

Story, video: At 105, UWO's 'platinum alumna' reflects on teaching

by Alyssa Kadansky - Thursday, September 05, 2013

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/29160/story-video-at-105-uwo-platinum-alumna-reflects-on-teacher-prep-experiences/>

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh alumna Harriet (Krueger) Kussman '31, of Amherst, took an extra big breath before blowing out the candles on her last birthday cake as she celebrated her 105th birthday in May.

UW Oshkosh's oldest-known, living alumna, a resident at Iola Living Assistance, fondly recalls stories of growing up in Berlin, her early days of teaching in rural schools and the stress of college and beyond.

Kussman's passion for education began at a young age, inspired by her grandparents and a traveling encyclopedia salesman selling "the very best encyclopedias."

Having never owned a nice set of encyclopedias and being the book fiend that she was, Kussman could not resist the beautiful books.

"And that was it," Kussman said. "I ordered them from him, and I must have had cash with me at school because I paid him \$65 for this set of encyclopedias."

After hearing about the money Kussman had spent on the encyclopedias, Kussman's grandmother called a lawyer to explain the situation. The lawyer replied that the salesman was not allowed to take any money from the 17-year-old.

"So, he had to give me the money back and I gave him the encyclopedias," Kussman said. "I never did buy any encyclopedias."

Kussman dreamed of becoming a home economics teacher, but her father told her that they could not afford to send her to Stout Institute (today's UW-Stout), where the program was offered.

Kussman went on to graduate from Berlin High School, then Lilac Hill School, a rural, one-room school outside of Berlin. Following graduation at the age of 17, Kussman began teaching at her alma mater to earn enough money to go to college. At that time, school teachers were not required to have a college degree to teach in the rural schools.

"School was always easy for me," Kussman said. "I was always reading books."

Even today as a resident at Iola Living Assistance, Kussman keeps a book tucked into her wheelchair for easy access and a pillow on her lap to prop up her current read.

While teaching in her one-room schoolhouse, Kussman experienced the challenges of being a young teacher. During a particularly warm winter day, the boys in her class built a pile of snow against the side of school. They climbed up and slid down, until they finally came back in with their trousers soaking wet.

Concerned about leaving them to sit in wet clothes, Kussman sent the girls to find the curtains that they had used for school plays. The boys tied the curtains around their waists while Kussman and the girls hung their trousers on a ladder over the furnace register to dry by the end of the day, resulting in an embarrassing rest of the day for the poor curtain-clad boys.

It was just one of several unique experiences during her four years teaching in the rural schools. Kussman decided to attend Oshkosh State Teacher's College, now UW Oshkosh, to earn her teaching certificate. This would allow her to teach in the state schools. Kussman was familiar with Oshkosh because she and her mother had shopped there every summer before school started.

"I was always a long-armed teenager, and I was embarrassed because my mother would say, 'We have to go get clothes now, it's August,'" Kussman said. "And then I'd try on clothes and my arms would dangle out of the bottom of the sleeves... I was always really embarrassed and I would get a headache every time we would go do this—go to Oshkosh's big stores."

As there were no college residence halls for students, Kussman stayed in an Oshkosh in a rooming house during her schooling. That is where she met her future husband's sister.

"I met my husband's sister there because she went to the business college. And she also enrolled late and so she was at the same rooming house, and we had to walk next door to get our meals," Kussman said.

Her academic experience proved successful in more ways than one. Kussman was enrolled at UWO for half a year to earn her teaching certificate, and she landed a teaching job immediately following graduation.

"They had some principals coming to interview us for jobs," Kussman said. "And this one day, the director of our department said, 'We are having a man from Rhinelander... and if any of you are offered a job and you refuse, we won't give you another chance to be interviewed.' So, I got interviewed and then I went to Rhinelander and was there for six years."

Kussman taught elementary school for those six years before marrying Otto Kussman, her former roommate's brother, on August 18, 1938.

"I remember when I finally did get married, somebody said to my husband, 'Well, how come you didn't marry her sooner? It took six years!'" Kussman said with a chuckle. "He said, 'She wasn't very enthusiastic.'"

When Otto's father died and he was forced to run the family farm as the oldest son, Kussman put her teaching career aside to be a housewife for 15 years.

"I didn't learn to do very good cooking because my mother-in-law was such a good cook that she cooked everything for the whole family," Kussman said.

Despite being a married woman and the family's hostess, Kussman said her cooking skills still did not improve. So, she did what she did best and returned to teaching, taking a job in Portage County. After teaching in the county for about 20 years, Kussman retired from her teaching career at Amherst.

Today, Kussman continues to learn as she reads book after book. She enjoys visits from family, friends and even former students.

- Is Harriet the oldest UWO alumna? Do you know any alumni older than 100 years old? [Let us know!](#)

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- [UW Oshkosh College of Education and Human Services](#)
- [University of Wisconsin Digital Collections: History of UW Oshkosh](#)