

Donna Bresnahan

In 1984 I was lucky to have been chosen as the first recipient of the South Branch Foundation Scholarship, a professional development scholarship which would later become the Westgate Teachers' Fellowship Fund. Dr. R.I. Wilfred "Bill" Westgate was a member of the Chatham School Committee at the time. He used to come around the school and visit with teachers, and he knew I was interested in revisiting Salamanca, a college town in Spain that I'd once visited while spending a semester in Madrid . The University of Salamanca is the oldest university in Spain , and an enthusiastic promoter of foreign language study. Dr. Westgate, a classics educator himself, was familiar with the history of Salamanca, and was also a strong supporter of professional development for Chatham teachers. He was kind enough to suggest that I apply for a new scholarship available to Chatham teachers. To this day I think I was the only applicant, and that Dr. Westgate, in his unassuming way, knew that the only way I was going to Salamanca in my first years of teaching was if someone else paid for me. He worked his magic and off I went!

The scholarship allowed me to take my first graduate courses abroad. I studied the subjunctive tense (about which one can never know enough in Spanish!), and I took an art history course. The professor took us to a new location each day: a cathedral tower, a cloister, a monastery, an aqueduct, a plaza mayor...we were a traveling band of art critics, and it was in that class that I made professional contacts and friendships that I still have twenty five years later.

In 1991 I was again the recipient of the scholarship, by then known as the Westgate Teachers' Fellowship Fund. By traveling back to Salamanca on the odd year (91), I was able to take the second part of the courses I began in 1984.

It is hard to quantify the impact these scholarships have had on my students' learning, but suffice to say that my Spanish proficiency improved with every visit to the country. In those days before the internet, I was able to keep up with current events, collect realia to use in my classes, buy teaching materials I would never have found elsewhere, and bring to my classes the real experiences and materials that make learning more authentic for students.

It wasn't until 2008 that I would see Salamanca again, this time with a husband and a GPS to make the going easier. While there I thought of Bill, Sheila, Michael, Ann, and Diana Westgate, and the entire Westgate Committee, which has worked hard over many years to see that funds are still available for professional development for Chatham educators. Bill Westgate may have done more to impact teaching and learning than any other Chatham citizen past or present. And on it goes...