

“Teacher of the Year: Barbara Goleman helps to anchor a school in turmoil and points up the promise of a Southern generation that may lead us all,” *Look Magazine*, May 13, 1969

She may well be the new South, and the new face of education. Barbara Goleman entered teaching only to repay a college-tuition loan. Her assignment: Florida’s Miami Jackson High, a white middle-class school. The year: 1954, date of the Supreme Court decision ordering the nation’s schools to integrate. Like most Southern states, Florida dodged. In 1963, Jackson admitted its first Negro students. Within three years, the school flipped from 90 percent white and Cuban exile to 85 percent black. Poor planning and the familiar flight of whites combined to block the intended racial balance. Miami and Jackson High tensed. Would the school, a fine one, become another ghetto dumping ground, barren of ambition and hope? Barbara Goleman, the head of the English Department, and others on the predominantly white staff, saw no reason why Jackson’s struggle for quality had to end because middle-class white had changed to black poor. New programs were devised. Teachers stayed. Black students, now exceeding 90 percent, understood faculty concern. Worries eased. Donald A. Burroughs, then principal, was able to say, “Barbara’s influence in holding the staff together was critical.” The 1969 Teacher of the Year, product of the South and heir to its traditional view of blacks, pointed up the strength of a new generation that may lead us all.

At first meeting, she seems fearfully shy. Her voice is low, her movements are subdued, almost hesitant. You strain to catch the words and, catching, learn forward further to be sure to get them all: “The ghetto that spawns and roughly cradles so many of our youth is nauseating. Its products are often crude, rough, hostile, violent, thwarted. [But] they are ours, and to ignore them is to ignore a slash across one’s face.”

The poor come to school torn between the different values of two cultures, pressured by neighborhoods in which narcotics and pimps are as present as family, and where children have to handle child and adult problems simultaneously. It is becoming increasingly the job of the school to attempt to take some of the ghetto out of the child. Academic skills, even for high schoolers who read on levels as low as the second grade, become secondary. “We have to help them understand they can survive, function, make the right choices concerning their lives,” says one Jackson teacher. It takes a special kind of middle-class leader to close textbooks when necessary and open doors to a more fundamental kind of learning, one that embraces understanding, desire and hope. Shaw once wrote, “...teaching would be impossible unless pupils were sacred.” Barbara Goleman, slim, modest, driven by a sense of commitment, fights for Shaw’s belief fiercely – and with the redemption of gentleness. She meets the new problems of Jackson High School with a sensitivity born of love and an appreciation of what all children can become if helped enough, and early. She reaches out to

her kids in a variety of ways. Her students respond. One wrote, after graduation: “You were honest, real and, more importantly, you cared. It is amazing how much that means – even to an honor student who is supposed to be self-sufficient – We all need people to care about us. If only we can learn to let them know we’re glad they’re alive. I’m glad you’re alive.”

From another: “[We] had the habit of calling you Lady Goleman because you were, to us, a lady in the finest sense.” Burroughs sums up the faculty view: “During a lifetime, you are fortunate if you meet a handful of people you consider outstanding. She is outstanding.”

Barbara has turned down better paying jobs at high schools and colleges. She will not leave her Jackson classes. “So many people [today] are experiencing fear of walking the streets, of Black Power spokesmen, of Communism, of each other,” she says. “I don’t like feeling afraid. To stand by and wait today is suicide. I’m tired of hearing liberals argue that we must integrate and help the poor – and then flee to lily-white suburbs. I don’t know if I’m a good teacher. With my penchant for activity and a stubborn hope that humanity can indeed improve, not destroy, itself, I’ve just got to be where the action is.”