

FOCUS ON...
JANE WILKIE

(Vol. 2, No. 2, November/December 2000)

From the moment one enters Jane Wilkie's office her energy is palpable; everything around her seems to snap to life as she springs from her chair to greet a visitor. Her trademark Mississippi twang makes him feel immediately comfortable and welcome. Her latest project, a newspaper feature in which the two major presidential candidates are juxtaposed, lays sprawled open, about to become the latest lesson for her ESL students.



Jane Wilkie, beside her showcase of curios from her international

Jane has been working with ESL students for twenty-two years, first on an adjunct basis and, eventually, as a full-time member of the faculty of the Language and Culture department.

So where does the Mississippi accent come from? You guessed it—from Mississippi—a “one-light town” called Sardis, where she was raised. The public school was very limited, according to Jane, but being raised Catholic, she availed herself of the learning that the nearby mission church offered. She found herself learning how to speak Spanish, and she began to dream of far-away foreign places. “I loved the idea of anything foreign,” Jane confided. But her wish to leave Mississippi and travel to far-away places had to wait a while. In the interim, she went to college, majoring in English with a minor in psychology, and then taught English and Spanish for a period of time before saying goodbye to Mississippi. She was very active in the Civil Rights Movement during that time.

When the time to leave came, it was to come to Delaware, not exactly an exotic far-away place. She came with her former husband, journalist Curtis Wilkie, who landed a job with what is now The News Journal Company. Following a stint there, the Wilkies moved to Boston, from which Jane eventually returned to Delaware. She achieved her Masters degree, focusing on Bilingual-Bicultural Studies.

To Jane, her teaching position is “intertwined with my life;” she has frequently found herself providing assistance outside of school to her foreign students. There have been times when she has had to find housing for a student, help a student in need of public services to negotiate the governmental bureaucracies that confound even life-long citizens, accompany someone trying to return a defective used car that they were pressured into buying, or rescue a female student from an abusive spouse, among other things. Overall, despite such “extracurricular” duties, Jane reports that her work has been “just an unbelievable experience.”

Along with her teaching and mentoring activities, Jane has assumed responsibility over the years for coordinating the special activities which, in her view, are extremely valuable in helping foreign students to assimilate American culture. To accomplish this, she has organized numerous field trips—to New Hope and Philadelphia, PA., where the Liberty Bell resides, to Ellis

Island, where earlier generations often first set foot on American soil, to the Rockefeller Center, the Delaware Theatre and the Opera, and to serve homeless people at the Emmanuel Dining Room—just to name a few. And, once a year, Jane and her colleagues organize International Week at the college, during which pageants of exotic wardrobes indigenous to many cultures, and sumptuous feasts of exotic foods from many lands, can be enjoyed by the entire campus community.

Jane sees one of her greatest assets as an educator to be her interest in current events and “bringing the world into the classroom,” as she aptly describes it. She is endlessly devising in-class activities around newspaper articles or students’ own knowledge of their native cultures, political systems, and the like. She views such activities as valuable learning opportunities, both for their relevance to American culture and their collateral value in causing students to learn the English language and fostering interaction between the students.

One of the biggest challenges Jane reports facing in her work with international students over the years has been shoring up the battered self-confidence of students who must repeat courses multiple times. She does what she can to give them encouragement and support, hoping to prevent them from giving up and dropping out of school. As she points out to them, and as we native-born Americans might remind ourselves, “How would *we* do in *their* culture?”

Jane says that she would be happy to share her expertise in sensitizing people to cultural differences and developing intercultural communication activities for the classroom, with colleagues from other departments, who frequently have ESL students in their technical classes. Oftentimes, the learning experience these students have could be enhanced by relatively minor changes in the presentation of material, or simply by an instructor’s efforts to help them feel welcome and included. Even better, there are occasions when an international student can actually enhance the learning experience by sharing how comparable ideas or practices are understood and followed in his/her native country.