SHAPING THE FUTURE

A TEACHER’S SELFLESS ACT ALMOST 30 YEARS AGO IS STILL CHANGING LIVES TODAY

Dr. Barbara Stone (left) wrote a personal check almost 30 years so that Trudi Jeter ’82 could graduate from Texas A&M. Jeter went on to become a high school teacher who has encouraged many bright young students to attend Texas A&M University. She is also the mother of Stephanie Jeter ’06, the author of this story.

Story & Photography
By Stephanie Jeter ’06
I have this picture in my mind of the woman who changed my mother’s life. Tall, but not too tall. Not unapproachable, because that would conflict with the warm “education-can-change-the-world” type of mentoring she’s famous for in my family. She’s a genius yet unassuming, and drinks tea out of mugs that say “#1 Teacher.” And my guess is she wears a lot of earth tones.

I’ve heard of Dr. Barbara Stone all my life, but really, I have no idea what to expect, having never met the Texas A&M professor who wrote my mother a personal check that allowed her to finish school. I have no idea what to expect, and we’re on our way to Alpine to see her right now. More than 500 miles one-way, and we’ll cover most of it before the sun sets below the horizon. We’re driving straight for it—my mother, Trudi Jeter ’82; Dr. Stone’s former coworker, Judy Shaver, and me, guided west on Highway 190 by a GPS named GiGi.

To say that Dr. Stone is part of our family would not be an overstatement. While it’s true that I’ve never met her, she’s the reason my mother—the dark-haired woman who gave me her laugh, her sense of adventure and the ability to see the beauty in anything—can put Class of ’82 in her e-mail address. She’s the reason why my brother and me were woken up for school every school morning with a record of the Aggie War Hymn, and why my little brother was almost named Kyle after Kyle Field. The fact that his birth fell on my father’s birthday was enough of a sign to change it to Stephen Neil Jeter II ’10. Our father is Stephen Neil Jeter ’81.

Dr. Stone is part of the reason why my mother is an educator and, in a roundabout way, why nine of her high school seniors are attending Texas A&M in the fall.

“She’s the reason. Make sure you make her the focus. It’s all Dr. Stone,” my mother said. We’re already 100 miles into this trip. The three of us are sitting at a picnic table in San Saba, stretching our legs after a rough bout of traffic in Copperas Cove. We’ve been on the road for two hours or so, but preparation for the trip started a good month ago when the Texas Aggie staff sat in a semicircle around the editor’s desk brainstorming education story ideas.

“Education changes people,” the brainstorm started. “An educator can alter a student’s entire life just by teaching them how to chase knowledge and by encouraging them to never stop.”

I knew of just the teacher. Her name came out of my mouth like a zing of static electricity.

“Dr. Barbara Stone.”

When my mother was at Texas A&M she worked two jobs in order to pay tuition and living expenses. “I was broke,” she said. “Completely broke. I would eat those little frozen pot pies every day because you could get them five for a dollar,” she said. Once she dug through her purse and found 29 cents, just the amount needed to get Pepe’s chips and salsa for supper. She doesn’t recall this to complain. Life experiences shaped who she is. But the fact remains; she had no money to spare.

She was an education major, and it was time to start her student teaching. Her professor told the class that all students with outside jobs would need to give their notice. He laid out all the responsibilities of a student teacher and concluded with a boisterous “no.” No, there was no time left for additional employment.

“No job?” my mother recoiled in her seat. Suddenly it was clear, she said. “I was done. There was no way I could continue with school. I had no money. None. I was so close, but there was nothing I could do,” she said.

Back and forth, she struggled internally. There must be something. A loan? No, she’d reached her max. Maybe a small job? A night one? But that wouldn’t be enough hours. She had already sold her blood plasma, what was left? Overcome at the ever-clearing realization that she indeed
had reached the end and would be leaving Texas A&M without a degree, my mother left the classroom. She sat down in the hallway of the sixth floor in Harrington. And she cried. “I’m talking big tears,” she said.

That’s when Shaver came walking by. Her office was also on the sixth floor of Harrington, where she worked as the secretary of American Humanics, a student organization that equips university students to work in American nonprofit organizations. Dr. Stone was the advisor for the group.

After listening to the unavoidable truth, Shaver continued on her way, rerouting in order to cast her shadow in the doorway of Dr. Stone’s office. Without a word to anybody about her plans, Dr. Stone sent word for my mother to come see her, asked for a budget and pulled out her personal checkbook, changing everything. Dr. Stone taught my mother how to chase knowledge and encouraged her to never stop.

My mother told this story to her last-period class before she, Shaver and I left town on Friday. Upon her finish, one of her students—a girl named Marissa—turned to Shaver. Fixing her eyes upon the woman who played a role in allowing my mother to be her teacher, she said two words—two of the best words.

“Thank you,” Marissa said.

ROAD TRIP

“What town is this?” asked my mother.

“Brady,” I said.

“I’ve heard of Brady,” Shaver said.

“It sounds like a dog’s name,” my mom said.

“That’s because it is a dog’s name,” I said, the name of our neighbor’s arthritic lab who growls like a bear.

And the car erupted in laughter, the thick kind full of history and shiny white teeth. Laughter comes easily on a road trip. It was like we were volcanoes, and any hint of a chuckle was enough seismic activity to shake loose an explosion the size of Mount St. Helens.

Nine hours in a car gives a lot of time for talk. By the time we hit Fort Stockton, I learned all about how Shaver organized my parent’s madcap wedding, and how my father, who never played the organ before or since, played the bridal march for Shaver’s daughter’s wedding. “They put his finger on one note and told him to play the dooo do do doo do doo do dooo,” Shaver said.

Mount St. Helens erupted again. Dr. Stone came to my parents’ wedding, too. An encourager both inside and outside of the classroom, she cared. “She made a difference in a lot of people’s lives. Their stories may never be told, so I’m saying my part now,” my mother said.

Though it’s true that learning about Dr. Stone and witnessing the Jeter/Stone reunion was the entire point of us driving the horizontal line from central to far West Texas for the week—
end, I think one of the reasons I’m so spellbound by “Stone stories” tonight is because nights in West Texas are jet-black dark.

I can see nothing. Not in front of me. Not behind me. Even my headlights, consistently strong and piercing in Central Texas, seem scared into dimness by the intense darkness. We haven’t turned on the radio the whole trip, choosing subconsciously to fill the car’s cab with conversation instead. This is the only time when I’m tempted to break our streak.

“Tell me more about Dr. Stone,” I ask, desperate for distraction. “Paint me a picture.”

Yes—color up this dark sky with a tale.

“I just know that Dr. Stone took a great interest in each of her kids,” Shaver said. “Her door was always open; she never said she didn’t have time. She was always on-hand, always showed an interest. She was just a down-home woman with no pretense.”

Stone was inquisitive, she loved nature, believed in education, and “you didn’t mess with her,” Shaver said. She lifted her tea, or was it Dr Pepper? With 50-cent refills, who can remember?

“I just loved being around her,” my mother said. “She is a wonderful woman.”

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School’s library and talked really loudly. I tend to do that when excited, that and wave my hands around like a drum major. Thankfully, my quirks were accepted by the librarian with a grin.

“I’m talking to a few of my mother’s students who have chosen to go, and one who is extremely hopeful for admission, to Texas A&M in the fall. My mother teaches special education classes, along with mainstream health and speech at Troy High School. She also drives a morning and afternoon bus and coaches tennis, cross country running and JV cheerleading. Try to fence her in; she breaks through teacher stereotypes using a district yellow bus.

You know who else talks loudly and uses her hands?

“Mrs. Jeter would talk a lot about A&M,” said Jaime Hernandez ’14. “When she found out that I was applying to Texas A&M, we talked about it even more. When she found out that I was joining the Corps, too, she’d tell me about leadership and all that.”

When Hernandez got the official word that he had been accepted, the first person he told was my mother, rushing to her classroom with the good news. He wants to play the bass in the Fightin’ Texas Aggie Band.

Then there’s the daughter of two Longhorns, Emily Roessler ’14. My mother took Emily’s older sister, Julie ‘11, on a tour of Texas A&M during her senior year. “I tell them, I’m going to give you the good, the bad and the ugly,” my mother says. I still remember the tour she gave me when I was an incoming freshman. “If you’re lost, look around for the Academic Building. Once you know where you are, it’ll be easier to find your class.” She reiterated the advice in a few early e-mails, signed with BTHO whoever the football team was playing that weekend and “I love you.”

Emily is following Julie to A&M in the fall. “Got another one,” my mother joked.

“Your mom helped me with the application process and told me which scholarships to apply for and made sure I did it,” said Kayci Cox ’14. “She showed me that Texas A&M was a place to get excited about. I saw her passion and thought ‘I want that, too.’”

She was watching. “Educators are the most powerful people in the world,” my mother said. “It’s a little scary, because with great power comes greater responsibility.”

TAKE A LEFT AFTER MCDONALD’S

“All right, Dr. Stone” I chirped into my cell phone from the side of Highway 67. “We’ll see you soon.” We are about an hour away. “I’ll be the one in the dirty Jeep,” she said when we finalized our meeting spot.
“She drives a Jeep?” my mother asked. “That is so Dr. Stone.”

The left blinker preceded a left turn and we spot her.

My mother’s door opens, she takes three steps, and in an instant, they embrace.

This is it, I realize, this is the reason that we’ve been in the car for more than 500 miles, why my legs are weak and my belly is making noises trying to identify the random road trip snacks I swallowed. This is why we’re here. But I can’t pick up my pen to record it. Instead, I’m held rapt, gripped by the site of my mother’s face. It’s shining, literally. The sun’s beams are bouncing off her cheeks dejected, conscious that they’ve been beat by her radiance.

Had my mother been smiling like this last night, I could not have described West Texas as dark.

“This is her,” I think. “This is Dr. Stone.”

**FOLLOW THE LEADER**

She lives eight miles into the mountains so we follow her up and around cliffs of rock and a clump of mailboxes. At age 81, Dr. Stone is “exactly the same,” my mother says. Stone pulls into her driveway, a rocky pathway surrounded by brush, cactus and other West Texas drought-tolerables.

“We can go in the front or wade through dogs,” she says. Two terriers bark at her chain linked fence. Having a solid fence would be a crime with the view she has—you can see mountains everywhere.

Her house is made of wood and is painted the faintest color of a Robin’s egg. You can see the wood’s knots through the paint. Her Gulfstream camper is parked in the shed. Three cats wait patiently inside a house of windows.

The sleepy house comes alive at her arrival. It could have been that the cats were pleased that their momma was home, or that the two terriers—Quincy and Simon—raced ahead, roughing up the still mountain air. Or it could have been because the house was so closely a reflection of Stone, that all the photos, all the antiques, even the walls stood up straighter at the entrance of their illustrator.

There was a painting of a horse done by a student’s brother who lived in China, a loom from which Stone weaves the patterns of her ancestors, antiques, photos of friends, her scanner and CB radio, and enough seating to entertain if her entire class wanted to visit. She moved here in 1991 after retiring from Texas A&M as a professor of methods of teaching adults. “I went back to the several places I’d lived, but this one felt like home,” she said.

One hundred miles north of Mexico and 100 miles south of New Mexico, Alpine is about 140 miles away from the nearest “decent” grocery store. This is where she lives, here in Alpine and forever my mother’s memory.

That’s what teachers do, my mother insists. “Education is the future. Period. What we chose to do with students today will dictate tomorrow.” Students will repeat the mistakes of previous generations unless they’re taught, Stone says. “Everything is education,” she said.

**INTERCONNECTION**

“Everyone has a Dr. Stone,” my mother said, apparently, even Dr. Stone. When Dr. Stone worked for the National Girl Scouts, her former boss, Catherine Hammett—a legend on the national staff—gave her $1,000 for a doctorate degree. “She wouldn’t let me pay her back,” she said. “She told me to pass it on.”

So, she did. It paid the last semester’s tuition for my mother. It paid tuition and bought a job-interview dress for a young lady by the name of Serena Tucker. It paid tuition for business school for the daughter of a bus driver with whom Dr. Stone had become close.

“Why did you choose each of those ladies?” I asked.

“Because I believed in each one of them,” Stone said.

We left Dr. Stone’s home before nightfall. She was expecting more company, and we needed to get going. Back in the car, the wind turbines that so enthusiastically waved us forward into West Texas now seemed to be waging farewell.

I was still thinking about my mother, Dr. Stone and Catherine Hammett when the sun set. The colors were beautiful and inimitable—each sunset is unique, a fingerprint of the day.

Every day is a new day, the perfect day to make a difference. My mother—the teacher—taught me that.