

# THE Unionite

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## Curtain Call

Freda Kenner, '42, reflects on a teaching drama and speech to mor



"I've loved the stage since I was a child," Miss Kenner, now retired to her hometown of Bells, Tennessee after 57 years in the classroom, recalls. "When I was a little girl, I'd make up plays with my friends and we'd perform them for the other neighborhood children in the loft of my family's barn. We charged a penny for admission."

Miss Kenner's love for the performing arts did not diminish as she reached adulthood. In 1934, she began teaching drama and speech, launching a career that would span almost six decades.

"Few careers outside of teaching were acceptable for young ladies at the time, so I began teaching at Bells High School," Miss Kenner said. "But I'm not sorry I did; I enjoyed every minute of it."

Miss Kenner's former pupils are not sorry, either. After 57 years, 10,000 students and more than 250 productions, Miss Kenner still receives calls and letters almost daily from her former students. Her 25-year tenure at Messick High School in Memphis left a strong impression on several generations of students.

"Miss Kenner made us feel capable of doing anything," Charlotte Turner, a Union alumna and a student of Miss Kenner's at Messick, said. "We came in as children of the depression, shy and lacking confidence, but her classes changed the way we thought of ourselves. By the time we graduated, we were quite bold."

Miss Kenner's dedication to bringing out the best in each of her students helped launch several careers in the performing arts. Three of her Messick students, Patricia Welting, Ruth Welting and Nancy Tatum, went on to perform with New York's Metropolitan Opera, while countless others made names for themselves in local and regional performances.

"I never taught anybody how to sing, to act, or to be a star," Miss Kenner insists. "I only wanted to teach my students how to take the stage, to express themselves, and to hold their own in all types of situations. Poise and confidence mean a lot, not just in performance, but in whatever a person does."

"She made us feel like we could face the world and be whatever we wanted to be," Turner agreed.

"I was a teacher at the best possible time in history to teach," Miss Kenner says. "Not only were the students eager to learn, but the parents were behind their children and saw that they achieved. I wish it were still like that today."

The special rapport Miss Kenner shared with students and parents produced many landmark performances. Rehearsals were often held at 6:00 a.m. so Messick football players could participate in the plays. This dedication was rewarded, as her annual children's plays attracted such a following that performances soon outgrew Messick's auditorium and moved to Ellis Auditorium in downtown Memphis.

"All of the students worked hard at what they did, and it was a wonderful feeling to see the community and parents show such interest," said Miss Kenner, whose favorite plays to direct include "Our Town," "The Sound of Music," "Twelfth Night," "I Remember Mama," "The Wizard of Oz," and "Hansel and Gretel."

Although she retired from Messick in 1971 to move back to Bells and teach privately, Miss Kenner regularly attends Messick reunions, where she is warmly remembered by former students.

"Students who haven't seen Miss Kenner in decades throng to her; she had that strong an influence on our lives," Turner said.

After an additional 14 years of giving private speech and drama lessons, Miss Kenner retired from the teaching profession in 1985. She has not mellowed in retirement, however, as her list of accomplishments continues to grow.

In August 1994, Miss Kenner was elected to the Educational Theatre Association Hall of Fame in San Francisco. Later that same month, during Theatre Memphis' 75th anniversary gala, Miss Kenner was honored for producing so many of the actors who later graced the Theatre Memphis stage. Finally, in September 1994, she received an Outstanding Achievement Award from Ned McWherter, the third Tennessee governor to recognize her accomplishments in the classroom.

"I've never had so much attention in all my life," Miss Kenner says. "Being honored in this way is one of the greatest things ever to happen to me."

Even in retirement, Miss Kenner tries to stay current with developments in the performing arts world. Until last year, she travelled to New York each Christmas to see the latest plays and musicals. Today, she still visits Memphis regularly and remains in touch with former colleagues from her teaching career.

Miss Kenner remembers each of her 57 years as a teacher fondly.

"Teaching has been my life; when my children achieved, that was my payoff," Miss Kenner says. "If a child can achieve just once and build his or her confidence, life will never again be the same. Those are the moments I'll never forget."

"I remember visiting a blind woman once, and asking her, 'don't you get lonesome?' She replied, 'No, I still have my memories.' Now I know what she meant. I miss teaching, even after ten years of retirement, but my memories will always be here."

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