

Jeanette M. Reuter, "The Maternal German"

By Paula E. Hartman-Stein, Ph.D.

It was shortly after her unexpected and untimely death in mid October 2006 when I learned that KSU psychology graduate students had bestowed the nickname, "The German," upon their beloved professor, Dr. Jeanette Miller Reuter.

From 1979 to 1983 I too was one of Jeanette's psychology graduate students. "The German," is an apt depiction of one aspect of her personality. Jeanette was a stoic most of the time, and she could exude a stiff and starchy manner. However, there are many other aspects of her personality for which she will be remembered.

Motherly and maternal are descriptors that come immediately to mind. Jeanette delighted in babies. She loved the smell and the feel of them, and her life's professional work was devoted to promoting the development of children throughout the world through her work with the Kent Inventory of Developmental Skills (KIDS). But Jeanette was also a maternal figure to many "older children," i.e., her undergraduate and graduate students, and that includes me. I hope that my recollections illustrate how one professor can impact a student, not only during graduate school, but throughout a lifetime.

From our first meeting in late summer, 1979, I sensed Jeanette's motherly, caring attitude toward me that deepened over the 27 years I had the privilege of knowing her.

Jeanette played multiple roles in my life. Depending upon the circumstance, she was my teacher, dissertation adviser, supervisor, research associate, co-author, confidante, counselor, grandmother figure to my son, and in later years, one of my dearest and closest of friends. I used to call her my mentor, but she did not like that term because she said it implied only giving and not receiving in return.

I met Jeanette shortly after I entered Kent State's doctoral program in clinical psychology after I had a master's degree from another university. During that initial meeting I knew Jeanette could teach me a great deal and support me emotionally when I needed her.

I recall how much I liked Jeanette's method of teaching her graduate class in child psychology. The reading list for her class was daunting, but we had a choice of how many articles to read and summarize. What a fair system! Our grade was determined by the amount of work and effort we were willing to put forth, reflecting Jeanette's view of how life ought to be.

Jeanette helped me to avoid minefields and climb up barriers encountered during graduate training. For example, when I did not receive my first choice of clinical placement in a child-oriented treatment center, it looked as though I had no option other than working in a setting for which I had no interest. In her characteristic unflappable and practical problem-solving style, Jeanette came up with an alternative solution. She developed a new clinical internship site, a health psychology placement at Akron General Medical Center, the first of its kind in an Akron hospital. Together we designed rotations in several medical specialty areas including rheumatology, endocrinology, neurology, cardiology, as well as in-patient psychiatry. With the support of Kent State as well as the Department of Psychiatry at the

hospital, Jeanette supervised me in a pre and post-doctoral program that was ground breaking and served to shape my career. Following training and licensure requirements, I worked at the medical center for 14 years as a health psychologist.

Jeanette was THE best dissertation advisor. She supervised my research on the impact of stress on diabetes in a consistently constructive manner, reading all manuscript revisions promptly. However, following the proposal meeting in the fall of 1981, Jeanette told me she doubted that I could collect my data in time to graduate in the spring of 1982. Her only negative comment increased my determination to graduate on time. One memorable anecdote: On the morning of my dissertation defense in early April 1982, someone called Kent Hall threatening to blow it up with a bomb at noon that day. Another professor, Mike Hirt, asked Jeanette what she was going to do. "Well I don't know what you are going to do, but Paula and I are leaving the building and going to Captain Brady's," she said, in that characteristically calm, stoic German manner.

Shortly following my graduation from Kent, I went through a dark time in my professional life. The Chief of Psychiatry at the local medical school made false allegations that would ostensibly prevent me from taking the psychology state licensure exam. It was the early 1980s, and apparently he viewed that my work in the medical arena encroached upon the turf and territory of the medical establishment. As my supervisor, Jeanette defended me at the State Board. She learned of the allegations right before we traveled together to Baltimore to present my dissertation research at a national conference. She wanted me to enjoy the weekend and so withheld her knowledge of the situation until after we returned home. "Paula, are you sitting down?" were her first words during her call the following Monday morning. Jeanette staunchly supported me not only for a few weeks while the allegation was found to be without merit but also for the following year when I brought a successful civil suit against the heinous psychiatrist so he would not bother me again or behave similarly toward other young professionals.

Jeanette taught me well about the most essential element of a good psychological assessment of a child or a frail older adult: corroborative interview data from a caregiver or family member. Using a somewhat similar methodology as in the design of the KIDS, Jeanette and I worked together in 1989 to develop *The Behavioral Competence Inventory*[®], a 106 item yes/no questionnaire that surveys the adaptive, positive behaviors that the frail adult can do in daily life. We later collaborated on research to validate the instrument, and it continues to be useful in designing treatment plans for memory impaired older adults.

Jeanette had progressive ideas about healthcare in America. We co-authored an article on integrating physical and psychological care for *The Independent Practitioner* that won an award as the best feature article of 1994 in the APA Division 42 publication.

Jeanette loved American politics. She read *The New Yorker* and the *New York Times* on a regular basis. I wish she could have lived to see the election of Barack Obama. She would have been both surprised and very pleased.

Besides our professional collaboration for many years after I graduated, I have countless warm personal memories of Jeanette and her husband Louie. My husband, son and I spent many pleasant Sunday afternoons in the summer with them at the lake near their home. On frosty Saturdays in winter Jeanette invited us to partake of her tasty black bean soup while we viewed the beautiful frozen lake and discussed books and politics. Whenever their own adult children were unable to come to the area for Christmas or Easter, the Reuters spent the day with my family. She brought a ring of vegetable-filled jello salad, clippings from magazines and newspapers and fascinating stories about the places and people they knew throughout the world.

Jeanette went through a dark, depressing time in her life for several years after her retirement when she felt bitterly betrayed and misunderstood. Louie turned to me once in desperation and helplessness. Although I supported her as best I could, what eventually helped Jeanette the most came as a surprise to me and to her family. Jeanette was a pragmatist throughout her life, revealing minimal interest in religious or spiritual topics. Shortly after she moved to Laurel Lake Retirement community, she began attending on a weekly basis "centering prayer" sessions that were led by another resident, Joe Fitzgerald, a devout Catholic. I had lunch with Jeanette and one of her other Catholic friends, Gerry Jones, exactly one week before she died. During what would be our final meeting, Jeanette said that the people at Laurel Lake with whom she had the most in common and to whom she felt the closest were the Catholics. My jaw dropped. This was the first time I learned of her new rich spiritual life. I wish we had the opportunity to talk in depth about what triggered this positive change and inner peace to her life.

Jeanette enjoyed knowing my own parents. She wrote to me in an email following my mother's death in July 2006 that she considered my mother a good friend. I will never forget the moment when she took my father by his shoulders during a visit with her and Louie in September 2006, one week before Louie would die. It was two months after my mother had died, and my father was grieving terribly. "Ed," she said, looking squarely into my Dad's eyes, "You just have to carry on without Pauline. You have no choice." Tears welled up in their eyes, and my Dad nodded, with no other words uttered. I could sense the profoundly deep understanding and intimate connection they had made.

Jeanette's influence continues in my life even after her passing. She taught me to not give up on my patients who show memory impairment. She encouraged me to write a proposal for a research grant for the retirement center where she lived that would bring learning opportunities and intellectually stimulating courses that promote cognitive fitness. One month after her death, I received the grant.

I miss Jeanette profoundly, especially when I am reminded of her at Laurel Lake. She was by far my most influential professor who became a member of my supportive circle of elders. I am forever grateful that she lives on in my work and in my psyche.

In this memorial I have recounted some of my personal memories with the knowledge that Jeanette was extraordinarily supportive and influential not only to me but also toward her children and grandchildren, toward countless students and faculty at Kent State and in far reaches of the world, as well as with new friends she made in her later years. She had the gift of a wise and caring mother of many children, who

could make each of them feel they were unusually special to her and at the center of her attention. I do not know how she did it, but she gave her time generously to all who needed her. And most importantly, Jeanette had more than enough love to go around for all of us.

Her family chose the following passage that was printed in the program at her memorial service. It beautifully sums up the essence of Jeanette Reuter's life and death:

“There is a land of the living

And a land of the dead

And the bridge is love,

The only survival,

The only meaning.”

Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*