

## Leesburg Today

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### LCHS Teacher Inspires New Author

-Catherine McKinney, Staff Writer

In her new book *When I Was Elena*, former Loudoun resident Ellen Urbani Hildebrand gives special acknowledgment to her 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher at Loudoun County High School in Leesburg.

“With heartfelt gratitude, I extend my most sincere thanks to the following people,” she wrote. “My 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, Dr. Elizabeth Turner, who so emphatically insisted I had a way with words that I wound up believing her. My thanks are long overdue for her easy assurances which have, in many ways, influenced my life’s direction. Every student should be so lucky.”

As a 22-year-old Literature and Design student at the University of Alabama, Hildebrand said an article in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* inspired her to join the Peace Corps.

“I was laying across my bed and reading *Cosmo*, and there was this article about a woman in the Peace Corps in Africa,” she said. “I sat up off my bed and called, and had them send me an application. Sometimes the best things can spring from the most superficial of places.

“*Cosmopolitan Magazine* got me to go to Guatemala,” she said, laughing.

After spending two years as a teacher in the Peace Corps from 1991 through 1993, Hildebrand sat down and began writing her first book, a memoir of her experience in Guatemala through her own voice and that of seven indigenous women who would otherwise remain unknown to the world.

“I didn’t start writing [the book] right away,” she said. “It was almost 10 years that I didn’t write it when I got home. I guess I had always had stories there that I wanted to write about, [but] I just didn’t know how to go about it. I don’t think it was until I was older that I could understand these indigenous women, some of the masks that great strength and courage can hide behind. I was able to see them in a different light when I was older.”

As *When I Was Elena* began to take shape, Hildebrand said the words of her LCHS high school teacher resounded in her head, more than 20 years after sitting in the front row of her classroom. Hildebrand desperately searched the Loudoun County school system to find “Mrs. Turner,” only to find that Turner had retired years ago.

“I didn’t even know her first name,” Hildebrand recalled. “But I wanted to tell her how she impacted my life so many years later. Too few teachers get acknowledged for what they’ve done in a student’s life, especially after 20 years.”

In 1983, Loudoun County High School collected its top English students, including 15-year-old Ellen Urbani, and placed them in an advance literature and writing class. According to Hildebrand, it was from this classroom experience that she drew the courage to write her first novel.

“It was a very focused class on writing, and my teacher encouraged me to read a list of books that aren’t typically suggested in high school,” she said. “I would describe

her as entirely encouraging, and she pushed me beyond what I might have tried on my own, in terms of what I read and what I wrote.”

Hiltebrand called the LCHS office seeking information about her former English teacher, and was pleasantly surprised to find that the current principal of the high school is William Oblas, her seventh grade pre-algebra teacher. According to Hiltebrand, Oblas not only remembered her name, face, home address and immediate family, but also clearly remembered exactly where she sat in his classroom nearly 25 years ago.

Oblas informed Hiltebrand that “Mrs. Tarner” had retired from the Loudoun County Public School System in 1987, gone back to school to earn her doctorate degree at Virginia Tech and had moved to Silver Springs, MD, with her husband in 1993. Before hanging up, Oblas also provided Hiltebrand with Tarner’s home phone number, in an attempt to reconnect the former student and teacher.

“I called her and wound up leaving a message,” she said. “I think I left one or two and then she called me and left a message. We just couldn’t connect. Then finally, I called two days before the final printing. It was delightful. She got on the phone and said she remembered me.”

Tarner is happy her former student contacted her. “It was just like we picked up right where we left off, except that of course, she’s an adult now,” Tarner said. “It doesn’t seem like so long ago, but so much has happened to us. I still can’t get her to call me Liz, after having her as a student, but I’m so glad she got in touch with me and we were able to reconnect.”

“There’s something freakish about these teachers,” Hiltebrand said, noting that Tarner, along with Oblas, also remembered the precise desk that Hiltebrand, then Urbani, occupied. “Their memories are amazing!”

Tarner said that she was not surprised that Hiltebrand had gone on to write a book, noting that as a former student, she had been a naturally expressive and adventuresome young woman.

“This is the first time I’ve had a student publish a book,” she said. “I’ve had postcards from some students who have [kept in touch], but I think this experience just went a little deeper.”

Hiltebrand read her lovingly crafted acknowledgment over the phone.

“I felt like I was reading a gift to her, and I do think that’s how she received it,” she said. “She made me feel like I found something that I was really good at, she made me feel good about myself. Twenty-five years later, when I was writing my book, I just remember her in my head being so excited that I was willing to try something. She thought I could comprehend something that I wasn’t even sure that I could, and it gave me the courage to try.”

Tarner said that as an emerging teacher, she had fallen naturally into the position due to her love of “the art of learning.”

“I guess I always played teacher as a child,” she said. “My mother was a teacher too, so it was just kind of natural to be one [also]. It’s just been a natural journey in my life to share learning and language. I wanted everyone to know what I know.”

In 18 years as an English teacher at LCHS, Tarner proudly reported that she had never given a student an “F” on a writing assignment.

“My first lesson as a teacher was that not everyone learns at the same rate,” she said. “The bottom line is that it doesn’t matter if you’re in industry training rooms or in

the classroom, teaching is about taking people from where they are and moving them forward in their thinking and confidence. I never tried to destroy their confidence by saying, 'It's not your best job.' I always try to make people feel good about their writing."

Referring specifically to Hildebrand, she said, "I still want to be that encourager, facilitator and motivator, because I'm so proud what she's done. I want people to know about her and her book. It's not to say, 'Look in the back of the book [at the acknowledgments].' It's not about me, it's about her. I still want to be the same person that I was to her 20 years ago. I'm so proud of what she's done.

Tarner added, "I give her an A-plus!"

As copies of her first book are beginning to hit the shelves, Hildebrand says that she is most proud of the voices of the indigenous women she captured through her novel.

"They're illiterate, and in that country they denigrate women," she said. "They would never be able to tell their story. I spoke for them in an honorable manner. This is my way of demonstrating my respect and friendship to them. I think that [readers] will find their voices very intriguing."

While Tarner admitted that she still hasn't finished reading the novel, she did say that Hildebrand has a "very distinct style, similar to how she was [20 years ago] as a writer.

"It's like you're there with her," she said.

While Hildebrand's book is receiving positive reviews on a daily basis, Hildebrand said she hoped that her book and her special acknowledgment of her 10<sup>th</sup> grade high school teacher would prompt other students to appreciate their teachers.

"This is what I hoped it would do," she said. "I hoped that it would make people think, 'I owe this teacher a phone call.'

"They lead us down these paths in our lives, and they never know what impact that they had on our lives. I Learned that in Guatemala," she said. "I needed to get back to Liz and tell her that I remembered her and that she mattered to me in my life. [I wanted to say,] 'There is a part of me that is who I am because of you.' I would love it that everyone will go find a teacher and say something to them."

Tarner said, "I think that so many people don't stop and say 'thank you' to thesew people. I think that's the lesson we all learn from something like this."

Hildebrand said, laughing, "We'll have a little Leesburg revolution of people calling information to find a teacher."

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