

AGATHA'S FLAG

Stars, stripes, and sentiment

By Lee Burdette Williams

"I THINK there's a lot of good learning going on." I probably uttered that phrase a dozen or more times that semester, to the dean of students, the chief of police, the university attorney, the director of residence life, my faculty colleagues, and, with a cold compress on my forehead and a glass of cabernet in my hand, to my husband. On the surface, a service-learning component in any class sounds like a great idea. Probe a little deeper, and you may find The Project That Overwhelmed the Professor—namely, me.

When I was a child and committed to finding new ways to annoy my mother, she would utter that familiar phrase, "Wait till you have children of your own." I took that warning seriously and opted not to test fate with children of my own, thinking that the evolutionary process would likely render my children even more difficult than I had been. My mother never said, "Wait till you *teach students* of your own," and I seriously doubt that my teachers back then could see anything in my future other than three to five years in a minimum-security facility for inciting riots, a skill I developed quite early. But if they had been more prescient, they might have seen Agatha, enrolled in my Women and Leadership class.

Smart, obstreperous, determined to test rules, challenge authority, question the status quo, Agatha indeed reminded me of myself at nineteen. I was pleased to

have her in my classroom, because she was fearless in expressing her opinions, both thoughtful and irreverent—one of those students who sees a sacred cow and fires up the grill. There are a fair number of these in Watauga College, the residential college I directed then, a program that for thirty years has been an ideological thorn in the side of this somewhat conservative public

university, located here in the Bible Belt state of North Carolina. (An aside about the program: for a number of years, part of our curriculum was a weekly meeting of the freshman class and faculty, which began with the mantra, "Welcome to Watauga Chautauqua, a gospel hour for agnostic academics, a cultural massage of the student body, and an embarrassment to professional educators everywhere," that last phrase shouted in unison

by the students, followed by a loud cheer.)

So I am, at this point, fairly used to students who look their education squarely in the eye and yell (at least metaphorically), "Ha!" I often reminded them that another motto we live by is, "We're Wataugans. We do more," a tribute to the academic rigor of the program, to their intense involvement in their cocurricular lives (especially their music, their art, their politics, and their parties). I repeated it whenever one of them complained about the workload, about the obligations of this unique community, about anything, really. It seems to turn their

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gripe into a point of pride and allows me to smile and move on, which I appreciate.

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS had been part of my Women and Leadership class ever since I heard the writer Katha Pollitt criticize current-day women's studies classes as being too theoretical, missing the activism that spurred the discipline on in its early days. My students worked with our local domestic violence crisis agency, our youth programs, our food bank, Habitat for Humanity's All Women Build program—the usual array of agencies. My only specifications for the projects offered by our excellent service learning office and its talented coordinator, Shari Galiardi, were that the agencies either deal with issues of special interest to women or be led by women. Though students often groused about the hassles of doing service learning (arranging transportation, having to work in a group, the usual unexpected complications), they consistently reported in their class evaluations each year that it was the most valuable part of the class, offering them a real-world opportunity that often led to profound learning, life-style and career decisions, and increased confidence in their own abilities to navigate the complex terrain of that real world.

In 2004, a presidential election year, Shari offered us a great project: working with three women, all involved in local politics (two town council members and the local chair of the Democratic party), to do voter education and registration in our town and county. This was to be a nonpartisan effort, and my students were to work on educating voters about issues especially important to women. "You know," I told them when describing this project, "22 million single women didn't vote in the last election. That's really discouraging."

I should also explain that in my class, we studied the women's suffrage movement, and after a few weeks of reading about Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Alice Paul, and other women who devoted their lives to the cause of suffrage for women, my students wept at the thought of any woman passing up an opportunity to vote and disappointing "Aunt Susan" (who, I have told them, will be waiting at the pearly gates with a ledger of voting records).

Four of my students chose this project, expressing more enthusiasm than any students I've ever had. It was gratifying. It should have been alarming. There is nothing like the force of a group of strong women (three sophomores, one first-year student) set loose with an agenda to save the world, especially when there's a grade involved.

One of those women was Agatha. Though the other three were equally formidable, each in her own way, Agatha approached this project with a certain gale-force energy that quickly swept across the Living Learning Center, where Watauga students live, and the rest of an unsuspecting campus.

Agatha and her groupmates, Erin, Jessica, and Katie, met with their project supervisors and quickly got up to speed on the local angle of the election season. The university is in a red county in a red state, and students at Appalachian had routinely been discouraged by local residents from voting because of their more blue politics. Two weeks after the project's work had begun, my students were in front of the board of elections, lobbying for a polling place on campus. They were unsuccessful, but thoroughly "jazzed," wrote one in her journal, that

they had been given the opportunity to speak in such a setting. A few days later, I watched them canvass a group of students attending a rally. "Are you registered to vote? No? Would you like to register? You know, you can vote in this county," handing out registration forms.

Not long after that, the group held a "Get Out the Vote" activity of their own on the campus mall, giving away T-shirts they had made that said "Smart Women Vote" and "Draft Beer Not Us." They registered several hundred people that day and were completely smitten by the democratic process.

Three of them were also smitten by the Democrats (Jessica is a staunch Libertarian who I suspected of having an Ayn Rand poster in her room). The closer the election got, the more determined these three became to unseat George W. Bush, who, they had come to believe, supported policies that were harmful to women. By Election Day, they were at a fever pitch—up at 5 A.M. to paint the tunnels on campus; out at the polls; wandering campus, imploring students to vote.

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AND THEN IT WAS OVER. Never have I experienced another service learning project in my class that came to such a screeching, crashing, bone-jarring halt. John Kerry conceded, George Bush smiled, and Agatha, Erin, and Katie mourned. (Jessica, who I suspected of having a strong preference for Kerry, tried to stay non-partisan in her reaction.)

Like many Democratic voters in America, their anger was palpable. They had worked *so hard*. Others like them across America had worked so hard. They were *right*. How could the process have let them down?

Those of us who are older and have lived through the results of elections that didn't go our way (I had my first political heartbreak at age eleven when George McGovern was crushed by Richard Nixon in the 1972 election) picked up the pieces of our dashed hopes and prepared for another four years of a Republican administration. Not my students. The day after the election, Agatha hung an American flag from her window. The F word had been painted in black across it. The message itself was one making its way across America, the sentiment "Now we're f****d" appearing on various Web sites and posters.

I understood the harsh criticism such a statement received here on campus and across the country. But I had my own response. I found it exceedingly reasonable, even from a nonpartisan perspective. For years, we had complained that college students were apathetic, that their turnout at the polls was pitifully low, that they didn't seem to care about national politics. Despite MTV's Rock the Vote campaign in the 2000 election, students didn't show up to vote in any numbers that gave us reason to be hopeful about our nation's future. But this time, it was different. This time they had turned out. This time they had cared. And yes, now they were really angry. Anger, I reminded myself, is a healthy thing

Lee Burdette Williams is dean of students at the University of Connecticut and former director of Watauga College at Appalachian State University. Her e-mail address is lee.williams@uconn.edu.

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when it catalyzes positive engagement in the political process. But like typical young college students who are not always adept at managing strong emotions, my students reacted in some harsh ways.

Agatha's flag gave me hope. It gave others headaches. First, she was told it could not hang from her window because this required removing her screen, a violation of housing policy. We told her she could display it, but elsewhere. She and Joe Gonzalez, the director of the Living Learning Center (LLC), agreed on the courtyard of the LLC, which is enclosed by both a residence hall and an academic building housing the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies and the offices of Watauga College. However, in keeping with the poli-

cies of courtyard displays decided on by the LLC's residents (and supported by the university attorney), Agatha needed to also display a statement claiming responsibility for the flag, explaining that it did not necessarily represent the views of Watauga College or the Living Learning Center, and inviting responses that would be displayed as well.

That afternoon, I walked into the courtyard to see her flag hanging from a makeshift flagpole. Also affixed to the flagpole were the necessary quali-

fiers and invitation. I read them all, a bemused smile coming to my lips. This is great, I thought. This is (okay, with the exception of the four-letter word painted on the flag) civil discourse. I turned away from the flag and found myself face to face with Kay, a first-year Watauga student. She shrugged and said, "We're Wataugans, Lee. We do more."

The fallout was inevitable. A person making a delivery from another office was offended enough to take the flag down when he saw it hanging there. I happened to see him as he walked away with it; I pursued him, getting the flag back. Other students in the LLC (not all are politically out of place in this conservative state) called their parents. The dean of students was called, the police, the press. The university attorney offered his views on free speech, reminding the police that while the defacing of the flag was a crime under North Carolina law, that law was unconstitutional and would not stand up in court. (Joe, the LLC

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director, has said that we're the only residence hall in America with its own constitutional lawyer on speed dial.) The police wisely chose not to remove the flag and, even more wisely, not to arrest Agatha (though honestly, the thought of an indignant Agatha standing before a judge made me smile).

I just kept repeating to myself and anyone who would listen, "Isn't this great?! Isn't there some great learning going on here?" Sometimes I had to yell to be heard over the shouting that Agatha's flag had inspired.

One night, shortly after the flag went up, a student from elsewhere on campus who was taking a class in the adjoining academic building stole it. Others had seen him take it and told Agatha his name. She called him and told him in fairly clear terms to return it to her or she would report him or maybe even sue him. He returned it, torn into small pieces.

JUST AS IT DID on the national level, the furor died out as students turned their attention back to other, seemingly more pressing things. Agatha's group began to work on the class presentation of their project, as well as some follow-up activities around campus and town, trying to harness the energy and anger they sensed was there. Agatha wrote in her journal:

My group is slightly demoralized right now. We worked so damn hard and it kind of feels now as if these were wasted efforts. It's disappointing to have to come to the realization that our nation is . . . well, the way it is. So we are a little upset but we are *not* giving up! I think the raising of our discontent may be what we, and possibly the country too, needs

at this point. We have been planning this HUGE event Thursday. Sooooo many people are involved, it's amazing! People have been networking like crazy, planning activities, and trying to get media and publicity. My email box is blowing up with love and inspiration as well as hate mail and "deal with your loss" type stuff. This is incredible. I may be overestimating the power of such movements

because of our position in this one, but I think America is on the brink of another big movement!

"You know, it's really like their first heartbreak," I said to my husband one night from under the cold compress covering my eyes. "They fell in love with the possibility of their own power, and when it walked out on them, they didn't respond in the most

gracious way imaginable. But who does? They'll do better with the next election."

I hope they're there for that next election, printing flyers and T-shirts, stopping people on the street to see if they're registered. I hope Aunt Susan smiles down at them and knows they share something of the suffragists' spirit and commitment. I hope Agatha feels the same sense of empowerment and righteous indignation but perhaps expands her vocabulary a bit. I hope they can look out across America and find others working just as hard to reclaim the true meaning of American patriotism: respectful debate, cherished differences, shared commitment to the common good, deep compassion for those in need.

Maybe I'll be fortunate enough then to call them my neighbors. I know I was privileged to call them my students.

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