

Making things happen in the schools of San Francisco

By Caroline Drewes

AN ANONYMOUS WOMAN, deeply moved by the Richard Burton production of "Camelot" and looking for a way to implement the idea suddenly blossoming in her imagination, gave \$37,200 to The San Francisco Education Fund so that 1,500 high school students could attend a matinee performance, in the best seats. She specified that the tickets not be a reward for achievement, but a gift.

For some of these young people, it was their first live theater. For all of them, it was an extraordinary experience, one that spilled over into their studies; the School District's curriculum department having incorporated "Camelot's" story and music and symbolism — the "highest order of chivalry, the impossible dream" — into English and music and drama classes.

To Gladys Thacher, executive director of the nearly-two-year-old San Francisco Education Fund, and to all her cohorts, the unknown woman's splendid gesture symbolized that for which the Fund stands. It was a confirmation of the role the organization was established to play: it was founded to raise money from private and corporate sources for use by the San Francisco public schools in enrichment programs.

The unique afternoon at the Golden Gate Theater was a joyous occurrence in a time in civic history when the public schools have been suffering from a crisis of quality and low esteem. To Gladys Thacher it was a harbinger, an example of serendipity.

Serendipity.

There's a charming, evocative word with even some implications of mystery, as befitting the specific case of the nameless woman and the theater tickets; and it keeps emerging when Thacher speaks in any depth about her life or her work. She is a believer in serendipity. In her own life,

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Gladys Thacher believes in serendipity: 'You cannot tell what is going to happen'

Examiner/Paul Glines

she has always thought it would make things happen. As indeed it has. "In the case of 'Camelot,'" she says, "a woman wanted to do something and there was a way . . . Sometimes you don't know who is going to speak for you. And indeed, you cannot tell what is going to happen."

And so, as serendipity would have it, there on Market Street the other afternoon, were Gladys Thacher and Mary Lowrey Gregory, the Fund's development officer, and Carol Choye, coordinator of curriculum for San Francisco schools, and all the others involved in the facilitation of the unknown woman's dream, watching 1,500 exuberant kids converge upon the theater.

Five days earlier, Thacher had received the Commission on the Status of Women's Award for Outstanding Achievement, sharing honors at a luncheon at the Sheraton Palace with Vilma Martinez, president of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

She is known as Gladys to her friends and the people with whom she has worked through her years of volunteer community service. She is an activist, her primary commitment devoted to programs designed to further educational and employment opportunities.

As an undergraduate majoring in philosophy at Smith College, and during a year in Paris and as the bride of her San Francisco attorney husband, and even later, Gladys wanted to be a painter. More than that, an excellent painter. Her blond hair was long and twisted in a casual knot when she first came here, and she strode around in a sweeping wool cape from Scotland, given her by her husband's parents. She studied at the California School of Fine Arts.

Looking back, she says, "I loved those days, but the painting came to an end, and an expectation for a life career came to an end. Having talent and not using it had never occurred to me. I had high expectations. But I did give it up, and I knew it was the right thing to do."

She reared four children instead, and took care of a big house. And, being Gladys, she soon found within herself interests and gifts beyond her talent as an artist. And finally, all the pieces of her life fit together, there was a feeling of continuity, of working with the same ingredients, and she began to feel more successful, as she puts it with the suggestion of diffidence with which she speaks of herself.

Some of the things she did:

She went on the board of Conard House, the halfway house for mental patients. Fascinated by human behavior, she enrolled in graduate school at San Francisco State and earned a degree in counseling. This meant "a lot of interesting work on a one-to-one basis, and a chance for me

to grow and express my feelings, realizing that if you meet people in a condition of trust and friendship you will get that back."

She began thinking about people needing jobs, and that led to her founding Enterprise for High School Students, an employment resource for young people, which she took on as a full-time job herself, but without pay. She believes in grassroots, in the organic concept, "and you have to stay with it. And you need to start in an orderly way."

Enterprise became established, and after a while the Thacher living room no longer crawled with kids, as headquarters were found elsewhere. Today, it is located on Sacramento Street above Gaston's Ice Cream parlor. (Last year, proprietor Gaston offered each re-registering student a discount on an ice cream cone.) To Gladys, Enterprise is much more than a job agency; it is an opportunity for high school-age students to prove what they can do, to grow.

She started a job awareness program in the high schools, calling it Operation Bridge, her idea "to develop a comprehensive career awareness curriculum from kindergarten on, to relate what a child is doing in school to the bigger world outside, to show him what society is all about."

And in 1974, to fill a need felt by a different segment of the population, she founded Alumnae Resources, a consortium providing support and networks for Bay Area women in search of jobs and careers. The stated purpose is twofold: "to help women identify, translate and use their liberal arts skills in the work world; and to help college-educated women attain professional and economic parity with men." Once again the Thacher living room was filled with people and activity; last year a commercial office on Mission Street and an executive director were selected.

And now Gladys is "very high" on the San Francisco Education Fund, arriving at her Post Street office via Muni express at 8 every morning. When she talks about her life and her work, sitting at her desk facing the morning sun, she looks out the window or obliquely at a corner of her desk and speaks thoughtfully, almost as though to herself, weighing and considering and honing and rephrasing her thoughts. Her eyes, when she looks squarely at the person she addresses, are an astonishing turquoise blue, shaped like a cat's.

She says she feels very grateful for the experience she has had, and for the present opportunity "to bring together in some kind of permanent relationship, San Francisco and its schools." She speaks of the influx of students from all over the world, the strikes and violence and schools closing,

What the fund is doing for students

YOU MAY NOT know it, but a lot of Good Things seem to be happening in the schools. For instance:

- Using a \$3,000 grant from the San Francisco Education Fund, and with the help of Alvarado Arts Workshop, students and teachers from Galileo, Mission, and Washington high schools cooperated to produce FACETS, a literary/arts publication that has earned wide recognition, and may, for some of the students, be the first step toward careers.

- A solar greenhouse was established at the New Traditions Center, an alternative kindergarten through fifth grade school at Raphael Weill school, to show how an alternative form of energy works and also to grow food for the various animals kept at the school and cared for by the kids. The Fund provided \$5,000; the California Conservation Corps built the greenhouse itself.

- An after school computer tutorial program was approved at the William R. deAvila Elementary School. Teacher Ellen Benjamin received a grant of \$1,950 to implement this project, which will put the school's 250 students through the computer for a profile of their language and math needs, then use the computer in after-school workshops to help students master basic skills.

- Construction of a shortwave radio system at the Aptos Middle School was implemented to teach the rudiments of electronics and electrical theory.

The San Francisco Education Fund solicits money from foundations, corporations and individuals and channels it into specific projects located on school sites. As its first priority, the fund considers "proposals originating from the school community that inject a creative approach to the learning situation." These must: keep alive student eagerness to learn; improve basic learning skills; assist underachieving students to reach their maximum potential; help talented students develop their skills in art, science and the humanities; equip students with essential competencies in order to use their unique skills in jobs and careers; involve the community in the improvement of education, including the use of the city's rich cultural, scientific, business and intellectual resources.

Organized through a grant by the S. H. Cowell Foundation, the Fund is the first organization ever established to serve as a link between corporations and the San Francisco schools. Historically, there has been a vast amount of mistrust between the corporate and the education worlds, Gladys Thacher points out. "What we try to do is act as a transparent vehicle between corporate donors and projects in the schools."

"What we do is give out small amounts of money to specific programs that are innovative and, if they work, can be applied to other schools in the system as well."

For the 1980-81 school year, a total of 49 proposals were submitted to the Fund by teachers and principals from elementary, middle and high schools throughout the city. Nineteen programs were awarded grants, which totaled \$67,062.

of "how isolated and impoverished and lacking in morale the schools feel," but she says, "I'm hopeful about the schools; let's not say system, I shy away from systems. I think the schools are turning around, that there's a rise in educational achievement. If confronted by funding to improve instruction, the schools and teachers do follow through: "You can change a negative to a positive, not immediately, but we are a start, we are a way, a dynamic kind of conduit."