

Carolyn Benton Cockefair

English Professor

1884-1969

by Susan Jezak Ford

Carolyn Benton Cockefair's thirst for knowledge and love of teaching helped her become a Kansas City institution. She accepted her final teaching position at the age of 69 by joining the faculty of the University of Kansas City. The respect she earned during her 50-year career led to permanent recognition by UMKC.

Carolyn Benton was born near Odessa, Missouri. Her parents placed a high value on education and moved to Kansas City to expose their five daughters to the city's culture. After graduating from Central High School, she received two bachelor's degrees and one master's degree from the University of Missouri. She then began teaching elementary school for \$30 a month. She met and married farmer William Cockefair in 1911 and, for the next 12 years, she managed their Black Water Farm and raised their three children.

Cockefair began working as a substitute teacher for the Central Missouri State University Teachers College in 1922 and in 1924 began teaching for the extension division of the University of Missouri. She required that her students read the classics and participate in discussions on literature, poetry, and philosophy. She became an assistant English professor for CMSU in 1937 and in 1943 moved on to the University of Missouri.

Cockefair joined the University of Kansas City, now UMKC, in 1947. Her freshman and continuing education classes were composed primarily of World War II veterans and female students hungry to learn. Her Socratic methods of teaching and high standards challenged her students and earned their respect. She co-founded a highly successful local chapter of the Great Books program.

Adult education was a priority for Cockefair. She worked constantly to involve the community with the university. For her efforts, her students established the Carolyn Cockefair chair of continuing education to bring outstanding scholars to UMKC. The former law school building at 5121 Rockhill Road has also been renamed in her honor.



Sources

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