

Ethel Niejahr
2000 Friend of Education

There is no doubt that Ethel Niejahr's greatest influence remains with the hundreds of students who came to her math classes at Beaver Dam High School for over thirty years. As nominator Karl Nienhuis notes, "Ethel's greatest attribute was that she was totally and unselfishly committed to her students, her students, her students ... "

Niejahr was definitely "ahead of her time." She was a forerunner in teaching students through "hands-on" learning, in guiding students in career education, in the development of students' character, and in the pursuit of scholarships and other monies to help students with their post-high school education.

Maintaining strong ties with her students and her fellow math teachers was extremely important to Niejahr. Because she was determined to attract others into the teaching profession, she served as advisor for the Future Teacher's Club. Elaine Altemus Possin, who taught with her friend Ethel for many years, says Niejahr served as the liaison for AFS students so that she could continue her ties to BDHS, long after her retirement. Niejahr was a charter board member and leader in the Wisconsin Mathematics Council. She served the council as historian and exhibit chair until she was well into her 80's. Each year, Niejahr paid for student memberships in the WMC for promising college seniors who were mathematics education majors. Because of her contributions to the council and because of her friendship to all members - from students, to teachers, to college professors - the council established an annual college scholarship in her name.

Niejahr was devoted to her church, to helping others, and to her long-term friendships with people of all ages. She appreciated the beauty of art and nature as much as she appreciated the beauty of people. Christmas will never be the same without her personally designed greeting cards. She faithfully sent her own cards to everyone on her long list, right up to her death at the age of 92.

Even though her arthritis slowed her down physically in her last years, Niejahr's clear and creative mind continued to motivate her to keep in touch with many of her students and her large, extended family. For some, she was a mentor until her death. As former student, Joleen Wahlen shares, "Miss Niejahr could cut through the nonsense of life to live a very basic life - that, in reality, was a very extraordinary life."