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Mary Soens Platner : Distinguished Achievement Award - Public Service

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2005 Distinguished Achievement Award - Public Service

Mary Soens Platner '71

“Whatsoever you do to the least of My people, you do unto Me.” (Matthew 25:40) Christ surely must have had someone like Mary Soens Platner in mind when he spoke these words. Like so many Distinguished Achievement Award recipients over the years, Mary’s service to others began as a student at St. Norbert College.

In her junior year, Mary led a successful effort to establish the college’s campus nursery school for preschool children. The program was designed to provide an on-campus laboratory experience for St. Norbert students in education and in developmental psychology. In order to make this project a reality, she needed to obtain a childcare license from Brown County. This program eventually enabled the college to have a teacher certification program in early childhood education. The offspring of this project is today’s long-running childcare center, which serves an average of 60 families per year, works with about 35 children daily (the children of students, faculty, staff and community persons), employs three fulltime and about 25 part-time people, and provides learning opportunities for about 350 St. Norbert students in psychology and education.

Since then, Mary has devoted her career to working with Special Education children. Shortly after graduation, she studied early childhood education at the University of Michigan, and in 1976, she received an M.A. in Learning Disabilities from Cardinal Stritch College.

Before assuming her present position, Mary worked in the Milwaukee Public Schools as a learning disabilities diagnostician and as a teacher in the generic early childhood Exceptional Education program. From 1980-86, she worked for the Child Development Center for the Tulsa Country (Okla.) schools where she taught in preschool programs for multi-handicapped preschoolers and K-6th graders, and taught emotionally disturbed 7-12th graders.

For the past 19 years, Mary has taught in the Scottsdale, Arizona, public schools. Her work there has involved team-teaching K-2nd graders with significant disabilities, and team-teaching K-3rd graders with high functioning autism. Her concern for helping children with learning disabilities led her to initiate, co-author and lobby for textbook accessibility legislation for all K-12 students with disabilities in Arizona; the Arizona Accessible Textbook law was established on May 6, 2004.

Beyond the classroom, Mary has been very active in the National Council for Exceptional Children, and is a past-president of the Arizona Council for Exceptional Children. In addition to the numerous professional affiliations, Mary has been recognized for her efforts with the Arizona Federation Council for Exceptional Children's 1994 "Special Education Teach of the Year" award, the 1997 "Samuel A. Kirk Special Education Teacher of the Year" award, and the 2002 "Distinguished Service to Exceptional Children" award.

Mary's St. Norbert education impacted her choice in life because it "went well beyond the confines of classroom walls...and was fluid enough to allow a somewhat traditional education to morph into a much more intense, personalized experience. Faculty encouraged students to explore concepts and their implications, to experiment with ideas, to assume additional responsibilities and roles, and to take risks." These were the impetus that led Mary to help establish the SNC nursery school and to start the Psychology Club.

She's not done, however. Her immediate plans and goals include working with a nonprofit organization to secure funds to assist schools in implementing the Arizona Textbook Law, to secure \$4 million to help Arizona schools purchase text-to-speech and voice recognition software, and to work with publishers to embed evidence-based learning supports into textbooks. At the national level, she plans to work at increasing educators' awareness and working knowledge of accessible textbooks and core curriculum.

Mary Soens Platner has clearly lived up to her own words, when she said, "I still believe that collaboration in a respectful community benefits all involved while also being reinvigorating for the soul, mind and body."

St. Norbert College

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