



## WESTRIDGE SCHOOL

### **2021 Mary Lowther Ranney Distinguished Alumna Award**

**Acceptance Speech, March 13, 2021**

***Jossalyn Turner Emslie '83***

When I first arrived at Westridge, I went to the school library. I knew I would find a kindred spirit there, because how could I not? Mrs. Patagalia became my first friend and remained so as long as she was at the school. She allowed me to sprawl on the floor, reading her latest gift. She listened while I gushed about books. I was sure she had read EVERY book in that library, and we had long satisfying talks about them. She introduced me to many books, some of which became forever favorites. Some books that had “Westridge School” stamped along the spine lived on my bookshelves at home for decades before I quietly returned them. A few books with that stamp still live on my bookshelves. Mrs. Patagalia taught me that there was no age differences to kindred spirits—the same thing that spoke to me at ten could resonate with someone 50 years my senior.

In 6th grade I was enthralled by *Homer’s Odyssey*—the Fitzgerald translation that reads like true poetry—and while Mrs. Stice was reading something else to the class, I read deadly epic adventures behind my upraised desk. One day she asked me if my book was better than hers, and I told her, “YES!” So she took my book and read *The Odyssey* aloud to the class. She had a lovely reading voice and I was in heaven, because Homer was meant to be spoken. After that, we spent a lot of lunchtimes together, discussing the pantheon of Greek gods and their myths. She introduced me to *The Sword in the Stone* from which I fell head over heels into the Arthurian canon, quests, knights, chivalry, Camelot, Mallory, Wales, standing stones.

Mrs. Stice taught me that every story was only just a starting point. From that beginning, I could learn about the history, the culture, endless numbers of things that could spin off. Those discussions were when I learned about teaching myself.

In the history department, Mrs. Sidle and Allen introduced me to sociology and cultural anthropology and modern literature. I was able to deep-dive into ancient history with Mrs. Lonergan and medieval history with Mrs. Kevles. Betty Cole taught me eye-opening lessons about seeing life through others’ eyes.

Class trips to Joshua Tree, Yosemite, and the Colorado River, taught me that taking girls into the outdoors can bond them with a powerful glue.

Mrs. Terry taught me quilting, and also the lesson that PE teachers can love handcrafts.

Mrs. Scheel and Leslie Gray showed me ways that creative arts can be used for self-expression; and the incomparable Juanita taught me about how a teacher can also teach about life.

In glee club, Ed Low taught me that music can be a social group activity, and that girls' voices making noise together can bond them.

In the drama department, Mr. Ogden taught me powerful resonant lessons about society's acceptance of women's voices—when they are spoken but not heard, or silenced; and that girls who strive to put together a cooperative project where all of the parts need to work in collaboration can learn more than from a lecture.

The English department taught me the joy of creating with the English language; being able to craft an irrefutable argument, to find the exactly perfect word, the perfect shade of meaning, the way a writer can draw a reader along a line of reasoning as powerfully and irresistibly as a geometrical proof. Mrs. Gertmenian read and critiqued heaps and heaps of my creative writing—stories, poems, novellas, as I struggled with world-building and believable character arcs.

Mr. Ott showed me what it looks like when an adult recognizes a girl's need for individualized guidance and draws hard lines with consequences, but also has the vision to allow for variation from tradition.

So how do you make that into a life? For me, it looked like this.

I went to college and graduate school and medical school. I got degrees in the things I loved—English literature focusing on Jane Austen; biology focusing on California ecology; medicine. I did my medical training at L.A.'s county hospital, where my patient population was made up of the poor and uninsured, the homeless, undocumented persons, and gang members. I continue to work with needy populations, and much of my medical practice is teaching.

I had daughters. I formed a Girl Scout troop so that I could share with them all the things I loved. I figured that if it were done in a social group with their friends, they would accept and enjoy the experiences. Which, it turned out, worked for close to 20 years. All the things I wanted my girls to know, I studied until I could teach them. And I was able to draw from the lessons I had learned from really good teachers before me. My scouts hiked and camped, built fires, tied intricate and beautiful knots, scrambled up hillsides of Modelo Shale to find fossils of ancient ferns, sang in rounds, studied the ecosystems of southern California, traveled together across the country and the world, taught their skills to others, won awards, flew precision rockets, gained confidence, and grew up.

When they were planning their Scouting Gold Awards, one wanted to teach robotics. We approached Westridge with the idea and the school said, "YAY!" That year, the school had a Lower School robotics team coached by a 15-year-old, that trophied at state championships. That kid now designs the web for Disney.

Another wanted to teach rocketry. We approached Westridge with the idea and the school again said, “YAY!” The rocketry program started as an after-school club, then became an elective in the curriculum. The school’s team went to national championships in the NASA competition for high performance rocket design. That kid was part of a mini-wave of Westridge girls applying to engineering schools, and now she is an electrical engineer. When they started planning their lives for after girlhood, some asked me about medicine. So I created a summer internship for them. They shadowed me in my practice and with my physician friends in other specialties. They met with physician researchers, med students, hospital CMOs. Some of them were attending Westridge, and word got out. Westridge told me, “YAY,” about the summer program—here’s more interested students.

There’s a lot of data out there about the ways in which people mentor boys and men, and how it differs from how girls and women are mentored. And how boys and girls are taught to have different expectations about their efforts. Boys are rewarded for succeeding and being in front; girls are rewarded for fitting in and cooperating, and not leaving anyone behind. I’m not an expert on this, but I have a certain perspective from having spent my working life as a scientist, and in a male-dominated field, and I have a diamond-sharp lens with which to view it thanks to the lessons I learned at Westridge.

My own daughters learned different lessons at Westridge about the power of their voices than I did. But still, work needs to be done. I feel compelled to work with the girls who come into my hands, to open doors for them and show them how to open doors for themselves; to tell them truths about their power and what stands in their way, and about some of the ways they can express their knowing in the world, and ways in which they can and need to cherish their own learning and wholeness and joy.

The Ranney award is about a “dedication to lifelong growth and learning.” I am grateful to be recognized with this award, but I share it with the Westridge faculty who nurtured my learning and who gave so much to me during the time I passed through the school. I am sure that my love of learning was indelibly reinforced by the lunchtimes my Westridge teachers gave up to spend time with me lounging in their offices, discussing *Tess*, *The Little Prince*, where to buy my own Moh’s hardness kit, Jonathan Livingston Seagull.

Good teachers can teach a child to love learning. The best teachers show the child how to teach herself.

If I have a message, it is LEARN. And then, to share what you know with a young person.

And that brings me back around to Mrs. Patagalia and Mrs. Stice, who shared King Arthur with me when I was ten.

"The best thing for being sad," replied Merlin, "is to learn something. That's the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn."

Surgere Tentamus.