

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

Grace DeVaney



Starting in a one-room school in Fayette Township, where she taught all eight grades, served as custodian, and built fires in a pot-bellied stove to heat the room, Grace DeVaney opened the doors for future female school administrators. From these humble beginnings, she became the first woman to serve as a high school principal in Indiana—at Garfield High School.

Born in 1897, DeVaney was a gracious and caring person who went out of her way to make life easier and happier for all with whom she came in contact. She shared in the family joys and crises of all her students, and as a sponsor of the class of 1943—the first class of graduates to enter World War II—she wrote regularly to every class member serving in the Armed Forces.

As a teacher and administrator, DeVaney was a strict, yet fair, disciplinarian. She was well versed in the principles of education and psychology, but she also held a firm belief

that the contribution of the individual, regardless of his or her ability, was most important.

DeVaney taught by example. As a community leader, she believed that she owed her support to any endeavor which made Terre Haute a better place to live. She was a pioneer in improving mental health treatment, and she worked tirelessly to secure legislation so that mental patients were not jailed while awaiting commitment to institutions. She was a firm believer in the United Way concept and served on its board of directors. She supported the YWCA in its work with Blu Tri and Y-Teens, and she generously gave to her church.

DeVaney briefly taught English and served as dean of girls at Woodrow Wilson Junior High and Laboratory School, but much of her career was spent at Garfield High School teaching English and serving as dean of girls, assistant principal and finally principal.

She was credited by her peers as having pioneered the area of guidance counseling in education. She instilled in her students the idea that if they worked hard and did their best, they would be recognized. Her familiar bits of advice included:

“Work. Do your best.” “Make something of yourself.” “You can aim higher than that.” “Use every ounce of your talents.” “Stand up for what you believe is right.” “Be appreciative of your parents. They not only gave you your life, but your brains as well.”

DeVaney’s sister Adelaide also served as an educator for 47 years, 41 as principal of Thornton School. Like her sister, Adelaide promoted the values of community and tradition in education.

Grace DeVaney died in November of 1981 at age 84. She held degrees from Indiana State Normal, Purdue and Columbia universities. What set Grace DeVaney apart was her innate and almost reverent belief and interest in the worth of every individual she met.

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