

IN MEMORIAM

MARY ELLEN DURRETT

Dr. Mary Ellen Durrett, Professor of Home Economics, died on July 3, 1988, nearing the completion of her sixteenth year as Chairman of the Department of Home Economics at The University of Texas at Austin. She had planned to relinquish the chairmanship in August to return to full-time teaching and research. At the time of her death, she was actively pursuing a Fulbright Fellowship in order to permit her to accept an invitation to spend part of 1989 at the S.N.D.T. Women's University in Bombay, India.

Dr. Durrett was born on January 17, 1924 in Simsboro, Louisiana. She was the youngest child in a family with three older brothers. Her father, a businessman in northern Louisiana, died when she was eight years old. She was raised in a close family that taught her the importance of human bonds and mutual encouragement. She was a strongly religious person; those values were evident throughout the way she conducted her personal and professional life.

After graduating from Simsboro High School in 1939, she received her B.S. degree from Louisiana Polytechnic Institute (1942), her M.S. degree from Iowa State University (1947), and her Ph.D. from Florida State University (1957). She received the Distinguished Alumna Award from Florida State in 1985, presenting a speech entitled "Home Economics Reaching Out: Balance in Life" on the occasion.

Prior to coming to UT Austin, she taught home economics in high schools in Elkhart, Texas and Simsboro, Louisiana. After pursuing graduate study, she taught child development and family relationships at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (1947-1953), the University of Delaware (1953-1955), and San Jose State University (1957-1959, 1961-1970). Between 1959-1961, she served as a consultant to the Government of India as part of the International

Cooperation Administration headquarters at S.N.D.T. Women's University in Bombay. Her teaching and research perspectives were strongly influenced by this and other international experiences, and she continued to maintain many friendships throughout the world, especially in India, Korea, and Japan. She was always interested in human diversity and in the richness of humanity across cultural and ethnic lines.

She was a key person in the development of Project Head Start, serving as a consultant from 1965 to 1978, participating on evaluation teams in California, Illinois, Alaska, Guam, New Mexico, and Louisiana and directing Head Start training programs in California. Eveline Omwake, who served on the Governing Board of the National Association for the Education of Young Children with Dr. Durrett, told of her determination and dedication in serving children. During the early 1960's, Dr. Durrett was in Washington for an NAEYC Board meeting to discuss Project Head Start when the town became paralyzed by a huge snow storm. Being unaccustomed to large amounts of snow, Dr. Durrett found it hard to believe there was no way to get around in D.C. and proceeded to walk out in the snow in her high heels to find a taxi, only to return a short time later, temporarily frustrated by the limitations imposed by the elements.

Dr. Durrett joined the UT Austin faculty in 1970 as Professor and Head of the Division of Child Development. She was actively recruited to provide leadership and to strengthen the graduate program in Child Development following the retirement of Professor Emeritus Sallie Beth Moore. She served as Acting Chairman of the Department of Home Economics in 1971-72, and was appointed Chairman at the beginning of the next long session.

Dr. Durrett was very active in home economics and her specialty area of child development and family relationships, maintaining membership in over twenty professional organizations. She held a number of positions as officer, most recently as the Chairman of the Agency Member Unit of the American Home Economics Association (1979-1981); President of

the National Council of Administrators of Home Economics (1980-1981); and founder and President of the Texas Coalition of Administrators of Home Economics (early 1980's). She singlemindedly pursued her goal of excellence in the UT Austin program in home economics. Under her leadership, the department received full accreditation from the American Home Economics Association for two ten-year periods: 1976-1985 and 1986-1995.

She received a number of academic honors, including induction into the honor societies Omicron Nu, Phi Upsilon Omicron, Delta Phi Upsilon, and Phi Kappa Phi. She was listed in *Who's Who of American Women* and *The World Who's Who of Women*. The Texas Home Economics Association named her Texas Home Economist of the Year in 1981, and the American Home Economics Association selected her as one of ten home economists nationwide to be honored as AHEA Leader for 1987.

Dr. Durrett's research concerned the family and cultural contexts of infant and child development. In her most recent research, conducted in collaboration with Dr. Phyllis Richards (Professor Emeritus, University of Texas at Austin) and Professor Midori Otaki (of Joetsu University, Niigata, Japan), she was comparing patterns of mother-infant attachment in Japanese and American cultures. Her interest in cultural patterns was also being explored in studies comparing parent-infant interaction in three American ethnic groups: anglo, black, and hispanic. Despite being a dedicated, full-time administrator, Dr. Durrett maintained an active research program throughout her career.

Dr. Durrett was author or co-author of approximately 70 publications, a number of which have also appeared in Asian journals. She supervised more than 20 graduate students in preparation of their theses or dissertations and served on the thesis committees of more than 50 additional graduate students. She successfully competed for funding for research and teacher training programs, receiving well over a million dollars in grants from the National Science Foundation and various public and private agencies. From 1966-1970, she devoted considerable

energy to the training of teachers and other professionals for working with children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Dr. Durrett was a part of a team of faculty in home economics at UT Austin which received a grant from the National Science Foundation to develop computer-based simulation for observing child behavior to supplement direct observation of children. This pioneering work on interfacing the computer with film modules, begun in 1974, resulted in research papers, presentations at meetings of several professional organizations, and use by students in child development courses to observe child behavior.

Under Dr. Durrett's unobtrusive but determined leadership, the Department of Home Economics grew in meaningful ways. She spearheaded the drive that raised more than \$1.5 million in endowments to provide ongoing support for students and faculty in the department. Five new endowed professorships and four lectureships were established in the department during her tenure. After a lengthy review process, a new Ph.D. program was established in child development and family relationships in 1987. At the time of her death, a proposal for the doctoral degree in nutritional sciences was in the final stages of review. She was instrumental in organizing a Departmental Visiting Committee, which has helped the department in many ways since its establishment.

"Mary Ellen Durrett was totally dedicated to home economics and assumed her responsibilities as a teacher and administrator conscientiously and with understanding," said Dr. Robert E. Boyer, dean of the College of Natural Sciences, at the time of her death. "She was respected by all who had dealings with her and loved by colleagues with whom she worked on a daily basis. Home economics has lost a role model, a person who contributed to its well being, not only at this university and in Texas, but on a national and international level as well. She will be remembered as a champion of all the values of home economics."

Her sudden and untimely death triggered an outpouring of expressions of love and gratitude from administrators, faculty colleagues, professional associates, students, friends, and family members. A former UT faculty member whose life was touched by her expressed these sentiments articulately: "In the whole of my life I have openly wept for the passing of just three people, and Mary Ellen was one of them. Dr. Mary Ellen Durrett was a tower who radiated a great light that chased the shadows from our lives. Where there was doubt and confusion, she gave courage and strength; and where there were those who faltered and stumbled, she gave them firm direction and purpose; and to those of us who dreamt dreams, she made them possible; and the tapestry of our lives has been enriched with the bright golden threads of this learned person's warmth, humility and scholarship. Alas, the light and the tower have gone, but the foundations remain, built deep into the hearts and minds of those bereft and those yet to travel down the road of life."

Former students wrote that she was "a secure base as well as the greatest teacher." "She was a dear and wonderful mentor for me, a role model, both as a scholar and as a caring human being. I wrote in my dissertation that she provided my Rubicon. And that she did. She inspired me to make an auspicious beginning in my academic career." "I learned a lot from Dr. Durrett--not just about child development theories, but also how to be a better person."

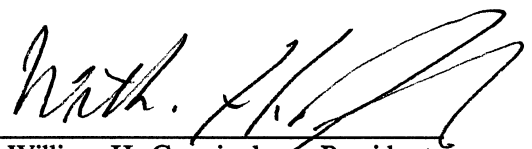
A faculty colleague wrote that "she was a gracious and caring lady who afforded me many opportunities to enrich my life. I deeply appreciate the wisdom and strength she has shared with me." Another former faculty colleague stated a thought held by many: "I know that Mary Ellen will be missed. But she made an impact on many lives while she was at the Department. Both students and colleagues carry her influence with them as they pursue their careers."

Dr. Durrett's strong personal and professional commitments to service will live on in many ways: through her constructive attitude toward developing the potential in every faculty

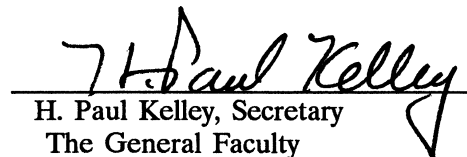
member she recruited, through the ways in which she touched the individual lives of countless students, and through her tireless efforts to make this world a better place for children and families. She encouraged others, convinced them that they were doing all right, celebrated their successes with them, and gave countless people unconditional and unselfish help.

Dr. Durrett was preceded in death by her father, W.S. Durrett; her mother, Willie Lou Durrett; and a brother, Kenneth Durrett, Sr. She is survived by two brothers, Douglas Durrett, of Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Claude A. Durrett, of Simsboro, Louisiana; and by several nieces, nephews, great-nieces, and great-nephews.

On the occasion of her death, the department established the Mary Ellen Durrett Scholarship Fund.



William H. Cunningham, President
The University of Texas at Austin



H. Paul Kelley, Secretary
The General Faculty

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a Special Committee consisting of Professor Harold D. Grotevant (chairman) and Professors Emeritus Margaret A. Eppright and Phyllis L. Richards.

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