Remarkable Woman: Amy Thomas Elder

"Everyone deserves an enlightened education, and that’s what The Odyssey Project aims to deliver"

By Judy Hevrdejs (jhevrdejs@tribune.com), Tribune Newspapers, January 27, 2013

Read this article about Amy Thomas Elder online.

Amy Thomas Elder works out several times a week, lifting weights, running: "I still train as if I was racing. ... My focus and my energy is on this one thing that frees the rest of my faculties or attention to operate without me, operate without my calculating ego pushing it around -- and so I am able to inhabit the world differently. And I'll frequently come back with different perspectives. I spend so much of my time trying to solve problems -- I see what's necessary, and I try to figure out what has to be done in order to get it done. But when I can stop that process, then my own mind can lead me in possibly some other direction. I can think about what's good, rather than just what's necessary." (Phil Velasquez, Chicago Tribune / January 27, 2013)

Amy Thomas Elder lives and breathes education. Has been doing so for most of her 49 years.

Her parents were teachers. Dad taught history; mom was a math instructor. Her kindergarten was held in an antique house at Greenfield Village next to the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Mich. "We had the looms that we wove on," she remembers, "and we churned butter."

Other educational institutions followed, of course, as did degrees in biology, the classics and the study of religion. She has read classical Greek and taught in a middle school, high school, Girl Scout camp and seminary. These days, she's among the instructors in the University of Chicago's Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults.

Yet it is Thomas Elder's power as an educator to transform the lives of adults that shines most brightly in her role as the director of The Odyssey Project (prairie.org/odysseyproject).

With the help of Shakespeare and Socrates, Plato and Picasso, Thomas Elder and a team of professors have been teaching college-level introductory courses in the humanities to low-income adults for a dozen years. Free of charge.

"Mostly we get people who feel like they missed their opportunity to go to college. Or they started, and they had to drop out," she says of those who find The Odyssey Project by word of mouth, through social service agencies, or from fliers that read: "Get the education you want and deserve."

It's a program of the Illinois Humanities Council in partnership with the University of Chicago’s Civic Knowledge Project, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Bard College's (New York) Clemente Course in the Humanities. Since the late Earl Shorris founded the course in 1995, believing the humanities could provide a path out of poverty, the model has been used around the world.

"It's supposed to be based in the great texts. It's supposed to be seminar format. It's got to include philosophy, literature, art history, U.S. history, critical thinking and writing," she says. "It's got to include the Constitution and a little Plato, a little Shakespeare."
Classes are held around the city (in English or Spanish) led by teachers from the University of Chicago, DePaul University, the Art Institute of Chicago and Northwestern University; classes in Champaign are taught by University of Illinois instructors. Students who complete the course earn six transferable credits from Bard College. More than 500 have completed the program since it first launched at a single site in 2000.

"We don't require that people have a GED. We don't care if they owe money to some college somewhere or they have defaulted on a student loan or if they have a record. It is a way of starting college and actually doing college without having to take on the financial responsibilities, and going through all the red tape," she says. "They don't have to be able to use a computer. We have baby-sitting during class. We buy bus cards."

For Thomas Elder, who's married to fellow educator Charles Thomas Elder with whom she has a daughter, The Odyssey Project was exactly what she was looking for. She had been teaching in the U. of C.'s liberal arts program for adults and tutoring at an adult literacy center in Hyde Park, but she was looking for something beyond the GED, remedial and basic adult education programs "to have the kind of conversations I was having with the basic program students."

She asked everybody she could find if there was such a program. Eventually, somebody knew somebody at the Illinois Humanities Council who was trying to put together The Odyssey Project. "If I had I tried to think up something, I wouldn't have thought up something as good," she says, "but I would have been trying to think up The Odyssey Project."

Here's an edited transcript of our conversation.

Q: Who is your living hero?
A: The Odyssey Project students are my heroes — the ones who take on a great moral and intellectual challenge at an age when most people have long decided they've figured out everything they need to know, who put themselves at risk in the classroom and outside of it because they believe in something they are trying also to understand, and who persist in their commitment despite tremendous personal and family difficulties, tragedies and losses.

Q: What's your greatest fault?
A: I'm too willing to compromise, which might also be my greatest attribute. ... One of the things that makes me good at my job — to the extent that I am — is that I can see where I have to compromise and see what is necessary.

Q: What's the best lesson you learned from your father?
A: To start every answer to every question with "Well" — and to try to see things from more than one side. To realize that things don't have simple answers.

Q: Do you have a mantra?
A: See, see feelingly.

Q: Tell me about your passion for running.
A: I ran a lot in high school, competitively. I didn't run in college. ... And then when I turned 40, I thought I would see how I did on the masters circuit. So I made a comeback at 40, which lasted a while. ... I did the (Chicago) marathon once because everybody said, "Oh, you run? Did you do the marathon?" I got tired of saying no. So now I can say, "Yeah, I did. It's fun. It's too long."

Q: What did you want to be at 13?
A: I wanted to be an Olympic athlete in running. I also wanted to save the world. I wasn't, I think, completely sure in what way to do it. I think it was around that time I read Rachel Carson ("Silent Spring"), and I think I thought it was in the environmental movement.

Q: Who is your favorite musical artist?
A: I love (Dimitri) Shostakovich. And I understand Shostakovich by trying to see his music as a response to the horrors of the 20th century, of the war and Stalin and of the nuclear threat. It's seeing the music as not a statement about those things, but an attempt to express an experience of those things. Not emotion, but a real sense of the crisis of our humanity which I hear in his music.