

As I remember Nancy

by Bernice Hauser
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Feisty, animated, blessed with charm, wit, intelligence, and a most contagious laugh, Nancy S. Van Vranken embodied the talents and characteristics of two irrepressible smart women, two very different role-models. One is the rebellious, patrician-born, outspoken, independent thinker Jessica Mitford, and the other is Elaine Stritch, actress, raconteur, singer, triumphant in her latest comeback and embodying a *joie de vivre* that is so uplifting and contagious. Nancy wore these characteristics with a cloak of graciousness and gallantry.

Though I did not know Nancy intimately, our paths crisscrossed professionally for a long time. I met Nancy about 25 years ago. She was active in the Association of Teachers in Independent Schools (ATIS), a respected tri-state teachers organization based in New York City. Nancy was an integral part of ATIS, having worked in many roles and many positions, and her presence, her articulateness, her capacity to get at the essence of a dilemma were apparent from the start. Nancy's mind was constantly overflowing with ideas to enlarge the scope of ATIS, with ways to enrich its offerings of workshops to educators and with plans for outreach, supports and collaboration with other professional groups that would encourage creativity and thinking outside the box. And though it is only in the professional realm that our paths crossed, this realm embraced a leadership style filled with humor, sensitivity, collaboration, encouragement, inclusion, and consensus, and -- for lack of any other word -- ACTION. Nancy saw dysfunctional and uninspiring science teaching everywhere and became a profound advocate for the subject of science and for all its constituencies and ramifications.

I, too, under ATIS' aegis, took on many leadership roles, but perhaps the one that I become somewhat renowned for, and the one that propelled me into Nancy's realm, were the talks and workshops that I had led for other educators in New York City on early childhood and primary science education, a field that was overlooked, devalued, and underrated by everyone. It took crises such as *Sputnik* and other global events to provoke Americans to look inward, to take stock, and deal with the so-called outrage at the state of American science education. Let it be known that I am not a trained science educator, nor did I major in science. What I was and am good at, really good at, is to study and understand my material, know my students, and thoroughly comprehend how they made sense of the world around them -- how they learned concepts from the integration of ongoing experiences and activities, how being active and hands-on are natural fits for young children, that talking aloud, sharing thoughts with your peers is their way of inquiry or getting validation, that young children have a healthy and natural curiosity about the world around them, that they want to know how things work, that they love exploring and taking things apart, albeit not always wanting to put them back together, that they need to do the same experiment several times so that it is not labeled "magical," that the world that these children inhabit is "science" with a big S, that you need not look further for material, issues, problems, equipment, activities -- it is all there for the taking. Did I have enough of a credible science education and background to be taken seriously? Perhaps. Did I call on learned science mentors and scientific resources to assist me in my quest and visions? You bet.

No one wanted to do science with young people in those days. Teachers did not trust themselves to impart the "right facts." They said they did not have the time, resources were severely depleted, basic subjects needed to be stressed, they had no labs, it was very messy, they had no help, and equipment was too expensive. In short, teachers were scared or reluctant to teach science unless they were licensed science teachers, and you most certainly didn't find these individuals in the nursery or primary divisions of a school. I won many awards, I authored and co-authored many scientific articles published in respected science publications, and I led many science workshops. But none of this would have been possible without Nancy's running interference.

Nancy happened to attend one of my science workshops for ATIS. At the end of the workshop she came up to me, introduced herself, and then congratulated me all the while quizzing me about my values, my scientific background, and my expertise. The encounter ended with Nancy's asking me whether I would like to present this "extraordinary" (her word) workshop or others at some science conventions. She had the ability to make me feel that I had accomplished something wondrous, that I had ventured where no one else had ventured. Nancy appreciated my quirky science renditions, my interdisciplinary approaches. She understood how my using all the children's senses reinforced on multiple levels the integration of the science material to a higher level of abstract thinking.

Nancy was no dilettante, no slouch in going after what she believed in as you can attest by listening to all the remarks that everyone is making today. I am indebted to her and to all my friends and colleagues at this conference who openly and warmly welcomed me and who also embraced my work in primary science. I am grateful to have been asked to share my thoughts about Nancy. It reinforces how vital, how necessary it is to have people dialogue with each other, shore up each other, and share innovative teaching and findings with each other. There is no substitute for having real-life mentors at your side and in your life. Due to my mentors' interventions and encouragement, a new world awaited me. For that I thank Nancy and all of you here today.

(Editor's Note: Bernice Hauser's reminiscences about Nancy Van Vranken were presented at a special session at the Twenty-Second Science, Technology, and Society Meeting (STS-22) at the Radisson Hotel, Baltimore, MD, 3 February 2007. Ms. Hauser regularly shares her ideas about teaching science to young children with readers of this Newsletter.)