HONORING AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

The Señora Supervia Endowed Chair

Sidwell Friends

You weren't just in her classroom. You were in her presence."

This is how generations of Sidwell Friends School students of Spanish—more than 700 in total—recall Señora Guillermina Medrano de Supervia, the exemplary teacher who blazed many trails in her storied life. Her teaching of Spanish made a deep impact not only on students at Sidwell Friends School, but in high schools across America and abroad—stretching from Mexico to the Dominican Republic to Spain.

Now, there is an opportunity to amplify Señora's impact, even beyond those who knew and loved her, to honor her life in a way that will benefit future generations of Sidwell Friends School students.



A FUND TO MAKE

SEÑORA'S LEGACY PERMANENT

Sidwell Friends alumni, friends, and students of Señora Supervia are coming together to create the Guillermina Medrano de Supervia Endowed Chair for Romance Languages, a permanent endowed faculty position to honor the extraordinary life and teaching of Señora Supervia.

Alan Bernstein '59 has pledged \$300,000 and challenged Sidwell Friends alumni and friends to join him. An additional \$300,000 will be contributed from the Supervia Spanish Program Endowed Fund. The goal is to raise the remaining \$600,000 needed to establish the chair.

"Honoring Señora is honoring the best in secondary school teaching," said Alan. "My brothers (Daniel Bernstein '55 and George Bernstein '64) and I simply wish to create a permanent honor for the very best in high school teaching, in a way that benefits Sidwell Friends School students for years to come."

"The reason we want to endow this chair is because the values Señora embodied were the very best in high school teaching."

Alan Bernstein '59



A REMARKABLE LIFE STORY

Señora Supervia taught at Sidwell Friends School from 1945 to 1978. "It was not a school to me, it was part of my home. And that is why I stayed many, many years," she said upon her retirement.

Her exploits were the stuff of legend. Señora Supervia worked directly with the President of the Spanish Republic Manuel Azaña, fighting against General Francisco Franco and the forces of fascism. Exiled to Paris, she raised funds for Republican fighters and worked to rescue her husband, Rafael, from a prison camp in North Africa. They reunited in France and escaped on one of the last boats from Marseilles, bound for the Dominican Republic, where she promptly founded what became the leading school in Santo Domingo. She and Rafael then immigrated to the United States, when she received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to study at Columbia University. She was friends with a dazzling array of international intellectuals, including those in the Spanish diaspora, from Federico Garcia Lorca to Marta Casals Istomin. Some say she was friends with Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. She studied directly with Maria Montessori and Anna Freud.

"Those of us who were privileged to have her as our teacher knew we were in the presence of a woman of strong passions and superior intellect. She offered us a deep understanding for the masterpieces of Spanish literature, the music of the Americas, and the customs, legends, and traditions of the entire Hispanic world."

Deborah Fosberg Nelson '66

A TRANSFORMATIVE TEACHER

What made Señora Supervia special was her complete dedication to bringing the entire world of Spanish language and culture to her students. Her classes-rigorous, certainly-were also a daily window into a broader world that extended beyond the classroom for many.

Yet Señora combined the rigor with a natural affinity for students, which easily translated into becoming a friend and mentor to so many. "She was a super teacher and funny too. She gave you the eye—a twinkle, or a frown for not paying attention. Her eyes pierced the classroom. She knew everybody, and their lives," Deborah Fosberg Nelson '66 recalled. "She continued to be nosy about everyone. Like a good Spanish mother, she meddled. She wanted to know about our extracurricular activities and who you were taking to the prom. She gave lots of unsolicited advice!"

Señora Supervia stayed in touch with her students across the years, across generations, across geographical distance. She became friends with parents, came to weddings, and insisted upon visits years after the classroom days had passed. For so many, her classroom presence had become a lifelong connection.

"Being a student of Señora was more than just conjugating irregular verbs," added Alan. "We spent a lot of time at her house; she hosted parties, had friends in the community. It meant being a Spanish student was more than just a classroom experience."

Señora was a demanding teacher. "She was really hard, and nobody got away with anything," recalled Cathy Ritzenberg McCulloch '68. "She had her rituals and would take no guff. She taught at such a clip you had to pay attention. I adored it."

Señora Supervia applied her talents as an educator beyond the halls of Sidwell Friends School as well. She wrote Spanish textbooks that were used throughout the United States. She served on the Princeton University Advanced Placement Spanish Committee, and as the chairperson of the Spanish Committee of the National Association of Independent Schools. In 1965 Harvard University recognized her as a distinguished teacher of the year. In recognition of her lifetime of accomplishment as a cultural force, the King and Queen of Spain awarded her the high national honor of the "Lazo de Dama de Isabel la Católica."

Upon her retirement, Señora said, "I loved my teaching career. Knowing that by learning another language my students could improve in other subjects, that was my satisfaction. You ask yourself, what could you have done with your life? The important things in life are self-respect and love. I have loved a lot, and in material things, I have lost a lot too, but I never regret having been a teacher."



AN INTRODUCTION TO

THE WORLD

Through her, so many experienced the world outside the United States for the first time. "It was a more insular, perhaps more innocent time," Alan noted.

"And her life was an international experiment of intrigue," added Deborah. "She was very interested in us being informed about events around the world and not just sticking with an American identity."

It was natural that Señora founded the Sidwell Friends School summer study program in Mexico in 1957 and led it until 1970. The program was a transformational experience for so many. Immersed in language and culture, living with families—many of whom were Spanish expatriates—the students studied Spanish each day and lived and traveled in and around Mexico City.

The experience deepened the appreciation of Spanish language and culture for many. "When we came back from Mexico, we had an active Spanish Club. We had dinners and performances for the whole school, and she was the advisor," said Bruce Bush '66. Some of Señora's students went on to careers teaching Spanish and working in Latin America, a testament to the transformational power of Señora's work.

"My host family spoke nada inglés, so if we wanted to talk, we had to learn to speak Spanish. It was quite an immersion. I personally remembered a turning point when I realized I was speaking Spanish in my dreams. I can still say what I want to say in Spanish to this very day."

Jon McBride '60





A GIFT

FROM ALUMNI

Señora Supervia passed away in September 2005, at the age of 93.

In 1980, Sidwell alumni established the Supervia Spanish Program Endowed Fund, which provided for a named classroom and language seminar room.

The Fund has also supported the teaching of Spanish, guest teachers, art exhibits, plays, cultural activities, and tutoring, financed the development of bilingual courses for students who come from Spanish-speaking countries or households, and funded the creation of Spanish classes in the Lower School and 5th grade.

With the Guillermina Medrano de Supervia Endowed Chair for Romance Languages, her remarkable skill and spirit will live on, ensuring transformational Spanish-language instruction for years to come. But the support of alumni is vital to fully funding the chair.

"Look at the key components of her persona and pedagogy, and you will see the very best in our society in our schools. She fought the battles for justice in our world as a guerrilla fighter in the Spanish civil war. She was an immigrant and had to reinvent herself in the new world. She embarked on a career where she became exceptional," said Alan, challenging his fellow alumni to honor the legendary work of Señora. "Then to crown it, her former country recognized her accomplishments and achievements by giving her the order of Isabela Catolica. I can think of no better role model for our teachers or our students."

LIST OF STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Larry Posner '55, Hon. Chair*

Alan Bernstein '59, Chair

Antonio Casas Gonzalez '50

Joan Barbeau de Calvo '58

Mary Rosen Salkever '59

Stephen Arent '60

Margery Arent Safir

Carol Carpenter Esteban '61

Leland Dobbs '61

Michael Gonnerman '61

Bruce Bush '66

Deborah Fosberg Nelson '66

To share your memories of Señora and to learn how you can contribute to establishing the Guillermina Medrano de Supervia Endowed Chair for Romance Languages, visit sidwell.edu/supervia-tribute or reach out to Mary Carrasco at 202-537-8117 or carrascom@sidwell.edu.

*deceased

