

# Katherine Bonar – My First Favorite Teacher

By Keith Propst and Janet St. Bernard Broen

Most of us can look back on our school days and remember one or two favorite teachers.

Perhaps a teacher who got to know us personally, one who extended an unexpected kindness, or even a tough teacher who pushed us toward greater achievements. I was lucky to have an excellent and memorable teacher early in my schooling. Mrs. Katherine Bonar taught me in the second grade at Highland Elementary school in Lake Worth, the 1958-9 school year. She was my first “favorite teacher.” I enjoyed other great teachers in high school and college, but Mrs. Bonar first instilled a love of learning that lasted through my school years and beyond.

More than 60 years later, I remember clearly how well Mrs. Bonar ran her classroom, with gentleness and persuasion, not threats or punishment. As second graders, we had mastered the alphabet and were learning to read. Mrs. Bonar helped us discover the world beyond our little town through our text books—how Laplanders lived in the arctic and how Dutch children traditionally wore wooden shoes. Between the inspiration from Mrs. Bonar and the encouragement of my mother, I developed a life-long love for reading and interest in the world around me.

Her kindness stands out after all these years. When I got through a test, I would turn the page over and draw pictures of ships or planes—typical boy stuff. For some reason, I was worried that I might get into trouble for doing this, but Mrs. Bonar assured me that it was perfectly OK.

It seems such a small thing, but this gesture stands out after 60 years as an example of how she dealt individually with each student.

One classmate drew her a picture. On it he wrote, “For Mrs. Bonar” and “Form Steve” and proudly presented it to her. Mrs. Bonar never commented on the spelling mistake and proudly hung the picture behind her desk. Even as a second grader, I knew that her sincere appreciation for this gift was generous and kind.

Nearly 30 years later, in 1987, I moved to Atlanta and started attending an adult Sunday school class. One Sunday, I met a classmate with a name that jumped out at me—Brian Bonar. I told Brian that I had a Mrs. Bonar as my second grade teacher down in Lake Worth, FL. He surprised me by saying that was his mother. I was delighted by this unexpected discovery. A few weeks later, Brian told me that he had asked his mother about me, and he said that she remembered me. Even with the hundreds

of students over her career, I can believe that Mrs. Bonar was the kind of teacher who would have individual memories of many of her pupils. She cared that much.

During the early 2000s, I did an Internet search for Katherine Bonar. I was pleased to discover that she and her husband, John, were still alive and living in Lake Worth. Mrs. Bonar was in her 90s by that time. The search also yielded archived newspaper notices for community dance groups that listed the Bonars as the points of contact for this shared interest.

In early 2017, I did another online search for Mrs. Bonar, this time fearing that I would find her obituary. To my amazement, I found an August 2016 article from a local Georgia paper about a celebration of the 104th birthday of a local resident—Katherine Bonar. A little more online research confirmed that this was indeed my beloved teacher, now widowed and living with Brian in Loganville, GA on the east side of the metro Atlanta area, about 50 miles from my home.

I emailed the writer of the article explaining my relationship to Mrs. Bonar to ask if she could help me get in touch with Brian. This connection led to a member of Mrs. Bonar’s church who saw her regularly at services. She said that the congregation loved Mrs. Bonar, who was always cheerful in spite of that fact that her sight and hearing were impaired. In a later email, this member said that she had told Mrs. Bonar that one of her former students was asking about her, which greatly pleased my beloved teacher.

I asked my contact to speak to Brian to see if I could arrange a visit with his mother. When Brian and I talked, he remembered our meeting many years earlier but said that a visit would not be a good idea, given his mother’s age and memory loss. He did not think she would know who I was. Sadly, I accepted Brian’s call on visiting.

About this same time, while organizing the garage, I found that my mother had saved the class photos from each of my four years at Highland Elementary. I found the photo of Mrs. Bonar’s class and was thrilled to see her at her desk with the lovely smile that I remembered. I tried to identify my class-



Mrs. Katherine Bonar



Janet St. Bernard Broen



Keith Propst

mates, but many of these names were lost to time. However, I was pleased to see that my childhood friend Janet St. Bernard had been a second-grade classmate. Another photo confirmed that we were also in the same fourth-grade class with another wonderful Highland teacher, Mrs. Brennan.

I searched for Janet online so that I could let her know that Mrs. Bonar was still alive and living near me. I discovered that Janet had attended FSU after graduating from Lake Worth High School. She was married and living near Tallahassee in the small town of Quincy, FL. I reached out to Janet via Facebook Messenger and was pleased when she replied that she too had great memories of “our much loved Mrs. Bonar.” When she saw the class photo, she remarked that she was surprised how much our teacher reminded her of Audrey Hepburn.

Janet shared her memories of our second grade class: “Do you remember Mrs. Bonar’s little giggle? I have always remembered how very gentle and femi-

nine she was. And we felt safe back then; classes were orderly. I remember sitting in a circle at the front of the room and taking turns reading a story. Each student read a paragraph while Mrs. Bonar sat in the circle, listening and leaning forward over the textbook in her lap. Remember show and tell? Every parent’s nightmare!”

In August 2017, Mrs. Bonar’s church celebrated her 105th birthday at a service, including a visit from the Loganville mayor and a representative of the local historical society. Sadly, she was not able to attend that Sunday. Leading up to this celebration, Janet and I worked with the reporter from the Loganville paper on a column highlighting our memories of Mrs. Bonar and how she influenced our school experiences. Right before Mrs. Bonar’s birthday, the paper published this column, and our memories were shared during the birthday celebration.

I checked with the church contact again a few months later, and this time I got the sad news that Mrs. Bonar had passed way in March 2018, about five months short of reaching age 106.

She had been unable to attend church for some time before her death, but the congregation continued to include her in their prayers. I emailed Janet to let her know about our teacher’s passing. Even though circumstances never allowed me to visit Mrs. Bonar, we took comfort in knowing that she was aware that students from long ago remembered her and asked about her.

I was fortunate to have more “favorite teachers” in high school in Savannah and at Georgia Tech. The positive influence they had on my learning and life is even more apparent as I approach age 70 and look back. Mrs. Bonar holds a special place in my heart as the first in this line of favorite teachers. She offered her students a positive learning experience that helped build a love of learning. She also gave us an example of what makes a “good” teacher. We left Mrs. Bonar’s class with the expectation that teachers were there to help us learn. We understood how rewarding a relationship with a good teacher could be, and we had a benchmark for evaluating each new teacher. Mrs. Bonar planted the seeds that led to appreciating the opportunity of a good education. We thank her for this gift and for her commitment to the teaching profession.

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