

A LIFE OF LEARNING

Teacher Aileen McGinty opened the book on island education



In 1954, Aileen McGinty, standing, taught Hilton Head Island students, from left, Gracie Hodges, Dianne Taylor, Bernadette Dixon and Avary and Frederick Hack in a one-room schoolhouse. File • Submitted photo

Aileen Leigh McGinty came to Hilton Head Island to teach in a one-room schoolhouse, five children in five different grades.

That was in 1954, two years after she and her husband, architect R.A. "Pete" McGinty, bought a lot on the ocean for \$1,100. They arrived by barge, all their worldly goods in a borrowed pickup with room to spare.

Aileen's grand adventure ended with her peaceful death at home on July 6. "We had the best life anybody could have," Pete said.

By the time dementia started stealing Aileen away about a decade ago, she had taught many more islanders the joys of reading and writing.



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She taught for three decades, most of it at Sea Pines Academy and Hilton Head Preparatory School, never raising her voice, never scolding. After that, a room in their Sea Pines home was dedicated to the stream of young scholars she tutored. "Firm, fair and friendly," is

how one colleague put the magic Aileen used to pull something from each child.

But she also taught the growing community important lessons by setting a standard for thinking, creativity and involvement.

Aileen was addicted to words, sentences, books and entire libraries.

Even before there was a bridge to the island, she took students to the library in Savannah. Once, when she and Pete left to get out of the way of a hurricane, she considered her Savannah library books the only thing worth taking. When a county bookmobile started

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coming to the island, everyone quickly learned to get there before Aileen and her three children or you wouldn't have much to choose from.

As the island library progressed from a doublewide to two generations of stick-built buildings, Aileen was always in the thick of it. She was a pillar of the Friends of the Library, and led a writers' program and the Great Books program. She participated in a Readers Theater, and always used drama as a teaching tool, even making costumes and playing the piano.

From a heavy electric type-

writer, she pulled magazine articles, short fiction and poetry. She finished one novel and was working on another. When her story, "Landscape with Figures," won an award in the 1990 S.C. Fiction Project, a judge said it was "a moving depiction of rural America in which the characters move in and out of each scene like people in an Edward Hopper painting."

Aileen's painting of Hilton Head would include some surprises. Like the time she and Pete made big, wooden boxes to go to a Halloween party as a pair of dice. Or when they were invited into the Plaster Cast, a small social group including writer John Jakes and artist Ralph Ballantine.

They read plays with slight staging and props at each others' homes. The monthly host chose the play, and the McGintys burst on the scene with the Greek classic "Lysistrata," for which they made a life-size prop of a naked woman.

Maybe it wasn't so surprising, since our one-room schoolhouse teacher was a Los Angeles native who studied literature at Stanford under Wallace Stegner. Aileen's father insisted she come out of it with a way to earn a living. She did that, and she did it well. Fortunately for us, in that line of work, the tale of her influence never has an ending.

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