

Professor, storyteller: Remembering Ruth Stratton

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Peer through the doorway in a professor's office, and you'll see all sorts of interesting items: books galore, artwork, tchotchkes from around the world.

Ruth Stratton, as it turns out, had a cast iron bathtub lined with fur – her reading space, former colleagues said. This surreal item was inspired by the ultimate Surrealist: Salvadore Dali, whose window display at high-end Big Apple retailer Bonwit Teller included a bathtub lined with black Persian lamb and filled with water.

Unlike Dali's tub, Stratton's was dry and the fur came from her mother's two fur coats, which she had placed inside. In its way, the tub came to symbolize Stratton's essence: innovative, intellectual and unique.

She passed away peacefully Jan. 26 at the age of 81, after decades of inspiring SUNY Broome students and audiences enchanted by her work as a professional storyteller.

"Ruth was an innovative, compassionate teacher. She championed the underdog, and was always willing (in fact, pleased) to do what she could to help a struggling student," remembered English Professor Greg Sareceno. "She also had a quirky, unique sense of humor."

Born in New York City, she moved – at age 13 – to a far different environment: a dairy farm in the rural upstate community of South Plymouth. In 1951, she graduated from Norwich High School and married William Stratton.

As a young mother, she later went to college, graduating from SUNY Broome – then known as Broome Tech – in 1966, surrounded by her four children. She then went on to Binghamton University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in literature. By 1970, she made an appearance in Broome Tech's yearbook yet again – this time as an instructor in the Liberal Arts division.

She spent her entire career teaching English and literature at SUNY Broome, retiring in June 1996. While there, she pioneered an effort to bring English courses to inmates at the nearby Broome County Jail.

"Broome was like part of her family," said her son-in-law, Business instructor Stephen Ohl.

Now an assistant professor herself, Joyce Prindle took Stratton's English class during her first semester as a BCC student in 1993. The two remained friends ever since, and Stratton made a surprise visit to Prindle's classroom last year to speak with students.

“She was a nurturing, creative woman who was clearly in her element in the classroom,” Prindle said. “She truly cared about her students.”

When she wasn't in the classroom, Stratton worked as a professional storyteller, traveling the country to demonstrate her skills at national festivals. She would sometimes be accompanied by her youngest and very special daughter, Sarah, as she travelled to festivals. Often, Sarah would sign while her mother narrated the stories.

Stratton also participated in writing groups and traveled all over the world, from the Alaska and the Caribbean to Europe, Japan and the Soviet Union. She was a fan, too, of Liberal Arts Dean Michael Kinney's jazz band and made it a point to make their shows. She loved to dance, he said.

“She had a real love for the arts,” said Dean Kinney, adding: “She always had a smile on her face.”

When it came to music, Stratton didn't just love jazz; she and her friend Professor Hal Sunshine introduced Prindle to the opera for the first time years ago.

“Ruth's love of the arts was obvious to all who made her acquaintance,” Prindle said.

The fur-lined tub, as it happens, was in Professor Stratton's office in old Y building and later made its way to the Alms House, where her office was practically on the front porch, Dean Kinney remembered. It was a tiny space and passersby could see her, grading papers and diligently at work.

Stratton had an appreciation for the campus' history, and remembered the former occupants of the Alms House with a campus ceremony in the fall. Years ago, the campus was home to the county Poor Farm, along with featured grazing cows, gardens and fruit trees. At the sole remaining apple tree, Stratton would make a short speech about the former residents, and invite students and faculty to write a wish on a slip of paper and place it in the tree's cavity.

Her reputation as a consummate academic with a talent for engaging students in learning preceded her, even among colleagues in different divisions.

“Ruth is one of the many distinguished faculty who helped SUNY Broome pave the road to excellence as a college,” Professor Mid Semple said.

**Surrounded by her four children, Ruth Stratton
graduates from Broome Tech in 1966.**

**Professor Ruth Stratton in the 1970
yearbook.**

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