

Chester's Own One in Two Million

Her classroom was a well-organized carnival of learning activities, a quiet but colorful explosion of knowledge triggered by first graders who never knew failure. The children came early and stayed late. They worked in a classroom where every day was like Saturday morning. They loved it. They loved her.

Chester County's own Martha Marian Stringfellow, and a member of The Up-To-Date Club, was more than one in a million---she was the one out of 2,222,000 public school teachers in America in 1971 to be named the National Teacher of the Year, symbolizing the very best in the teaching profession.

Mrs. Stringfellow was born in a rural area of Fairfield County, South Carolina, on October 12, 1914. After graduating from Mt. Zion High School in Winnsboro, she entered Winthrop College in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and earned a Bachelor of Science degree. Her quest for knowledge was lifelong; she received a Master of Education degree from Winthrop in 1971.

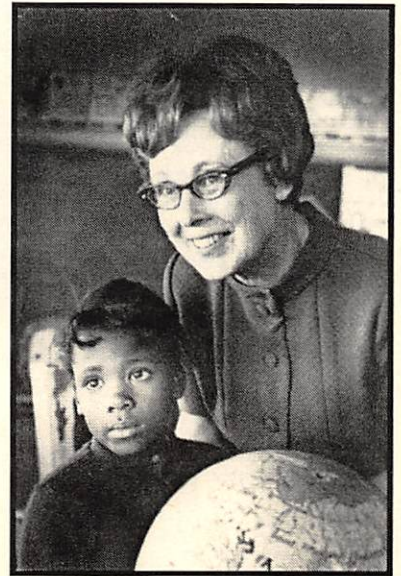
When Mrs. Stringfellow started teaching in 1937, she had four grades in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Fairfield County, kept the furnace going and hauled out the ashes, all for a monthly salary of \$85. This initial assignment conditioned her for the "new" approach of individualizing instruction. Her philosophy that each child is a unique individual requiring a unique curriculum was instilled early in her career.

In 1940, she married William Brawley Stringfellow, Jr., of Chester County, South Carolina. During the early lives of daughters Edith, Marion and Ann, Mrs. Stringfellow remained at home at Hillbright Farm, but she maintained continuity with her profession by substitute teaching in Chester County. After her children were mature enough, she returned to the classroom in 1963 to teach first grade at Lewisville Elementary School.

Mrs. Stringfellow's teaching methods and materials were unique and innovative for that time. Her classroom was a precursor of "Hands On" activities; puzzles, games, songs, even a tree house inside the classroom (built by her husband, "Mr. Billy") made learning inviting for her charges. What was also different about this gracious lady was the way she gave and received love and trust in a school where the majority of the students were black.

This manner of teaching moved her from the front of the room to the side of the individual child in need of help. "We have each child working on his level, at his own rate," she once said. "That way, we have no discipline problems, each child is involved, and the teacher is working with the children who need her, not lecturing in front of the room."

In 1970, Mrs. Stringfellow was chosen Teacher of the Year at Lewisville Elementary School. This honor set in motion her selection as Teacher of the Year for Chester County and subsequently for the State of South Carolina. Upon nomination by South Carolina Superintendent of Education Cyril B. Busbee for the 1971 National Teacher of the Year, Mrs. Stringfellow underwent observation for two days in her classroom, and she met with a panel of educators and laymen. In her philosophical presentation to the Awards Panel, she stated:



**Martha Marian Stringfellow
with one of her students**

"I believe that every child is different and these differences are normal. It is up to me as a teacher and the responsibility of all teachers to encourage and to give help whenever help is needed---to develop this child to the height of his potential, but most important to develop within this child a feeling of worth and a positive concept. Because each child must live in a world which is becoming progressively more complex in its technological, sociological and political demands, I feel it is my duty to help this child in obtaining information, solving personal problems, and using leisure time to the best of his ability for a full and happy life. Such a commitment will be reflected in comprehensive diagnostic procedures, a diversity of materials and methods, realistic and appropriate evaluation, and carefully planned procedures for providing for variations in learning rates, achievement levels, interests and goals."



**Martha Marian Stringfellow (L) with
First Lady Pat Nixon**

On Monday, April 19, 1971, Martha Marian Stringfellow was honored for her career achievements at the White House where Mrs. Richard M. Nixon presented her with the National Teacher Award before whirling television cameras and note-taking reporters. (Excitement was so great that teachers in Chester County left their classes unattended to watch the presentation on televisions set up in principals' offices!) Following the White House ceremony, Mrs. Stringfellow was escorted to Capitol Hill where she was presented by Congressman Tom S. Gettys of South Carolina's Fifth District. Mrs. Stringfellow's teaching accomplishments were featured in the May 4, 1971, edition of LOOK Magazine, between stories on Elvis and Twiggy.

Unlike today's Teachers of the Year who leave the classroom to crisscross the country with speaking engagements, Mrs. Stringfellow returned to her classroom to continue building inspirational fires within countless children in Chester County. Her legacy of warmth, uncommon competency, character and compassion continues to be emulated by teachers throughout America.

Margaret Hickson Britton

About the Author

Margaret Hickson Britton is the daughter of the Louise Cornwell Hickson, formerly of Chester County, and the late John Spottswood Hickson of Miami, Florida. She earned a B.S. and M.S. from Winthrop College. She and her husband, the late Roger Richard Britton, have five children. Mrs. Britton lives at 134 West End in Chester.