



AVID Celebrates 20 Years in 2000

- 20th Anniversary yearbook
- Wall of Fame book launch
- Recognizing the original AVID class
- Special events at the Summer Institutes

Summer Institutes

International Site
July 10-14
San Diego, CA

Eastern Division Site
July 23-27
Charlotte, North Carolina

Northern California Site
July 30-Aug. 3
Oakland, CA

What's Inside

- ✓ AVID Student/Alumni Profiles
Page 5
- ✓ AVID Data Collection Results, 1998-99
Page 6
- ✓ Excerpt from Wall of Fame
Page 10

Mary Catherine Swanson

AVID'S FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Access Interview

It is well known to those familiar with AVID that the program was created 20 years ago at Clairemont High School, in San Diego, California. However, it can be argued that AVID actually developed its philosophy and educational approaches in Kingsburg, California, a small, farming community near Fresno, over 50 years ago. That is where AVID's founder and executive director, Mary Catherine Swanson, was born and raised, where she attended elementary and high school, and where she formed her views on individual determination, hard work, and the need for support as well as contemplation.

To find hard-working role models, she needed only observe her father, Ed Jacobs, the editor and publisher of the town's newspaper, who for 60 years—the longest tenure of any newspaper editor in California—brought news of the out-

side world to Kingsburg, and shared his opinions in editorials. Mary Catherine's mother, Corrine, worked as a bookkeeper, first at the paper and then for the town's doctor. Hard work was observable elsewhere in the community: on the local farms, in the fields, in the canneries and packing plants. Mary Catherine and her younger sister, Elizabeth, were introduced to work at an early age.

"Hard labor, physical and otherwise, was viewed as a good thing in our town," recalls Swanson. "In Kingsburg, everybody had to work." Growing up, Swanson's summer jobs included babysitting and working as a lifeguard at the community pool. At 16, she began working in the local packing sheds, boxing plums, nectarines, and peaches. "We worked on wooden platforms which were shaded but open on the sides. In the

Continued on page 2

The AVID Site Team

COLLABORATION FROM THE BEGINNING

For Sandra Scherf, even after 34 years of teaching at four different schools, the memory of her introduction to Mary Catherine Swanson's original AVID students at Clairemont High School 20 years ago stands out.

"In 1981, I was still a fairly new teacher to Clairemont," she recalls. "I really didn't know Mary Catherine well at all and didn't know what she was doing with AVID. But in a French class, I had four or five students—all of them minority students, by the way—and they sat in the front row, all had similar, well-organized notebooks, they were always

prepared, responded, and took notes. They were the superstars of the class."

Since she taught far across campus from Swanson, Scherf rarely had an opportunity to talk with her about the college-preparatory experiment which was placing motivated students with weak academic backgrounds into rigorous courses. A couple of incidents increased her interest in AVID, however.

"I was giving a test in that French class," says Scherf. "The class walked in and I said, 'You have ten minutes to re-

Continued on page 8

summer, the heat was typically 110 degrees. This type of experience taught us that you can survive almost anything.”

The value of education was also stressed in the community and in Swanson’s household. Ed Jacobs spent many hours with his older daughter, allowing her to ask questions about world events and issues, fostering her love of knowledge.

“We had very long and detailed discussions,” she says. “We talked and analyzed everything from religion to philosophy. He was so smart and knew so much, it helped me distill a lot of ideas,” Swanson recalls.

In Kingsburg, which lacked even a movie theater or bowling alley, the local avenues for entertainment were limited at best. Thus, Kingsburg High School played an important role for young people. “It was the focus of social activity in our community,” says Swanson. “That sent the message that school was important. And our high school was small—only 500 students—so we all had to participate in something, otherwise it wouldn’t happen.” A straight “A” student who played flute in the band and orchestra, Swanson was also a cheerleader and participated in school clubs and the Girls’ Athletic Association. Competitive sports were important in Kingsburg,

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Phone: (619) 682-5050
FAX: (619) 682-5060
Website: www.avidcenter.org
Email: avidinfo@avidcenter.org
Editors: Freda Statom & Rob Gira
Founder and Director,
Mary Catherine Swanson

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Did You Know...

- that AVID is a model program for several Federal Initiatives?
- that AVID will be implemented in 16 states and 13 foreign countries in 2000?
- that AVID graduates have designed and launched space shuttles?
- that the San Diego Padres Baseball Club has awarded over 125 \$5,000 scholarships to AVID students?

but men’s sports only. Swanson observed some inequities in academics as well, treatment of female students that was common in the 1950’s.

“I remember my first serious math class, in the seventh grade. The boys were expected to sit in the front and the girls in the back. And at our high school, no girls—including me—were ever in physics.”

During her high school years, Mary Catherine met and began to date Tom Swanson, the son of a local farmer. Despite the fact that he went to “country school” outside of town, the two became close during their junior year, but drifted apart until both had gone off to college. “It’s sort of ironic,” she says “We were probably meant to be together. We were born a week apart, and as infants we were the only two babies in the nursery of the Kingsburg hospital.”

Soon, Mary Catherine and Tom Swanson will celebrate 34 years of marriage. Today, he is the president of a Southern California bank. Their son, Tom, is beginning his fifth year as a high school history teacher, a career choice that his mother heartily endorses. While he was majoring in economics and political science at UCLA, he saw himself entering teach-

ing. “Of course, he had been an AVID tutor for years, says Swanson. “He has become an excellent teacher rapidly and seems to have a strong sense of purpose.”

Swanson’s own path to teaching was less direct. After graduating from Kingsburg High School, she first attended the University of the Pacific, in Stockton, and then transferred to the University of California, Berkeley and San Francisco State University, where she majored in English and journalism. Upon graduation, she was offered a prestigious scholarship in journalism to Columbia University. “I had dreams of being an investigative reporter,” she recalls, “but my father opposed the idea of journalism for me because he felt I’d be stuck writing fashion or housekeeping articles.” Going to Columbia in New York would have also meant separation from her future husband. When they married after college graduation, Tom Swanson served in the military and attended graduate school. Mary Catherine Swanson chose teaching at the age of 21 as a means of supporting them.

Beginning at Woodland High School near Davis, California, she then moved

Continued on next page

Swanson

from page 2

to Fairfield, where she taught youngsters whose parents served in the military at Travis Air Force Base.

"This was a tough time to teach," she says. "I remember lots of tension during this time (the late 60's), with racial strife, bomb scares, drugs, lots of police on campus. Many kids were stressed because their dads were in Viet Nam."

Following her husband's bank transfer to Riverside, Mary Catherine spent one year opening a new high school, an experience she recalls fondly, but soon another move followed, this time to San Diego, where she found a teaching job at Clairemont High School, in 1970. At this time, the school was one of the shining academic lights among the 17 high schools in the San Diego Unified School District. A large portion of the school's population were the children of professors at the nearby University of California, San Diego. Teaching English and reading, Swanson learned her craft, became a respected member of the faculty, eventually assuming the role of department chair in English. As was common during this time, the school was heavily tracked and she took on her share of remedial courses. This experience, combined with her work with students in the gifted and talented program, caused her to begin examining her own best practices as a teacher.

"I was always trying to move my remedial students as fast as I could, to get them into regular classes," she says.

In 1978, significant changes loomed for Clairemont High School, as the school district grappled with desegregation issues and prepared to offer voluntary bussing as a means of diversifying its campuses. Also, a new high school was being built, appropriately named University City, because it would attract the majority of Clairemont's college-going population. Clairemont would go from 2400 students to 1200, with nearly 500 low-income students being bussed from other parts of the city. Faculty moral dropped. Fearing an erosion of the college-going atmosphere, many

staff applied for new assignments. However, Mary Catherine Swanson and her colleague, Jim Grove, who taught the school's prestigious Seminar Program, for gifted students, chose to stay at Clairemont, and they began to discuss an innovative structure, a class to provide the new students with the support to succeed in rigorous course work. In 1979, after winning an argument with the school's administration, Swanson had the AVID Program placed into the master schedule, and in the fall of 1980 she received her first 30 students and began in earnest to examine what type of structure could best support their efforts.

One year later, Swanson had formalized the AVID curriculum, had incorporated college tutors as part of the program, and had begun working with a group of teachers—the first AVID site team—to examine the most effective pedagogy to prepare all students for college. When 28 of the first 30 AVID students received acceptances to four-year colleges, and when Clairemont's standardized test scores showed the greatest gains in the district (despite the school's population shift), the program began to attract attention beyond Clairemont. In 1986, Mary Catherine Swanson was recruited for a job at the San Diego County Office of Education. One of her main duties was to assist other school districts in implementing the AVID program. State and national recognition followed, and today, 16 states and 13 foreign countries offer AVID to 50,000 students. In 1996, Swanson created the AVID Center, an educational non-profit designed to support AVID programs throughout the world.

Recently, Mary Catherine Swanson took the time to reflect for ACCESS on the 20-year journey she has taken.

ACCESS: Before developing AVID, what were the developmental stages of your teaching career?

SWANSON: Teaching was always more to me than a job. From the beginning I loved it. I also saw it as a huge responsibility. I told my husband that teaching was the greatest thing, and that I would have done it for free. As a teacher I always liked new challenges,

"I remember my first serious math class, in the seventh grade. The boys were expected to sit in the front and the girls in the back. And at our high school, no girls—including me—were ever in physics."

—Mary Catherine Swanson

and I always saw it as my job to get the most out of students that I could. When I was first learning my craft, one of the subjects I was asked to teach was reading, and I realized I knew little about it. So I studied all I could about reading. In my reading classes, I learned how to move students quickly into more rigorous courses, and these were kids who were supposed to be at the bottom. As I look back, I see phases that we went through in teaching. In the 60's we were learning how to motivate students, to move them into rigorous courses. Then, in the 70's everything had to be relevant. Well, I remember working with students on their writing and going over their drafts with them. I asked them to explain what they were trying to say to me, and they couldn't. But they believed that what they wrote was sacred because they wrote it. That frustration led me to develop a program called Project English. In this junior elective semester course, I would survey individual students about their interests and then allow them to choose four novels from my list that were thematically linked. Students wrote weekly essays on the novels and studied vocabulary from the works. As part of their work, I also had them attend four cultural events and write papers about those events. From that, I developed my first peer editing system and really began to examine the writing

Continued on page 4

Swanson

from page 1

process. Project English was a fun and a challenging thing to do, and became the basis for my Master's thesis. But in the late 70's, I stopped the approach when students began to choose novels based solely on length instead of theme. Then, with AVID, of course, everything changed for me.

ACCESS: How did your experiences with AVID change you as a teacher?

SWANSON: I always thought of myself as teaching kids first and subject second, but before AVID I'd have to say I was fairly focused on the subject. Before AVID, there was a lot about my students that I didn't know. In most academic settings, you have students for only one year. In AVID you're totally responsible for everything that happens to them. Since I was such a part of their lives, I saw everything—drug abuse, child abuse, you name it. When I was just teaching English, I usually referred student problems to someone else. Now, their problems were much more my responsibility. I learned to understand the depth of kids, what they were going through.

ACCESS: To what degree do you think your experiences growing up in Kingsburg influenced your creation of a program like AVID?

SWANSON: Even though I wasn't aware of it, growing up in Kingsburg set some strong values for me. I learned to value hard work, but equally important, because I got to participate in so much at our high school, I learned what it meant to be a part of things. When I started AVID, I made sure that my students knew the importance of involvement. On the other hand, living in such a small town, I missed some things. I didn't hear my first symphony or see a professional play until I was a junior in high school. Our teachers were caring, good people, but the environment at our school then was not highly academic. I made straight "A's" easily, and I thought college would be easy. It wasn't. I was a hard worker, but I didn't

know how to study. And I remember my freshman English professor referring to works such as *The Great Gatsby* and other novels, expecting us to know details from them, and I hadn't read them at all. I had tons of catching up to do. I think this helped me understand what AVID students face. I also remember that when I made a 3.4 grade point average and didn't make the honor roll my first semester at UOP, I was devastated. The good part—and I think this carried over to my AVID work—was that there was never any question that I'd make it. That attitude came from my experiences at home and in school: We felt we could accomplish anything.

ACCESS: Can you recall when it became clear to you that a program like AVID was necessary?

SWANSON: From the beginning of the bussing mandate, it was clear to me that we would need to do something at Clairemont. At that time, I wasn't all that aware of what was happening nationally with college going rates. I was aware, however, of the situation locally, at the University of California, San Diego, where the rate of acceptance for minority students was very low and their attrition rate high. Moreover, in the late 70's and early 80's, the population in San Diego County was becoming more and more diverse. The situation for many of our immigrant students reminded me of the line from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which I taught for many years, "Beware of men with lean and hungry looks." I recognized that if we didn't do a better job of educating all our students, we'd be facing a civil war. With the impending and drastic population shift at Clairemont, it also became clear to me that we had a couple of choices. We could do what was common at the time and offer more remedial classes for the new students coming to us. But this was not what our staff at the time was used to teaching and this remedial approach would not have been good for the students. Our other option was to continue to offer rigorous courses and get the vast number of students in the middle ready to succeed in them. To me, common sense indicates you do the latter.

ACCESS: What were some misconceptions you had when you initiated AVID?

SWANSON: In the past, I had learned that I could move students quickly, as I often did in my remedial reading classes, to at least get them into regular courses. What I misjudged was how much intervention it would take and how huge the barriers were for some AVID students and their families, as they entered rigorous coursework. Our researchers would say that I didn't understand the role that 'social scaffolding' plays in student success, especially for students from impoverished backgrounds. Another misconception I had was in the instructional approach I took with the AVID students initially. I thought that I should concentrate on lots of basic skills lessons with them, and focus the tutors on helping them in their accelerated coursework. It turned out—and this was probably a godsend—that it took all of our efforts to make them successful in their rigorous coursework. I had no time to concentrate on basic skills lessons. In retrospect, I think we've learned that teaching basic skills in isolation doesn't work anyway. Regarding the issue of remediation versus acceleration, I remember a lengthy and somewhat heated discussion I had with a math teacher when I made a presentation during AVID's early years in San Diego County. This teacher insisted that students should not be allowed into an algebra class unless they knew their multiplication tables. I said something such as "What makes you think that, if a student hasn't learned those times tables in six years, that another year will make a difference? Why not give the student rigorous work to do that will show the need for applying multiplication tables?"

ACCESS: You have often credited Jim Grove, one of your colleagues at Clairemont, as essential to the development of AVID. What role did he play?

SWANSON: He is such a wise man. He had taught ten years longer than I had. He was the epitome of good teach-

Continued on next page

Coming this Summer... **AVID's 20th Anniversary Yearbook**

See stories of these students and others



Jaime Escobedo

**AVID Class of 1984
University of San Diego**

AVID gave me study skills, helped me to do well in my classes, and increased my strength to persevere in education. AVID also helped me to learn English! I can say the spirit of AVID helped me to keep my faith.

Tolupeni Vaefaga

**AVID Class of 2000
Luther Burbank High
Sacramento, CA**

AVID has extensively broadened my horizons. As a result I am a well rounded individual. AVID has taught me to stay neat, organized and independent. This program has also taught me to never give up.



Swanson

from page 4

ing, there was nothing he couldn't do with students. Jim was so important for his advice. As a teacher, I was somewhat aloof with staff members. I have tons of patience for kids, but less for adults. I spent lots of time with teachers I respected, yet didn't hang out in the lounge much. Jim and I ate lunch together because I wanted to run my ideas for AVID by him. And there were several good reasons to involve him. He had been teaching the honors seminar, which required an IQ of 145. Students in the seminar could be a challenge to teach. If he had difficulty with a student in English, I would take that student in my English class, and vice versa. Also, Jim had such prestige at the school. He was part of the team that opened Clairemont in 1959. Everybody respected him. So it was beneficial that we worked together on AVID because the faculty was much more accepting of him than they were of me. After all, I had only been there for ten years! When we actually implemented the program in 1980, he was a constant sounding board. He had a phone in his room and I had one in mine (sort of illegally). I called him all the time and he never said, "I'm too busy." His patience during our conversations reminded me of my father's. Jim never taught AVID but he provided many of our tutors from his seminar program, and we'd share field trips to colleges

and guest speakers. If he had a bus for his gifted students to take a field trip and it was only half full, we'd fill the other half with AVID students. Jim was truly a mentor for me.

ACCESS: *Other than Jim Grove, who were key early supporters of AVID and how did they help?*

SWANSON: Chuck Raleigh had been named the new principal at Clairemont during the summer, right before we implemented. He called me during the summer to check on whether I was going to stay at Clairemont or move to the new high school. I told him that my decision would depend on how much he supported AVID. To his credit, he agreed to attend all of our meetings, and he kept his word. Another key staff member was Sandra Scherf, an outstanding world language teacher who has become a great staff developer for AVID. Sandra was essential at getting AVID students into AP. We had well educated students come to us from Mexico, and they'd be placed into Spanish I or II, and Sandra and I would work together to get them moved up. And the early tutors such as Judy Riffle, now AVID Center's director of finance, and Debbie MacLeod, now heading an Advanced Placement project for AVID Center, deserve a lot of credit. They were really like colleagues. We were working incredibly hard and I couldn't pay them enough. If something didn't work, we'd just keep trying and trying.

ACCESS: *What were the key early lessons for you as you started AVID?*

SWANSON: If kids know you're on their side and that you want what's best for them, they will do anything you ask. I got very little opposition from them. Even if they slipped and didn't do their work, they'd be honest and let me know. I had the chance to observe such remarkable progress. Because students are in such a formative stage, you get to see such growth in AVID. Teachers in general get to work with students when they are at their most impressionable. That's why the teachable moments are what you live for. That's what's great about the AVID setting. With adults there are fewer teachable moments and more baggage. That was an early lesson for me, but in the AVID world, we get to see a lot of teachable moments with adults as well.

ACCESS: *When did you realize that you had discovered something beneficial in AVID?*

SWANSON: It really wasn't until the first group of students graduated. In the first few years, I just knew we were working our hearts out—the students, the tutors, I. When the first group graduated and 28 out of 30 went to four-year colleges, and when the district examined our school-wide test scores and found Clairemont's were considerably higher than the rest of the

Continued on page 7

Results

from page 6

1,488 or 92% received acceptances to four-year colleges and universities.

Other high school facts from the 1998-99 data collection process:

- The average number of AVID students at each high school site was 61.
- The average number of AVID sections per high school site was 2.47 (Note: the large number of new AVID sites affects this figure).
- AVID students represented, on average, 3.76% of a high school site's overall population.
- The average number of tutoring hours per week at a high school site was 24.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on a study of the data and conversations with regional staff involved in its collection, the AVID Center determined the following:

1. A high percentage of AVID high school students are enrolled in a college preparatory sequence of courses, and a

large percentage of those students complete the courses necessary for acceptance to four-year colleges.

2. Additional attention needs to be paid to the enrollment rate of middle level students in both algebra and honors courses.
3. AVID sites will be provided with a detailed analysis of their AVID students' performances, with a regional, state, and national perspective. Site teams should study their schools' results in detail and incorporate recommendations into their site team plans.
4. There is a strong correlation between the percentage of AVID graduates completing four-year entry requirements and the percentage of students gaining acceptance to four-year colleges. Further study should be done on the impact that students' SAT or ACT scores are having on their acceptances.
5. Research on AVID programs indicates a strong correlation between two years of enrollment in AVID at the middle school and success by high school AVID students in completing the requirements for college. Middle schools should study their percentage of AVID students who complete two or more years at the middle level.



Swanson

from page 4

district's high schools, I felt we were onto something. We had worked hard for four years and I felt we had made progress, but we had also slipped along the way at times. So, with the results, the lesson was, 'Keep at it!'

ACCESS: Other than the early challenges at Clairemont, which are well described in the new book, *Wall of Fame*, what are some of the other hurdles you've overcome?

SWANSON: I think it's always difficult when you feel out of step with the colleagues in your profession, and I've felt that way at times with AVID. You have to have a strength that says 'What I'm doing is right for students, and if I can keep my focus, they'll be successful.' You have to let the peripheral stuff go. Sometimes letting go of the peripheral stuff is a challenge for me.

ACCESS: What would your reaction have been in 1980, if someone had said,

'AVID is a great program and some day it will be working in 1,000 schools serving 50,000 students?'

SWANSON: I couldn't have even conceived it. I don't think Jim Grove could have either. It was so far from our minds. Even, several years later, when I was brought to the San Diego County Office of Education to disseminate the program, and had to make a plan, it was difficult to grasp. Then, when educators from outside California such as the Department of Defense Schools and the Kentucky department of education contacted me in 1991, I still couldn't believe it. There was never any grand plan to spread AVID.

ACCESS: What concerns you about the condition of public education?

SWANSON: Our school population will become more and more diverse. Immigrants to the U.S. will come from the Third World, by and large. They'll have divergent values, different religions, and languages. Challenges will be greater. We will have increased poverty if these immigrant families don't get into the economic system. At the

same time, there is a huge public outcry—and rightfully so—to raise our standards. We've got to educate our immigrants and grab the hope they bring with them right away. If that doesn't happen, we'll see a huge disillusionment. That's why we're seeing a proliferation of violence and drugs. We've got to get the first generation of immigrants to the U.S. to become part of mainstream America. If we don't, we'll be torn apart.

ACCESS: What encourages you?

SWANSON: There are a lot of us who know what's the right thing to do. I look at my son's generation and they're graduating from schools such as UCLA and Stanford, and it's true that a lot of them went for corporate dollars. But others, like my son, have chosen teaching. And I think among young people there is more of a trend to give back to the community. It's critical. The next generation will be carrying out and perfecting what we have begun. Interview my son when he's 50, and what we're doing will seem rudimentary.

