

A photograph of two women standing in front of an ornate wrought-iron gate. The woman on the left has dark hair and is wearing a blue and white patterned blouse. The woman on the right has blonde hair and is wearing a black top with a blue and white floral pattern. The gate is made of dark metal with intricate scrollwork. The background shows green foliage and a brick building.

A Gift for Teaching

Sisters celebrate their mother's passion for teaching by establishing a memorial scholarship that supports tomorrow's educators. *By Natalie Missakian*

Laura Palmieri remembers hearing about her mother's first day of work at her very first teaching job. The way the story goes, she went home that afternoon and excitedly told her mother: "I can't believe they pay me to do this!"

"That was my mother's lifelong dream — to be a teacher," Laura says. "She absolutely loved it."

So when Laura and her sister, Donna, established the Nancy B. Palmieri Memorial Scholarship in their late mother's memory, there was no doubt in their minds about which students they wanted to help the most.

The scholarship is awarded annually to a Southern student studying to become a teacher, a nod to their mother's beloved profession and her alma mater, which prepares the largest number of teacher education graduates in Connecticut.

"I know she enjoyed her experience at Southern very much," Donna Palmieri, '92, says of her mother. "I know she met a lot of lifelong friends, and I know she felt she got a great education to prepare her for teaching."

It was Nancy Palmieri, '68, M.S. '75, who first dreamed up the idea for the scholarship after she and Donna went to visit an elderly cousin. The cousin had told them about a scholarship she started in memory of her deceased son.

On the drive home, Nancy confided to Donna that she wanted to endow a scholarship of her own at Southern someday, saying how wonderful it would be to help students with their tuition while paying tribute to a loved one.

"I thought it was a wonderful idea, since we had both been supporters of SCSU since we graduated," Donna recalls.

But Nancy would not live long enough to see her wish come to fruition. Two years after that trip, she died unexpectedly at age 59 of complications from knee surgery. So Donna approached her sister, and together they decided to honor their mother's memory by carrying out her plan themselves.

"My mom loved Southern. She was such an avid supporter," Donna says. "This was something she wanted to do and never had the opportunity."

Nancy enrolled at Southern after graduating from Sacred Heart Academy in Hamden. She earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in early childhood education and started her career teaching pre-K and kindergarten in East Haven, Conn.

After taking a break from the classroom to raise her family, she found it difficult to re-enter the teaching field.

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So she took a job at Southern New England Telephone, where she worked for 16 years before retiring in 2000.

But she never forgot her first love. When she learned about a job teaching pre-K at New Haven's Jackie Robinson School, located next to Southern, Nancy came out of retirement and reached for the opportunity. "It was like she never left," recalls Laura. "She just fell right back into it. She loved all the children like they were her own."

Nancy also took pride in her Italian heritage, Donna says, and served as a board member for the Italian American Historical Society of Connecticut and was a member of POINT (Pursuing Our Italian Names Together). She traveled to Italy to study her family's ancestry.

Donna says both of her parents were supportive of higher education and passed on those values to their children. While at Southern, Donna also benefited from an Alumni Association scholarship, which helped with tuition costs, so she feels good about providing the same opportunity to other students.

She says it has been incredibly rewarding to meet the scholarship recipients each year at the scholarship banquet and learn more about who they are, while sharing memories of her mother with them.

She adds that she is fortunate to work for an employer that matches her contributions to the scholarship, so every year during Southern's Annual Giving Campaign, she earmarks her donation to fund the Nancy B. Palmieri Memorial Scholarship.

"I would encourage anyone who supports higher education to consider endowing a scholarship at Southern," Donna says. "It's a wonderful way to help students achieve their education goals and to go on to do great things in their communities."