

Having Fun: one Wesleyan graduate's take on a life worth living, from education to old age.

By Atira Meyer

An old woman stands alone at the window in her quiet room. With both hands clasped around her walker for support, she stands in the glow of the sunlight that filters through the curtains, illuminating her pale skin and thin white hair.

It's a big day—one she has been anticipating all week.

Her visitors arrive, anxious to hear her stories of travel and adventure. You see, she's been all around the world. The woman has packed more experiences and wisdom into her 97 years than many would expect of midwestern women from her time.

"How did you do it?" Her visitors ask, and her eyes light up at the question.

"I had fun."

Ruth Jean Bolton is one of the oldest living graduates from Nebraska Wesleyan's English and Teaching programs. Not only that, but as a woman born in 1922 in a rural area outside of York, Nebraska, her story is not typical of most female university graduates from the late '30's and early '40's.

At the time Jean Bolton was studying in the English department and pursuing her teaching certificate, the percentage of US teachers who were female was [over 75%](#). As the country climbed out of the Great Depression and entered the second World War, Bolton recalls that most of the men went off to war while the women went to work and school.

With the demands of the war affecting American jobs, history boasts that many women joined previously male-dominated fields to keep everything running. But Bolton recalls that the women she knew while attending the Methodist university were primarily pursuing a few specific career paths. While she and many other women sought teaching certificates, one of her roommates studied to become a nurse, and the others found husbands.

But, Bolton jokes, "I dated the only thing there was available to date, which was *student ministers*."

Bolton wasn't too interested in finding a husband, nor was she interested in going back home and teaching in a rural "country school." At least, not any longer than she already had during her two-year practicum at Crestwell, the rural schoolhouse where she taught to save up money before returning to Wesleyan to complete her degree. At Crestwell, she enjoyed teaching

students of all ages and the experience inspired her to pursue more teaching at a larger scale. Still, she laughs as she recalls, “I didn’t wanna build my fires every morning!”

Not long after completing her degree, Bolton was teaching elementary in Omaha when she learned about the Department of Defense’s overseas teaching positions. Soon after, she was boarding her first airplane on her way to her first stop on the rest of her life-long adventure: the Clark Air Base in the Philippines. Over the next 25 years, Bolton would travel around the world, teaching schoolchildren at a variety of US bases and, later, in a number of US states as well.

She enjoyed teaching—and not just because she came from a family of educators, but because something about teaching touched her heart, and maybe even ignited a spark inside her. That, and she considered herself pretty good at it, too. In the vital early years, when young students learn to read and write, Bolton found value in being the person who helped guide children through the experience.

After depleting her energy for teaching by the end of those 25 years, she retired and returned to Nebraska where she took an office job in Lincoln.

Bolton never married or had any children of her own, and though the remainder of her working years may not seem as adventurous as her time with the DoD, Bolton continued her travels for as long as she could. Looking back now, at 97, she says the only two states she never got to see were Alaska and Tennessee.

For a woman with such a long life packed with so many experiences, her mind is anything but worn down. Today, she enjoys spending her time at Willow Brook Assisted Living in York, Nebraska, reading, doing puzzles, writing poetry—or “jingles” as she calls them—and, of course, reminiscing.

She wholeheartedly believes that there is something to thank God for every day, and on Friday, March 1st, she was thankful for that sunlight shining through the window and the visitors who came to hear her stories.

Bolton was more than just excited to tell those stories—she was prepared. Though 81 years have passed since she first set foot on Nebraska Wesleyan’s campus, Bolton’s memories are still clear. She remembered so many details, from the day her parents dropped her off, to the classes she took, and many of the things in between. She even had written on a small piece of paper the names of her five roommates from her first year: Florence Lowson, Esther Perkins (Price), Wilma Goering, Geraldine Walters, and Maxine Brooks.

Bolton’s story of arriving at college is not unlike the experiences of many students here today. It was her first time moving away from home, which was understandably hard on both her and her parents, but it didn’t take long for her to feel right at home for the next few semesters.

“Oh, we had the most fun,” she laughs, doing a little dance with her shoulders. “We overdid it!”

Though strict regulations were in place at the time to uphold Wesleyan's 'Christian Education,' and the Dean of Women ensured that the behavior of female students adhered to strict social standards, Bolton and her new colleagues managed to have their share of fun, though she wouldn't dare tell what it was they did. The friendships forged during her first years at Wesleyan stemmed from a sense of togetherness and comradery, as she refers to it, that was surely the product of their shared experiences.

Student housing at the time was provided by families that lived near the campus, as Wesleyan had no dormitories, so Bolton recalls that she and her five roommates were boarded at the Flood household near Adams street for a few dollars per month. In the late '30s, according to Wesleyan statistics, about 40% of all enrolled students held part-time jobs on campus to help pay tuition and boarding fees. Bolton and her roommates were no different—she worked in the closed stacks in the Rachel Ann Lucas Library for a while, assisted professors, and graded papers thanks to the National Youth Administration program (NYA) that provided universities with federal funding to pay students for on-campus jobs.

Bolton and her roommates each made four dollars per month, which they often pooled together to make \$24 for food and boarding costs.

“Oh, we ate *wonderfully* at the first part of the month!” She remembers, excitedly.

“By the end of the month...” Her face drops to an exaggerated frown.

Contrary to the glorious 25-cent ramen noodles and dollar frozen meals students rely on today, Bolton and her friends had what she called “nine-cent meals” by the time they reached the end of their funds each month, which consisted of old bread, old cottage cheese, and skim milk.

Still, she laughs as if she enjoyed every minute of it—from every exciting experience with her new friends to every hardship that came from the Depression's economy and the losses of the war.

Bolton recalls that, during her time at Wesleyan, her younger self may have spent a little more time chasing the experiences than studying, but she doesn't regret it. Although she would not have considered herself a model student at that time—or a role model worthy of sharing advice—the life she has lived gives her some authority, not only on the college experience, but on the human experience as a whole.

When asked her advice for current and future students at Wesleyan, her answer was simple:

“Have fun.”