

Ellen Taber Appreciation

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Ellen Taber



MAPW Alumna Ellen Taber

By Jeff Cebulski

On September 8, Alexis Starks, a KSU senior student-athlete, will formally receive the second Ellen Taber Memorial Scholarship. As the sponsor of this scholarship program, every award ceremony reconnects me not only to this terrific institution but also

to my experience in the English Department as an MAPW student and instructor.

The MAPW program, due to its very nature, is capable of having a significant impact on life outside the classroom walls. My own story attests to that.

In 2002, I was an MAPW student in the penultimate semester of a whirlwind year. I had taken a leave of absence from my secondary English position in Wisconsin to finish a master's degree. I had chosen the MAPW program because it was singular among many graduate writing curriculums, offering a three-tiered academic and practical approach that, I believed then and still believe, was a perfect fit for a teacher who wanted to catch up to what was happening in the world of writing outside the classroom confines. More importantly, to my benefit, the program's leaders accepted me and allowed me to complete my degree in a year (accepting previous graduate credits as a base).

So, I experienced what many teachers should, mid-career: a switch back to student life. Now it was my writing that would receive proper and sometimes humiliating scrutiny. My first papers elicited all sorts of comments (one persistent one was that my writing exhibited my journalistic tendencies and needed some, uh, fattening).

In the meantime, I had to earn some money along the way to pay for lodging and...stuff. Fortunately, I was able to score campus jobs with writing at their centers. One was becoming Sports Editor and sometime feature writer for *The Sentinel*. The other was becoming a tutor in our wonderful Writing Center. Later, I earned funds working for the Sports Information Department.

It was in the Writing Center that I first encountered Ellen Taber, at the time a temporary full-time English instructor (later to become a Senior Lecturer). Perhaps because we were relatively close in age, and more certainly because she possessed the kind of care for students that I tried to demonstrate as a teacher, Ellen and I hit it off. More importantly, Ellen became a mentor of my overall approach, reading draft after draft as we went through the writing

process. It was Ellen who demonstrated what a college writing mentor does, and her influence, along with others in the Writing Center, changed my pedagogy. First back in Wisconsin, and then ultimately in my Lecturer position at KSU, my experience changed the way I interacted with my students as we strove for better writing.

Ellen's mentoring continued even into my instructional years at KSU. Here, Lecturers are expected to create two comprehensive reviews; both include a 12-page self-critical narrative. Ellen, again, became a chief reader and guide. Even when I continued a few style aggravations, she (and several other English colleagues) patiently suggested changes and read how-many-other drafts I sent to her. Eventually, I passed both reviews and became a Senior Lecturer in my beloved department.

What made Ellen into such a fine mentor? I think the key is found in her story. A registered nurse, Ellen, like many in our graduate program, harbored a desire to write. She entered the MAPW program, earned her master's, and in the process morphed her nursing persona into her academic persona. Thus, in a sense, people like me became her "patients." To be a great nurse, one has to have the patience and inner strength to suffer the frustrations of the one who needs care, along with the diligence to see that person through to the "cure." Faith helps, too. The best caring professionals I know see themselves in their roles and believe—whether in the will of God or in their fate—that they are exercising a true purpose that transcends the idea of having a job. Ellen eventually performed her task as one of our General Education 'gatekeepers' well enough to be hired and eventually became a candidate for professor.



MAPW Alumnus Jeff Cebulski Taber Award winner Hunter Arnold, and Ellen's husband Al Taber

One group of "patients" Ellen particularly cared about was the student-athlete. Like me, Ellen believed that different campus cultures serve significant purposes in the holistic education of young adults. She also, like me, felt that athletics was important but had to be integrated into the general academic purpose of the university. Thus, she began a personal effort to reach out to KSU athletes, to mentor them as they began their time in the post-secondary world. She encouraged their advisors to schedule them into her classes. She made sure they came

over to her English building office for course material review. Eventually, her efforts, with her quiet entreaties to fellow faculty, led to KSU forming an official student-athlete mentoring program.

As her KSU career moved forward, Ellen became a published writer (her book *Tybee Days* is, according to one source, housed in the Jefferson Reading Room in the Library of Congress). An accomplished educator, Ellen was ultimately stymied in her attempt to become a professor, but she continued to be involved in her work and our department even while dealing with some family issues. I know because we had several fruitful conversations about Gen Ed pedagogy during her last two years at KSU.

Ellen retired in 2013, and settled into an active post-educational life of service to her family and to her community. So it was a complete shock when, in April 2014, we were informed of Ellen's death, due to a heart attack.

Reaction within the department to this bad news was swift. Talk of memorial efforts began. The English Department, with an idea supplied and organized by MAPW Professor Beth Giddens, decided to create a memorial garden in a cove by the English Building, a wonderful remembrance that can be visited right now.

Meanwhile, I was grieving like many others. A pivotal person in my professional life was gone, and I was motivated to find a way to honor her. A memorial scholarship seemed a worthy vehicle, but I wanted it to reflect the cross-departmental spirit of Ellen's career. I decided to contact Mike Redd, who served as the academic overseer for the Athletic Department during my graduate years. Mike put me in contact with the department, and the planning began. After a few hits and misses, the Ellen Taber Memorial Scholarship was founded. Every year, a \$1000 grant will be awarded to a student-athlete or a student who served a meaningful role within the athletic department. The catch was that this student cannot be receiving any other scholarship at the time of the award. The recipient would be an "old

fashioned" student-athlete type, a true amateur who would have to be in good or significantly improving academic status and of good character. Serving the athletic department or another department in off hours would be a plus. Therefore, the recipient could be a member of a team, one of the trainers, or a tutor to athletes.

While I am responsible to provide funding for the scholarship, I was able to open the scholarship for gifts through the KSU Foundation. With the generous support of Ellen's family and of English Department members and alumni, we were able to grant the first Ellen Taber Memorial Scholarship last year to Hunter Arnold, a senior member of the Track and Field team. The Athletic Department generously organized a ceremony for the occasion that included Ellen's husband Al and Hunter's parents.

I am happy to say that our 2017 campaign, which included a matching donor, has not only garnered funds for this year's award but also given a huge boost to funding for the 2018 award. Our matching donor will be a part of the next campaign as well.

Knowing this, if you have become interested in contributing to this scholarship, please follow this guideline: for a one-time, single contribution, go to www.ksuowls.com/ellentaber and follow directions (the gift is automatically considered tax-deductible). If you wish to commit to a continuous, renewable (such as yearly) contribution, no matter how little or much, contact Erin Wissing in the Athletic Department or contact me at jmc8157@kennesaw.edu.

Remembering Ellen by this direct connection to student success at KSU is the least I can do to honor her legacy and the legacy of the MAPW program.



Professor Darren Crovitz, Cebulski, Taber Award winner Alexis Starks, MAPW Emeritus Professor Bob Barrier at award ceremony



Ellen Taber, author of *Tybee Days*