went to teach at Carmenita Middle School. I graduated from Nixon in 1986 and never spoke to her again, though I had thought about her hundreds of times, especially after I really embraced writing in the 1990s. I always meant to get in touch with her.

Goodbye to a Steel Butterfly

Following Carmenita, she went to Fedde Middle School in Hawaiian Gardens in the late 1990s and taught there as well. She retired in 2010 and eventually passed away on May 30, 2016. One of Ms. Navarrete's longtime colleagues from her days at Carmenita, RoseEllen Shea extolled Ms. Navarrete in an online post: "She was large in the lives of many, loud in her quiet, child-like in her wonder, a believer in magic beans, a steel butterfly, a storyteller unparalleled, a lioness for kids, a kind tinker for those who live in the land of misfits and broken toys, a firecracker, a belly laugher, and I got to be her friend."

Similar to the sentiments expressed above by RoseEllen Shea, I am grateful that I got to be her student. There are not enough words available to ever really properly pay tribute to her. I will always regret that I never did have a chance to speak to her again or thank her for all she did for me, but I will continue to pay it forward. I am now not only a poet and journalist, but I have been teaching English for a decade and I currently teach 11th and 12th graders AP English, Journalism and Creative Writing. I hope to be half the teacher Ms. Navarrete was.