

In the Beginning.....

By Marian Arkin

OK. I feel like a long distance runner—the English Department’s most senior, no wait a minute, longest-at-LaGuardia faculty member (there are a minute few older in years than I). I came to LaGuardia in the Winter Quarter of 1971. (We had a quarter system then and for about 20 years. Four quarters—ten weeks in each quarter. Each period 70 minutes long.) 2004-5 marks my thirty-third year at the College.

When I began teaching at LaGuardia the College was 3 months old and had just completed its first quarter. I was hired by George Groman, an eccentric English professor and chairperson of the Language and Culture Department. I’ll never forget my interview in his office on the 4th floor of the Main building. His desk was in front of a window from which you could see the #7 line and a by-the-hour hotel underneath the elevated tracks. His desk was in front of the window and a chair was by the desk. “Sit down Miss Arkin,” he said, looking up at me for a second and pointing at the chair. That was the last time he looked at me for the 30 minutes of that interminable interview. At one point he began looking out of the window, and seemed to be focusing on something perhaps important happening outside, so I said to him, trembling: “Dr. Groman,” (we always called him Dr. Groman to his face and George behind his back), is something the matter outside?” “Oh, no; oh no” he responded, looking at me for another second very uncomfortably and cleared his throat. We quickly finished the interview and I left. I was certain I had blown it but got a call the next day from Lotte, his loyal and much brow beaten secretary, that I had been hired as an adjunct lecturer to teach two course of Basic Composition. I was later to learn that George was often uncomfortable and always remote. He was, however, a brilliant leader with, dare I say, remarkable judgment, if one looks at the roster of faculty hired by him—people like Gil Muller and Harvey Wiener but also Alan Berman and Cecilia

Macheski, Ana Maria Hernandez and Terry LaNoue; Roberta Matthews and the infamous Flora Mancuso.

Actually I had been recruited by Harvey, the Director of Composition, whom I met at Brooklyn College, where we were adjuncts in the English Department. Harvey went on to fame and fortune as a prolific writer of textbooks as did Language and Culture's Deputy Chair, Gil Muller. The two of them wrote and piloted the first English courses at LaGuardia—Basic Composition, The Novel, The Short Story and I got to pilot the first Introduction to Literature. There was one other member of the faculty, Jonathan Peters, and a woman I was never to meet but whom I was hired full-time to replace.

How or why I got hired to a full-time line is a story in itself. You need some background. LaGuardia in 1971, '72, '73 was a College of the counter culture. It was begun by a man in his late 20s with a vision and a keen ability to inspire experimentation. He recruited young people from all over who had an ideological commitment to the nontraditional student and finding innovative ways of teaching them. From the beginning, many of the programs and individual courses were interdisciplinary and collaborative. For example, we had courses called Intensives which, like expresses, were 9-5 for a week with a one-hour a week follow-up and were often “intensely” political. We took students on trips; brought in speakers; team taught. One faculty brought students to her upstate home to study the outdoors. Art, politics and protest began as an Intensive. I was encouraged to write the first women's literature course at LaGuardia, in 1973 (I think it was one of the first at a community college in the country), to create a writing center in 1974 (We're 30!!!!!!), and create a course built around the concept of collaborative learning—peer-tutoring—in 1975. We were all encouraged to “think outside the box,” to do new things, and we were supported, by George and by what was a very enlightened administration. Many of the early faculty had never held full-time jobs anywhere else. Many were hippies, anti-war protestors. We were flower children, still in our 20s, looking to

save the world and fall in love. Romance was in the air, and the smell of pot was in the halls. The woman I was hired to replace went too far. She was teaching a “process” paper—you know, how to do something. One of the best ways to learn is to model, right? She decided to model a process paper, so she brought in some weed and asked her students to follow her example and write a paper on how to roll a joint. The students, counter culture themselves—people who dropped out of college to protest, avoid the draft, go to Vietnam; women who were returning to school after raising a family—appreciated her efforts but the administration did not. Pot was in the halls but NOT tolerated in the classroom.

Harvey observed me before making the final decision to hire me full-time. I was told that he really liked technology in the classroom so I brought in a tape recorder with songs to inspire student writing. He was so impressed with my high tech skills that I got the job. I have to admit, however, that I was ambivalent. My plan was to be an adjunct while I finished my dissertation. (I was teaching at three CUNY schools at the time.) I didn’t see myself as settling down. However, the spirit of the place, and the huge salary of \$12,700, convinced me to accept the job, for what I thought would be, at most, two years.

1972 was my first full-time year. We were not English then but were called Language and Culture because we were comprised of several other areas—music, speech, foreign languages, philosophy. If you put together the Humanities Department and the English Department you can imagine what our department looked like. There were five of us in English—four men and me. There were six (I think it’s six) others, three in foreign languages, Ana Maria Hernandez, Max Rodriguez, and Flora Mancuso; one in philosophy, Neil Rossman; and two in art, Terry LaNoue, who headed the area and Peter Brown, recently retired.

It was fun being in a department with people from other areas. But it also meant that our needs weren’t always taken care of. George was a good daddy, but he had too many children. And the next year he

acquired even more children by taking on developmental English. You might wonder where developmental English was if it wasn't in English. Well, we were untraditional in many ways, but traditional in this way. Developmental English was seen as a pre-college course and thus belonging with the other basic skills area, Communication Skills. People in that department, which was located across the street in what was called the Annex, taught both Reading and Writing skills. Sarah Barber, Red Barber's daughter, was their main "writing" person and one day approached George and suggested her little fiefdom join the English area. I'll always remember the day George called me into his office and asked me what I thought of the idea. I was perplexed. Why not? I thought. It seemed a no brainer. "Of course Basic Writing belongs in English," I told him. Maybe he was being an elitist—we don't "do" developmental—or maybe, always political, he was thinking ahead, to how big this would make English in comparison with the rest of Language and Culture, how unbalanced the department would then be. That's what happened, of course. Basic Writing came to the English area of Language and Culture, along with Sarah Barber, and we grew and grew. By the time we split with the Language and Culture Department there were nine of us. (Sorry Sandy; it was never the Magnificent 7, although that's a great image.) We were half the department and deserved an office suite of our own. We obviously convinced the College, which voted in our favor in a very close election in which many have claimed to have cast the deciding vote. The rest is history. Roberta Matthews, our Director of Comp, was elected our first chairperson. George, who didn't want English to leave, remained chair of Language and Culture which was renamed the Humanities Department.

The English Department has always been very rare and very special and I think it's in part because of the way we started. Many of us, while we wake up in the morning in circa 60-year-old bodies, are hippies in our hearts and in our minds. We've never seen ourselves as "grown-ups"; we still distrust people over thirty; we still experiment, teaching new subjects in new ways. We consistently become the leaders in the College. We write prodigiously; we grade; we give

papers and workshops; we grade. We spend too much of our time grading. That fact certainly hasn't changed. But we've always known how to celebrate. That fact hasn't changed either. Best of all, we still like each other. We're colleagues and many of us are friends. (And there are those who are more than friends.) As I said the other day, I know of no other department like ours.