

Chapter 9

The Ward-Belmont Years

"The academic story of Ward-Belmont has never been told," Dr. Ivarlou Duncan commented as we discussed her career at the school

"I'm aware of that," I said, "but my interest is in the life of the Principal of twenty years, under whose tutelage it was a cultural citadel and academically excellent. Annie Allison served with three outstanding presidents: J.D. Blanton, J.W. Barton, J.E. Burk. Let us hope some day an industrious doctoral student will paint the academic portrait of Ward-Belmont in a thesis. How did Annie Allison influence you when you taught there?"

"She impacted my young career tremendously," Dr. Duncan replied. "I'm amazed when I recall the camaraderie and respect that grew between us. I was much younger and taught in the college department, but we sat at the same luncheon table each day in the main dining room. That table became rather famous. It was a topic-table—one day we would discuss current literature, one day we'd critique the newest *Atlantic Monthly Magazine* (Miss Annie took the lead when Eudora Welty published a new story; she loved this Southern writer.) At many lunches we discussed a play or an opera appearing in Nashville. The teachers who usually sat with us were Martha Ordway, Elleen Ransom, Louise Gordon, Emily Throne, Louise Herron, Mary Norris and "Jackie" (Vera) Hay. The rule was that you spoke to everyone if you had something to say."

"We often had discussions on a woman's place in the world," Dr. Duncan continued. "One conversation I remember well, for Miss Annie had just returned from a Headmistress Conference for the Southern Association of Private Schools. She was quite active in this. She brought to us the principal speech by Margery Nicholson of Columbia University, *The 3Rs of Women*, those being Reading, Riting and Research. But her thesis was women can excel in all areas except research. They are not free to give unbridled time to study as men can, because they are responsible for life's fundamentals, i.e., homemaking and parenting. All the time we were friends, Miss Annie was actively pursuing better recognition for women. Oh! she was not a woman's rights advocate in today's terms, but she believed the women of her day did not have proper recognition for what they

contributed to society. She felt that academically and politically women were not "respected for their capabilities." Dr. Duncan remembered that, "she enjoyed the story of my mother's first trip to the polls. We lived in the Village of Bellevue and when suffrage came, our voting place was the country store. Father came home early to stay with us (three daughters), Mother was all dressed and donned her hat and walked briskly down Maple Road holding her head high. She was back within the hour flushed and full of her first political action. Miss Annie recalled her first time to vote when she was in a group of Tennessee's leading Suffragettes. One teacher was delighted by Anne Morrow Lindbergh's new writings so we discussed her many times at lunch. Her first published articles were in the *Atlantic Monthly*. (When I think about it we were probably a snobbish bunch!)"

(Dr. Duncan became the "bridge-over-troubled-waters" when she was asked to stay on in the English Department at the four-year Belmont College when the Baptists bought the school "I was the English relic from Ward-Belmont they carried over into the new college. The administration was wonderful to me and allowed me to gather up things, memorabilia, and take them to our Tennessee Archives Library.")

"One day at lunch I was telling the teachers about my mother trying to get a PTA started at the new Bellevue High School" Dr. Duncan reminisced. "Miss Annie asked, 'Does the school have a library yet?' "

"No, they don't."

"I have so many books from my Girls' Preparatory School packed away, I'd like to give the suitable ones to the high school to start their library, Miss Annie said.

"The new PTA accepted this offer and it started the nucleus of the library. Some of us took the primary books to the Harpeth Valley Elementary school," Dr. Duncan recalled.

In the words of her peer group, "Annie Allison had intellectual ambitions for everyone of her girls." But Shirley Caldwell Patterson discovered she was intimately involved in their health also. When she was a second grader, Annie was in her first year as Principal and a note came from Shirley's mother, "Please see that Shirley drinks this carton of fresh milk each day. Our doctor says she's malnourished. Thanks, Cousin. Love, Ellen" One Friday a wealthy New York industrialist and his wife were looking over the school, considering it for their daughter. They encountered Annie Allison in the hall standing over little Shirley monitoring her consumption of a jar of milk. Miss Allison smiled weakly not wishing to be recognized and quickly allowed Shirley to retreat into her classroom (Shirley remembers after that, her milk supplement was to be found in Cousin's office cooling on the window sill)

Along with academic effort, the principles of good health were stressed. In the early days of the school only fruit and wheat crackers were permitted as snacks. A ground swell of concern by Miss Catherine Morrison, head of the Physical Education Department, and Annie Allison produced good posture exercises that rivaled intramurals. All the students had posture buttons, posture teams, posture prizes. (To this day, slumped shoulders draw my hands as if to press the owner back