

MARGRET KLESSIG '64
A Late Bloomer

By Lisa Vihos
 Director of Alumni Relations

“Older people who have an opportunity to attend college and don’t should have their heads examined.” Those words were spoken 46 years ago by Margret Klessig and quoted in a Sheboygan Press article dated May 29, 1964, just two days before her graduation from Lakeland College. Her bachelor’s degree in elementary education came a mere 26 years (and eight children) after she began her education at Lakeland – then Mission House – in the fall of 1938.

Klessig is a shining example of the concept of lifelong learning. Still an avid reader, she celebrated her 90th birthday on June 7, which her family celebrated in Cleveland, Wis., at Saxon Homestead Farm, the dairy farm where she and her husband, Eddie, (who passed away in 2006), made their life together for six decades.

The daughter of Austrian immigrants, Margret Kraft came to the U.S. with her parents in 1923 when she was not quite three. She grew up in Sheboygan, the middle of the three sisters, and graduated from Central High School in 1938. Her father was a doctor and he and his wife enjoyed the company of other expatriates in the area, key among them Joseph Bauer and his wife. Bauer taught German and philosophy at the college from 1923 into the early 60s. He was the one who encouraged Klessig to attend Mission House.

She spent only one year at the school at that time, but that was just long enough to have been selected as the first May Queen and to have made numerous friends and bonds with her professors. She also remembers fondly her first boyfriend, D. Frank Grether '42, a football player. “I didn’t know a thing about football. I didn’t even know what position he played. But Frank was a wonderful person who loved nature.”



After 1939, Klessig’s life took a number of unexpected twists. She left Sheboygan to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Nursing. There, she met Eddie and announced her intention to be married after completion of her third year of school. The director of the School of Nursing told her that if she was going to marry, she had to resign from school. Thus, she abandoned her formal schooling, married

Eddie and started a new life as the wife of a dairy farmer.

Klessig kept busy as a devoted mother, taking care of her large family. Her third child, Conrad, was born with Down Syndrome and she was desperate to find a way to support him educationally. She wrote letters to local newspapers in search of families in a similar situation. Through this effort, she met other mothers and formed a group that began to advocate for children with special needs, ensuring proper schooling and care for them through the school district.

Klessig’s daughter, Pauline Senno, remembers her mother’s determination when it came to Conrad’s education, “Mom had infinite patience and love; she treated Connie like all the rest of us. He had chores. He had a role in the family. He was not hidden away. Her example made all of us kids

more sensitive to other people who were in need, people who were the underdog.”

Klessig’s life was full, but as her children grew, she felt that something was missing. She wanted to go back to school to learn about how children learn. Filled with trepidation, she approached Lakeland and was referred to professor of education, Roland Koyen. “He was interested in my situation, and he gave me enormous encouragement.”

The college accepted her credits from her first Lakeland experience, and she returned to college in her late 30s. “I thought, ‘My goodness those kids are smart.’ I tried not to say a peep. They tolerated me. I admired all my teachers and learned that sociology is an amazing field of study, and that world literature and drama were utterly fascinating.”

All humility aside, Klessig was a dedicated and hard-working student who made the Dean’s List for academic excellence during her first semester. Not unlike many adults who decide to complete or begin their educations later in life, Klessig’s story underscores the fact that when an older adult returns to college, the entire family must get involved. With an understanding spouse, a mother who played a huge role in holding down the fort and older children who could help with the younger ones, Klessig was able to realize her dream of becoming a teacher. “I became well known as the prototype for the woman who had a family, who went back to school, and in spite of all the difficulties involved in this, got a degree. They always said I was a late bloomer!”

After graduating from Lakeland, she earned a master’s from UW-Milwaukee and embarked on a 19-year teaching career, 15 of those years at Pigeon River Elementary School in Sheboygan working with fifth-graders. “Every child has something to share, something to offer. This is what I so loved about teaching, being able to ignite the spark that is present in every child.”

While Klessig may have been a late bloomer, she was also ahead of her time. She intuitively understood the theory of multiple intelligences long before it was articulated in 1983 by Harvard educational theorist Howard Gardner. Back in the mid-1970s, Klessig was successfully incorporating many learning modalities into her classroom. Sheboygan business owner, Kevin Hoffman, remembers his experience in her classroom: “Mrs. Klessig taught a unit on Christopher Columbus by having us write, direct and perform our own play about him. She also had us do things like write letters to Washington to save the wolves.” Klessig’s method not only



taught necessary writing skills, but also helped her students be more aware of social issues and the political system.

Klessig’s closest co-workers at Pigeon River in the early seventies were two young men, John Guse and Gregg Schwarz, who each remember her as an inspiration in their early years of teaching. Guse remembers, “In Margret’s classroom, everything was for a cause; she always had the kids writing letters to senators. She was so friendly, a free-spirit. She wanted the best for all people, and she cared very much about nature.”

Klessig quietly retired from teaching at age 60 with no fanfare. She did not tell her friends she was leaving, but quietly slipped away at the end of the school year in 1983. In the ensuing years, she has enjoyed her family, her dogs, her garden, good books and plenty of time to “unscramble her house,” as she put it. Near the front door of her Cleveland farmhouse, Klessig keeps a small sign that says, “Dissent Protects Democracy.” She describes herself as a “pacifist and progressive leftist.”

She speaks eloquently about how all change comes from the ground up, not from the top down. Her lifelong pursuit of knowledge and her enthusiasm for education – whether for parents of special needs children, for her students at Pigeon River, or for herself – make her life an example of that theory in practice.

“I was delighted in being a housewife for the first twenty years of my adult life, but in the next 20 years, I focused on what I really enjoyed: I loved teaching. I wasn’t

only a wife and mother. The kids have said that I am such a good example for them, and that learning never stops. You just keep on learning.”

To this day, Klessig is proud of what she accomplished and how her alma mater has evolved. “Whenever I see anything about Lakeland in the newspaper, I’m very proud to see how the school has expanded, not only nationally, but internationally.”

The life and educational journey of Margret Klessig reminds us that it is never too late to learn something new; it is never too late to blossom. 🌸