

DONA BIGGS ROSS

Dona Ross settled in Union Springs after living and working for many years in Parish, NY. She and her family had spent summer weekends at the Ross cottage on Farley's Point. When the time came to fully retire, the couple had to choose which of their options to settle into; they chose the lake. Born in Syracuse, Dona was an only child for the first six years of her life and had the privilege of living in an apartment with six adoring adults: her parents, her maternal grandparents, and her great-grandparents. Both parents worked outside the home while her grandmothers cared for her. Her great-grandfather, a tool maker by trade, retired at the age of 80. Her paternal grandfather owned a masonry company that provided many of the sidewalks in Syracuse. The name O.J. Biggs was imprinted on each one. Both sides of the family have English roots - her mother and family arriving in Syracuse via Canada. Dona spent most of her early childhood with adults. Her great-grandmother taught her to read before she went to school, mostly from the signs and posters in the grocery store next door. Kindergarten was not a pleasant experience for Dona. She was left-handed and the teacher made her use her right hand, to help her hold the pencil "correctly". In addition, her teacher believed that her name was spelled incorrectly and insisted that Dona spell her name "Donna" (with 2 n's). Used to wearing dresses and 'never getting dirty', Dona did not like to sit on the floor, which was often required. She did not seem to fit in and was often sent to the music room for a time-out. This punishment turned out to be a blessing as she was taught to play piano which was a practice she enjoyed for years.



Dona was six when her brother was born. The family moved to a small house in a rural area south of Syracuse University. It was technically part of the city but rural enough to allow the family to have gardens, a barn, chickens, and a relatively rural lifestyle. Here there were neighborhood children with whom to play, though Dona generally preferred to play piano and read. She attended Percy Hughes School; the school closest to their home. This was a city school founded in the 1930's for handicapped and special needs children. The children were afflicted with cerebral palsy, low vision, and the effects of polio. The few neighborhood children of all grades shared one room for part of their classes and were integrated with the special needs children for the rest of the day. It was a wonderful experience. One has to assume that the teachers in this environment had and/or developed creative techniques for their work. Dona's mother did the same as she had two Girl Scout troops: one for the neighborhood children and one that accommodated the special needs of the school's population. While the challenges, goals and achievements were the same (when possible), the leadership strategies and techniques were adapted for the situation.

Her mother is Dona's primary role model. Her mother had a can-do attitude; she was intrepid. She did things most women of her day did not do. She had a driver's license, a part-time job as a crossing guard, could change a tire, do home repairs, and still made most of Dona's clothes. She was president of the PTA, and later in life, became a medical secretary.



Is it any wonder that Dona chose to become a teacher? She experienced the best from her great-grandmother, the special children at the school, and her mother's leadership and role modeling. She attended a downtown high school, taking a city bus or riding to school with a neighbor who worked downtown. Her family did not have a car. She graduated from high school at 16 and received a full scholarship to Syracuse---\$1000/year. Dona still lived at home, walked to classes in the morning and to her part-time job in the afternoon. As she was part of a sorority, she had a base on campus. After graduation, she taught in Syracuse schools for two years. She married her husband Tom in 1960. They joke and call it an arranged marriage. Dona had come to know Tom's parents through church activities while he was away at college and they did some matchmaking when he came home for vacation. In 1971, to the delight of their two young sons, the couple bought a house with 10 acres of wooded land near Parish, NY where Dona taught K-1 for 23 years, though not in anonymity.

As new reading techniques and instruction were being developed, probably enhanced by Dona's own eclectic and unusual learning opportunities, she became a noted specialist in her field. SUNY Oswego recruited her to provide workshops for other teachers and for a series of video tapes of her classroom techniques. She also enjoyed her tenure as President of Oswego County Reading Council. This period was, however, marred by the death at 19 of her older son. This was the most difficult challenge she ever faced, dwarfing the lesser ones that might also have shaped her destiny.

When she retired from teaching, she was hired by SUNY Oswego to supervise student teachers in Central and Northern NYS. She did that for 11 years and loved every minute of it. She is also a survivor of breast cancer in more recent times. In addition to the contributions of a lifetime in education, Dona carries a compassionate and thoughtful nature into community activities in her retirement. She serves as secretary of the Frontenac Historical Society Board and serves as a museum curator. She and Tom like to visit their son and his family in Vermont as often as they can.

