

Madame Toole

Committed to her students - and wannabe Francophiles



PHOTO COURTESY ANNE TOOLE

BY SARA HOAGLAND HUNTER

Anne Toole—Madame Toole to thousands of Cape Cod students, graduates and tour guests who have studied French or traveled under her tutelage—is a woman who knows no limits. Although retired in June after 40 years of teaching, she is hardly slowing down. For much of her career, she taught in Barnstable, where she was department head for foreign languages for first through seventh grades, but her efforts to turn Cape residents into Francophiles are just as renowned. Her guided vacations to a French country farmhouse in Provence will continue, as will her quarter-century tradition of French conversation circles in her Cape Cod home. She explains, “I am looking forward to new adventures and to spending more time with family. Last summer I brought my oldest grandson with me to France and I want to continue the tradition as each grandchild turns 10.”

Anne’s fluency in and love of all things French have always set a high academic standard, but it is her huge heart and capacity for principled compassion that have made her invaluable to the school community. Former Barnstable Intermediate School principal Rick Bidgood, who with his wife, Joan, has also partici-

See story, next page

Above, Sunflowers brighten a view in Arles, Provence, France. Left, Anne Toole retired in June after 40 years as a foreign language teacher in Barnstable. She has guided tours for 15 years from her rented farmhouse in Provence and looks forward to many more!



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From previous page

pated in Anne's summer program in Provence, lauds Anne's gift for reaching at-risk students. "She gets the most out of kids that nobody can get anything out of. They appreciate the caring she exudes."

Indeed, as I interviewed her in her middle school office, five seventh-grade boys of various slumped shapes and sizes amble in uninvited to practice French phrases and earn "euros" (extra credit paper money to raise their grade point averages). At first glance, this rowdy group would seem unlikely to be conversing about their costumes for the previous evening's French Night, but their jovial teacher doesn't seem at all surprised. They discuss the gathering of close to 300 middle school students dressed as French characters, like Quasimodo, Marcel Marceau and Louis XIV. Anne's brown eyes sparkle as she describes the winner of the Most Creative Costume award, won by a student wearing a stake through her back and a skirt of flames as Joan of Arc, while the boys laugh about their own efforts.

When they exit en masse, I marvel out loud that a group of seventh-grade boys, a couple of whom are 6 feet tall and look much older, would be seeking out extra work in French. Just as she defies limits of age or opportunity for herself, she says she has always refused to let labels define her students. "I don't accept labeling in any way. That's the same as giving up." She says that French has always been a vehicle to expand students' horizons, deepen their empathy for other cultures and increase their enthusiasm for school. "I make a pact to make a connection with each of my 250 seventh-grade French students," she says.

Perhaps that is why so many students and former students seek her out when they are in trouble. She never gives up on them. She has corresponded for years with a former student who is in prison, supports a former student who is the first in her family to graduate from high school and attend college, and counsels current students who, due to dysfunctional family situations, are living on the streets. For years, she has hosted tea "with real teacups" or lunch "with real sandwiches" for groups of middle school girls who have never experienced such a thing, teaching them basic etiquette and conversation.

Anne comes by her penchant for giving to her community naturally. Born and raised in Barnstable, she is from a

Bon voyage

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long line of community contributors. Her maternal grandfather, George Haskins, owned The Barnstable Patriot, which remained in her Haskins-Cross family for decades. She says Grandpa Haskins "used to rent out the old Cape Cod Inn every Thanksgiving, filling it with people who had nowhere else to go and feeding them."

Her own parents sponsored a young German woman for citizenship post-World War II. Rosemarie Merino became "like a sister," says Anne, and still returns frequently to the home Anne now owns in Yarmouthport.

Even when faced with personal circumstances that would have restricted the outreach activities of most, Anne continued to expand her horizons. As a young divorcee and working mother trying to make ends meet, she was insistent that her two daughters travel and experience the world. Each year, she chaperoned school vacations, bringing her daughters on trips to Europe, Canada and Mexico. Refusing to be confined by the labels and limits of single parenthood, she committed to a lifelong dream of becoming fluent in French. Through juggling childcare, scrimping and saving, she was able to complete a summer course at Institut de Français in Villefranche on the French Riviera. The resulting ripple effects were of tidal-wave proportions. Upon her return to Cape Cod, she began a French conversation circle, open to interested members of the community, which continues to this day. When hearing of her efforts, retired college professor and former U.S. cultural attaché, the late Dr. Leroy Benoit of Yarmouth, reached out to become a mentor. Benoit, who had taught at Amherst College and Johns Hopkins University, became a sponsor for Anne as she worked her way through a master's thesis from Lesley University while still teaching full time, mothering two high-school daughters and a son, and caring for her ailing mother.

On the strength of these accomplishments and ever grateful for Benoit and others who championed her efforts, Anne decided to realize another lifelong dream: "to live in France."

See story, next page



PHOTO COURTESY ANNE TOOLE

Le Château des Fines Roches, an exclusive hotel in Provence, was built late in the 19th century in the middle of the vineyards of Châteauneuf du Pape.

From previous page

With her husband, Bill, she set out to research a rental they could afford for a month in the summer, somewhere in the “remote countryside where there would be no English speaking.” She explains, “It was my dream to find an old farm house. Nothing elegant.”

She planned to share the cost of the rental with five to eight tutees, giving fellow travelers an authentic two-week experience in the French countryside, while saving the second two weeks for family members. It took determination to land exactly the right spot, but 15 years and countless visitors later, Anne’s guests all agree her July home in Mazan, 20 minutes from Avignon, is it: simple, peaceful and quintessentially French. Guests fly to Nice where they are met by Anne, who likes them to acclimate a bit before removing to the Provencal pace of the country home nestled in a vineyard. As Anne opens the gates to the winding drive through the olive groves, she is often greeted by her smiling neighbor Sylvie, waving and shouting, “L’Americaine! She’s back!”

The large, shuttered windows of the four-bedroom farmhouse open to serene vistas of cherry and apricot groves to the front and vineyards to the side and rear. “The guests claim their rooms and they all end up thinking theirs is the best,” says Anne, laughing. “We eat all our meals outside and I pass the food through the kitchen window. We have a colander of fresh cherries every morning. We go to the bakery to pick up bread and croissants... I post a list of must-dos, and then we work out a schedule. We eat one meal in, one out each day.”

The must-dos range from shopping on village market days to exploring a Greco-Roman excavation site in Saint-Rémy. A popular field trip is to the eagle’s nest town of Simiane-la-Rotonde, surrounded by mountains and lavender

fields. In addition are optional trips to the scenes of French Impressionist painters, a visit to the red clay cliffs of Roussillon, and the Avignon Theatre Festival. Anne says that although her guests may not become fluent in French, she hopes they will leave with a deepened affection for France and for the French people.

Cotuit resident Suzie Reed, who has traveled on several of Anne’s trips, confirms that Anne’s affection for France is “contagious.” She says that Anne’s understanding of the area around Mazan is what makes the trip special. She brings into focus the beauty of Provence for her visitors. “Provence is a sensory place: the sunlight, the flowers, the food, the farmers’ market. We ate al fresco at a long farm table under the trees.”

Rita Jones of Hyannis, who visited the farmhouse with Anne in 2010, agrees. She notes that the simple home is “full of Anne’s little touches,” offering a precious respite from a rushed routine. She says, “It was a time when I was free of time...I loved the simplicity of Mazan and everywhere we visited.”

At the end of the school year, Anne bid adieu to her classroom decorated with pictures of school trips to Quebec, tours to France and students dressed as their favorite French personages. The Barnstable Intermediate School halls will no longer echo with her cheery piano playing at 6:30 in the morning or ring with the voices of students shouting to her in French to earn paper euros, but for Anne it is truly au revoir, not goodbye. “When you take on a commitment to people, you take it on,” she says. “When I say I will be there for my students, I will be there always.”

For a woman who has never acknowledged labels, “retiree” will never fit. There are adventures to be had abroad and at home. You can be sure Anne will be at the center of them.

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