**Ecce Magistra**

**A Quite Alive Teacher Finds Passion in a Very Dead Language**

“If you’re into getting things done fast, Latin isn’t the language for you.” Mrs. Smith, christened Magistra Smith by her students, would know. The sole Latin teacher at Joel Barlow, Mrs. Smith is known to be passionate about both the language and her students. I have witnessed her both reading the Latin version of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone (Harrius Potter et Philosophi Lapis) and claiming vengeance on the teacher who moved all the seats in her room before my class. Some might call her crazy, and others, would affectionately say, quirky.

She is aging; but not old. Her specific age is unknown as she refuses to tell her students. She wears a grey wrap sweater, a maxi green skirt, and her trademark clogs. Her hair is black with the faint presence of gray is at the top of her head.

We sit in the LARQ, which is empty besides two students in Mrs. Smith’s virtual language class who are serving a detention. “You’re late, mister,” she grumbled as another freshman boy, wearing a shirt with Bob Marley on it entered the room. Mrs. Smith fumbled to take off her glasses once she realized that she would not have to write anything down and settled back into her chair. Posters of the Eiffel tower and the Spanish flag hang behind her, but nothing shows any presence of the Latin language in this school: not a bust of Julius Ceasar nor a tiny model of the Coliseum. Not even a motivation poster claiming, “Veni, Vidi, Vici”. I came, I saw, I conquered.

Latin is a dead language. My textbook, Ecce Romani (meaning Behold the Romans), states that it has not been spoken since the first century A.D. Not great advertising for a textbook company. But what would compel a person to study a language that has twenty-three possible endings for each noun? Mrs. Smith had known since she was young that she wanted to teach. What she would teach, however, was still shifting.

“I took Latin in high school for four years,” she said trying to explain her career choice, “and actually, I started college majoring in German and Spanish. I took just one course in Latin my second semester freshmen year and then I took another one and I was absolutely hooked. I had this absolutely fabulous, fabulous teacher. I had this professor for this course in Horace [a Latin poet] and he was amazing so I just sort of got sucked in against my will.”

Now at Barlow for nine years, Mrs. Smith is one of the least known teachers, partially due to her specialized student base. I asked her what made students continue with Latin if it is one the hardest language to learn.

“Latin is a hard language for a lot of kids to grasp because you have to pay attention to everything you do, every little last ending. It’s very slow. It’s not immediate gratification that’s for sure,” she said, leaning into my phone that was recording despite me telling her it was not necessary, she confessed, “Some kids just don’t work. They don’t give it a chance. It’s sad. But a lot of the kids that come up from the middle school already really like it and have had a good experience with it.”

She looked up at one of the detainees, motioning that he once took Latin in the middle school. The boy sitting next to him cracked, “Imagine where he could’ve been if he stuck with it.”

Mrs. Smith smiled at the thought of her freshmen in Latin II, which she professed as her favorite class. As a member of the Latin IV class, I was offended. She quickly added, however, that, “I like more complicated grammar like in your class. It’s more fun to teach. It’s more meaty. Meat and Potatoes.” And with that last sentence she laughed and she held open her hands as if she really was holding meat and potatoes.

She is blunt about her dislike of teaching the youngest Latin level, and confides that, “I do not like teaching Latin I. I don't know why, maybe because it's too easy? It’s too elementary? It’s hard to make it exciting. It really is.”

So what makes Latin interesting? Endless verb conjugations, a history longer than our own country’s, poems written before the birth of Christ? I asked her this and she countered, “I don’t kow what it is. You tell me. You really buy into the language.”

Mrs. Smith is quite certain that her students are beyond compare and describes how, “It’s easy to like what you do when have really, really really, really, really good students and nice students.”

I swear she said really that many times.

To students unfamiliar with her, Magistra is just another face is the hallway. For Latin students, she is the teacher who once accused a sophomore of stealing her favorite pencil, who tried to find prom dates for all her upperclassmen, and who brought us all green bagels on St. Patrick’s day. She is the teacher who convinced the bus driver to take forty kids to the Creamery on the way home from a field trip.

Mrs. Smith chuckled as she remembered a note that a substitute left her one time after she had been absent one day: “When I die I want to come back in my second life as a Latin teacher.”