



WHY WE CHOSE TO HONOR MY MOM AND WHAT IT HAS MEANT TO MY FAMILY AND ME

By Monty Nielsen, Ed.D.

My mom, Neva Nielsen, '70, decided as a second grader that she wanted to be an elementary school teacher. Thirteen years hence, she became one! She mused later that she preferred teaching to housekeeping for someone else at the rate of \$3 per week! In 1936, teachers' salaries in rural Nebraska also were meager. From a monthly salary of \$40 the first semester and \$45 per month the second semester, she allocated \$10 per month for room and board, \$15 for a car payment and \$15-\$20 for other essentials.

The completion of normal training in high school had launched Neva into a teaching career that was just beginning, and soon it was necessary for her to attend summer school to earn eight or nine credit hours for the ongoing renewal of a three-year teaching certificate. Ultimately, the completion of a baccalaureate degree would be required to continue teaching in rural Nebraska, but that still was decades away.

Neva, like her five older and two younger siblings, plus her mother, all were products of a one-room, one-teacher, eighth-grade education. Routinely, she experienced a new and different teacher for each of the eight grades; disciplinary problems frequently were the main reason a teacher might stay only one year, Neva said. Nonetheless, she had many good role models among her eight elementary school teachers, in addition to an aunt who taught at the University of Washington in the 1930s and an older sister who also was a one-room, one-teacher in rural Nebraska, as her contemporaries.

So while Neva had graduated high school in 1934, she immediately began pursuit of her first teaching position without success for two years. It was the Great Depression — complicated by the Dust Bowl — and competition was fierce with as many as a dozen candidates for the same position, and most had previous teaching experience. But she persisted and secured her first teaching position in the fall of 1936. Through the remainder of the 1930s and most of the 1940s, she juggled teaching and the necessary pursuit of her baccalaureate degree.

Neva married Ervin Nielsen, a farmer and my dad, in 1947. She stopped teaching, raised our family and then resumed her formal education and teaching career in 1961. Following multiple summers of attendance at Kearney State College, which included the successful fulfillment of a student teaching assignment in the Kearney Public Schools, she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education Degree from KSC in August 1970, and in her words, "That was a very special day!"

Not uncharacteristically, when reflecting in retirement on her 30-year teaching career that started in 1936 and concluded in 1982, she said in a hometown newspaper interview, "I would not have traded it (teaching) for any other career that I know."

So, why did we choose to honor my mom? Most simply, she loved her profession and her clients — she was an elementary school teacher who understood from an early age the importance and value of elementary education for all children. She ate, drank and slept teaching! Plus, she never forgot those in her own family or the teachers, mentors and friends who encouraged and supported her as both a teacher and a student.

Like so many of her era, she made countless sacrifices to become and remain a teacher over the course of her humble career. Neva spent all of her teaching years sharing with her students — she was giving back to them what had been given to her as an elementary school pupil and then teacher.

The Neva Nielsen Elementary Education Scholarship Fund is our way of giving back to those at the University of Nebraska at Kearney who aspire to teach as she did, and the plaque on the wall is a lasting reminder of her commitment and dedication to teaching children.

Dr. Monty E. Nielsen vividly remembers being taught by his mother, alumna Neva Nielsen, in a one-room rural school in Nebraska. He received an undergraduate degree at the University of Nebraska at Kearney in 1971 and a doctorate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1981. Monty's wife, Dr. Anne S. Nielsen, '73, died in an automobile accident in Kansas on September 21, 2022. As University Registrar Emeritus, at Kansas State University, he now resides in Annapolis, Maryland.