

Worthy of ...

Helen Childs Boyden

by Orlee Marini-Rapoport '19

Senior Orlee Marini-Rapoport was selected as one of two inaugural Montague Grant recipients this past spring. Inspired by a quote from Bill Guthrie '43, she pursued answers to her research question in the Academy Archives:

What role did Helen Childs Boyden have within the Deerfield Academy community, and how did she influence the broader landscape of independent school education?



Helen Childs Boyden was before her time in many ways.

She helped to make complex decisions at a then male-dominated institution; her passion and fearlessness, combined with her willingness to rise to the expectations of a headmaster's wife, allowed her a unique amount of influence at a small New England boarding school that became a leader in secondary education. Her honorary Doctorate from Smith College says it all: She, "with some slight assistance from her husband, created in Deerfield Academy one of the truly great schools of the country," bearing witness to the fact that Mrs. Boyden poured her life into teaching and shaping Deerfield Academy into what it is today.

Born on September 20, 1883, Helen Childs grew up in the Town of Deerfield alongside several siblings. She attended the Academy, which was at that time the town's public high school, and as such, a coeducational institution. But after her sophomore year, her father, a well-known dairy farmer in the area, decided that she should transfer to Greenfield (MA) High School if she was to gain admittance to nearby Smith College in Northampton. After two years at Greenfield High, Helen Childs was indeed accepted into and attended Smith, graduating in 1904. She then headed to Stamford, Connecticut, that same year to teach at the Catherine Aiken School.



Above: Mrs. Boyden and her son Ted in Egypt in the 1960s

Left: 1912: Mr. and Mrs. Boyden (left and right), their son John, and an unidentified woman (center).



Not far away, Frank Boyden had graduated from Amherst College and begun his remarkable tenure as headmaster of Deerfield Academy in 1902. In 1905 he asked Helen Childs to take on a one-year teaching position at his school. He didn't want to hire her—he thought her lack of experience was problematic—but less than three years later, on June 27, 1907, she and Mr. Boyden were married in the Brick Church on Main Street. They had three children: John Cary Boyden, Theodore Childs Boyden, and Elizabeth Boyden. Mrs. Boyden took several years off from teaching to raise their children, but in 1913, at the encouragement of Mr. Boyden, she returned to the classroom as the Head of the Chemistry Department, and continued to teach until her retirement on June 30, 1968.

Deerfield was a very different place when the Boydens were first married, alumni note. Deerfield students led a constrained life even though there was no official “rule book” for the school. They generally didn't leave campus, did not have bicycles or cars, and had no access to radio. Students were required to check in with adults at each of several meetings per day, and they attended



Mrs. Boyden enriched the lives of Deerfield boys for decades. Some alumni point to her as the person who changed their lives forever.

church on Sundays. In addition, as Mr. Boyden began taking on male boarding students to rescue the school financially, the male-to-female ratio changed and eventually, in 1948, Deerfield became an all-boys institution. Mrs. Boyden was one of only a few women on campus; most teachers, and all students, were male.

Deerfield alumni remember that knowing Mrs. Boyden was one of the defining experiences of their time in high school. Mrs. Boyden enriched the lives of Deerfield boys for decades, and many remember their relationship to her fondly. Some alumni point to her as the person who changed their lives forever. While many recall that she was more “behind-the-scenes” than Mr. Boyden,

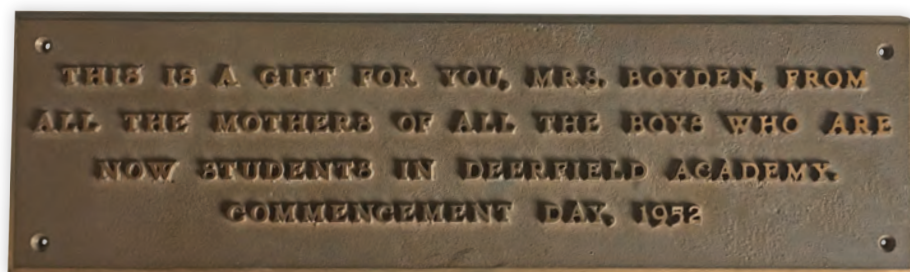
she also made an impression on her students, encouraging them to be curious chemists who did not fear complicated material. At the same time, she acted as a sort of stand-in mother or grandmother, comforting “her boys” and ensuring that each one was treated as an individual.

She took on a myriad of responsibilities at Deerfield. She was the “headmaster’s wife” as she was expected to be, opening their house to faculty every night for coffee and, on Sunday nights, for dinners, but she was also a quintessential member of the faculty. Some years, she taught more classes than any other teacher at Deerfield while scoring baseball games, reading a book or more a week, keeping up on current



Above: a 1958 certificate of “honorary membership” from the New England Association of Chemistry Teachers

Left: Mrs. Boyden’s Deerfield Medal—the Academy’s highest honor—awarded to her in 1962.



Above: the bronze plaque that accompanied the gift of Mrs. Boyden's greenhouse, which was attached to Ephraim Williams, the Boydens' residence from 1926 until their retirement in 1968 / Right: Mrs. Boyden's alma mater, Smith College, presented her with a Doctor of Humane Letters in 1934.



events, and traveling extensively during school breaks. She also maintained a garden next to Ephraim Williams House for many years—a gift from the mothers of the boys attending Deerfield in 1952.

Mrs. Boyden had some quirks, which former students remember warmly. She would arrive at Deerfield swim meets an hour before the start time and sit in the grandstand knitting; she didn't want to arrive after all the seats were taken and have a student offer to give his seat up for her. She loved the sentence "Possunt quia posse videntur" from Book V of Virgil's *Aeneid*, loosely translated as: "They can because they think they can."

According to alumni, Mrs. Boyden was someone you just didn't want to disappoint. Former students of hers admit to working harder in her class than in others because she had earned their deep respect through innovative and engaging teaching practices. As she stated during a dinner to mark Mr. Boyden's 50th anniversary at Deerfield (on April 29, 1952), Mrs. Boyden believed that "...the object of science is to teach you to search for the truth—to search for the truth by weighing all the facts." She constantly asked students to view chemistry through this lens, while at the same time making a notoriously complex subject accessible through various analogies to relationships between boys and girls—an approach she likely believed would be particularly memorable to teens at an all-boys school.

Forgiving and kind, Mrs. Boyden was also an exacting teacher who emphasized learning and intellectual curiosity. In the mid-1960s, she pushed for an expansion of the Deerfield curriculum: While Mr. Boyden believed that standard classes were sufficient, Mrs. Boyden urged him to introduce AP classes. She later joked that she had to use her "ultimate weapon"—tears—to finally convince him.

Beyond her commitment to academics and nurturing the whole student, what made Mrs. Boyden so successful was her complete sincerity. Many of "her boys" spoke of her so fondly because she truly delighted in teaching and interacting with them. On October 27, 1973, the *Deerfield Scroll* quoted Mrs. Boyden as saying, "When I die and go to heaven, I hope there is a blackboard, a piece

of chalk, and a lot of little boy angels who want to be taught. Then I shall be happy."

And she meant it. She taught her students both inside and outside of the classroom: She had a seemingly endless amount of advice for them, which she isolated in aphorisms that many of her former students remember to this day. These included: "Science is the search for pure knowledge, not for application"; "The difficult we do immediately—the impossible will take a little longer"; "Choose high failure rather than low success"; and, "You always have to sacrifice something little for something big." And despite the absence of an official Deerfield rule book, Mrs. Boyden's gentle reminder that "the trouble you don't get into, you won't have to get out of" instilled in students a desire to stay within the boundaries of the institution.

According to alumni, Mrs. Boyden was someone you just didn't want to disappoint. Former students of hers admit to working harder in her class than in others because she had earned their deep respect through innovative and engaging teaching practices.



One memorable day during a chemistry class, Mrs. Boyden snapped at Victor Butterfield, Class of 1922, who later became president of Wesleyan University, “Victor, when are you going to stop trying to remember and start trying to think?” That piece of advice, hidden in her question, stuck with the entire class. Years later, Mr. Butterfield would say, “I count Mrs. Boyden among the few great teachers I have ever had... She embodies, as do very few, the total wealth of qualities which make cultivated living an inspiring thing... She gives the life of the mind a dignity, a depth, and a range which command the respect of all.”

Peter Atkinson '62 was a student in Mrs. Boyden's math class as a junior. He later became close to her as both a family friend and colleague upon returning to Deerfield after college to teach. He describes her as “the sweetest, kindest, most generous human ever,” someone with a “super soft heart” yet “good standards.” He would not describe himself as mathematical, but found Mrs. Boyden to be a “brilliant teacher” who had an “instinct to feel for ways to make things memorable” while “being a wonderful person in the process.”

“She is a model of what a teacher ought to be,” Mr. Atkinson said, but he stressed that Mrs. Boyden “wasn't doing a job” but was instead “being herself.” She was innately generous and warm with an “adventurous mind,” and teaching and being a Headmaster's wife came easily to her.

He also noted that she was “sort of a grandmother to me and everybody” and remembers that Mrs. Boyden “was famous for having a soft spot for the little freshmen.” When she judged the annual “Fresh-Soph Debate,” he believes that she always voted for the freshmen.

Mr. Atkinson also remembers that Mrs. Boyden “genuinely loved” opening her house every evening to faculty, where she would serve coffee from a giant silver urn and chat with others. She would also host a Sunday evening dinner, which Mr. Atkinson first attended as a student after being elected a Senior Class Officer. There he saw her “from a completely different angle” —talking with fellow faculty members and students in an unguarded way.

Mrs. Boyden had her share of challenges as well. She began to go blind during her last years as a teacher at Deerfield. (Many of her former students guess that she was suffering from then-undiagnosed cataracts.) And she struggled to continue managing her classroom herself, but persisted; she was fierce and unwilling to quit teaching, but also wise. She assigned each student a seat in the classroom for the entire year—former students of hers can still remember where they sat—and relied on the sound of each boy's voice to determine his identity during class discussions. A teaching assistant helped with grading papers and with any assigned readings or textbook material. She herself knew the material so well that she taught from memory.

She also continued scoring baseball games despite her blindness. To compensate, she had a student sit next to her and give her a play-by-play of the game, and then she recorded the details to the best of her ability.

Mr. and Mrs. Boyden had decided to announce that they would be retiring, effective in June of 1968, to the Deerfield student body, but while Mrs. Boyden was away on a trip, the press got word of their impending announcement and planned to publish stories about it the next day. Mr. Boyden was heartbroken but had no choice but to call a School Meeting to announce their retirement on his own.

It was a testament to their relationship—they had developed and bettered the school together, and they had wanted to be together when they announced their retirement. This reflected what alumni describe as their relationship over time. There was an unusual but harmonious relationship through the years: They were very different people, yet complemented each other. Both were considered down-to-earth and direct in their approach to the world, yet they were also highly intellectual. Mr. Atkinson refers to both of them as “wholesome.” And through it all, they worked as a team.

Even after their retirement, the Boydens never went far, living in the Manse right at the edge of campus. Incoming Headmaster David Pynchon struggled at first to take over a school whose legacy had been so drastically shaped, and continued to be shaped, by the nearby Boydens. Mr. Boyden died in 1972, but Mrs. Boyden continued to be a part of the school community until her death on October 19, 1973 at 90 years of age.

She was remembered by Deerfield alumni and current students from around the world; letters poured into Deerfield, and the *Deerfield Scroll* devoted an entire spread in its next issue to her life and legacy. And even after her death, she continued to influence her former students. Bill Guthrie '43 wrote, “. . . I can remember puzzling over the school motto and wondering what it meant. ‘Be worthy of your heritage.’ Somehow the word heritage seemed strangely remote and abstract. I was never sure what it was. So I changed it in my mind to ‘Be worthy of Mrs. Boyden.’ And that was the motto I tried to live up to. And I'm still trying.” //

Special thanks to members of the Class of 1958: Brian Rosborough, David Knight, Dave Halsted, Chip Atwood, Jerry Gibson, Peter Sieglaff, George Carmany, Jeff Urstadt, Peter Clark, Porter Wheeler, David Willis, Otto Doering, and so many additional alumni who shared their personal stories about Mrs. Boyden. And special thanks to Jim Banner '53, Julia Rivellino-Lyons, Jessica Day, and Margarita O'Byrne Curtis for their guidance and support throughout the writing and editing process. The Montague Grant for Research and Writing on the History and Purpose of Deerfield Academy is funded by the generosity of Richard W. Montague '52.