

Thank You, Dr. Zedler

by Margaret Vavrek

Texas State is now known as the rising star of Texas. Our journey to the stars has been a long one, over 100 years and counting. Along the way, there have been many “stars” whose life and work have shown brightly on our campus and beyond. Certainly the first true star of national prominence on our faculty was Empress Young Zedler, who died in May at the age of 98. She leaves to us an incredible legacy of professional accomplishments characterized by a true passion for her research and her teaching.

Empress Zedler came to campus in 1948 to set up a speech clinic. She became only the second female member of the faculty to hold a Ph.D. in 1953 (Rheta Murphy was the first in 1938). Zedler was also certified as both a psychologist and a speech pathologist. Her research focused on two topics—the diagnosis and treatment of dyslexia and non-verbal children who have the capacity to acquire speech but do not as a result of brain difference.

Today, such fields of study are well known, but they began with one of our own faculty, on this campus, many years ago.

Zedler authored a ground-breaking textbook, *Listening for Speech Sounds* (Doubleday & Co., 1955), which quickly became a widely used textbook in the field of reading and speech correction. There is no doubt that countless students, scholars and parents have used this book, and Zedler’s innovative methods, to improve the lives of children in Texas and beyond.

Southwest Texas State Teachers College established one of the first departments of special education in Texas in 1946, and



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Empress Zedler became its chair in 1964. She held that post until she stepped down in 1977 to devote more time to teaching and to her work in the Speech, Hearing and Language Clinic. Zedler retired from the university in 1981.

Zedler became known as a pioneer in her field, and the university became the premier place to study speech/learning disorders and to have children treated in the clinic. In 1958 she was invited to appear on the *Today Show* to discuss her innovative work with children who had failed to develop language skills. She even demonstrated her therapy techniques with two children from the campus clinic. The parents of those two children drove from San Antonio twice each week to have their children treated by Zedler and her graduate students. One of the treasures in our University Archives is the teleprompter roll from that 1958 television appearance, on which we can read some of what was said on nationwide television that morning.

Another example of her cutting-edge scholarship is related by a former student, Carolyn McCall, who is now on the curriculum and instruction faculty at Texas State:

“During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Dr. Zedler began to realize that there was a critical connection between the oral language children were to develop by age 3 and their future success as efficient readers. Dr. Zedler immersed herself in all the new information being published regarding the emerging language research. As she read, she meshed that information with the keen observations she was making every time she tested a child whose language was late to develop and who had not yet begun to

read. She taught her students that there was a strong connection between children’s ability to develop and use language and their future ability to learn to read.

“At that time, there were no MRIs or CT scans to firmly document that the part of the brain used for language development was different in the poor reader and the good reader. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the use of functional MRIs [fMRI] came into practice by neuroscientists. It

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is amazing that every piece of information taught by Dr. Zedler in the early 1970s was clearly documented by fMRIs and the work of Dr. Elise Temple in 2003!”

Empress Zedler was not only a fine scholar, but also a dedicated teacher. The needs of her students always came first. If they needed assistance, she never hesitated to seek out those who were in a position to get what was needed; in 1965 she even made a phone call to the home of President Garland Flowers at midnight! The story of that phone call is probably best told in Zedler’s own words, which she related in an oral history interview in 1986:

“[Dr. Flowers] called me Dr. Zedler when he was pleased with me (he was very proud of anyone on his staff with a Ph.D., much less a woman), and he called me Mrs. Zedler when he was displeased with me. When I called at 12 midnight to ask him [about finding some funding to help stu-

dents], he said, “Mrs.

Zedler, do you know what time it is???” The next morning, Dr. Flowers did, indeed, help Zedler get what she needed.

When the subject of a retirement party was mentioned in 1981, Zedler gave her consent only on the condition that the event be used to raise scholarship money. The Empress Zedler Scholarship exists today and serves as a tangible reminder of her extraordinary dedication to students.

Empress Zedler’s greatest legacy is, no doubt, the impact she had upon countless students, parents and children. She changed the lives of thousands of people through not only her scholastic endeavors, but also through her genuine care and concern for every student and child who came through her clinic. The stories of those individuals are deeply personal. One parent of a dyslexic child graciously shared his story here:

“I have great respect and an enormous sense of personal gratitude for Dr. Zedler. I worked on campus and saw Dr. Zedler’s work for years. During that time, she helped identify one of my children as dyslexic. Dr. Zedler accepted my child into her research program, which was a one-on-one effort, a graduate student spending time with the child, showing her techniques to overcome the effects of dyslexia and to instill a positive attitude. I am proud to say that, thanks to Dr. Zedler and my child’s own tenacious dedication, my daughter successfully completed bachelor’s and master’s degrees.”

All of us who are a part of the Texas State family owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Empress Zedler. Thank you, Dr. Zedler. ☆