

## The Peg Malican Story

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*Note: This article was written in 2006 after an afternoon visit with Miss Malican at her Grand Island home. She passed away [January 9, 2012](#). Also see [Joe Klimschot's Story](#) (a fellow teacher at Lake View School).*



Susan Ward Merk, Lake View Class of '55, remembers her first experience with Miss Malican.

“We were practicing for the Christmas play, and she said anyone who hasn't learned their parts will be 'thrown out by their ear'. I was scared to death because I took everything literally back then and cried my eyes out,” Susan said. “Miss Malican asked me what was wrong and I told her. From then on she was very nice to me. She became my favorite teacher.”

Such reactions reverberate through Peg Malican's teaching career: an initial uncertainty, then a lifelong admiration.

“She was the single most important influence in my life,” says Don Walker, a 1955 Lake View alumnus who echoes the sentiments of legions of Lake View kids.

Paul Petek '53 concurs. He remembers how Miss Malican force fed him jello and string beans at lunch because “I was skinny as a rail and she was concerned about me.”

Malican used an eclectic assortment of teaching techniques, ranging from substituting fun activities, like making vegetable soup, for dull science exercises to standing a misbehaving student on his head in a wastepaper basket. “How long did he stay there?” she was asked while being interviewed at her Grand Island, New York home. “Well,” she said with an impish grin, “let's just say I didn't make him stay all day.”

That Malican twist of tongue permeates much of what she has to say. Susan Ward Merk's fears of yore can now be seen as the reasons for Malican's lore: her ironic sense of humor. Rarely does she mean exactly what she says. That's the fun part of being her student, once you understood what's happening.

“How old are you?” Malican was asked during the interview. Turning to someone else in the room, she playfully shields her mouth with a piece of paper and says, “Give him a punch!” Needless to say, no punch is thrown and no date is given.

We do know Peg Malican graduated in 1945 from the University of Buffalo and took up residence at Lake View School after a short stay at St. Mary's School for the Deaf in the city. She doubled her salary to \$2400 a year by moving south. “That was the best decision I ever made,” she said. “Lake View was my favorite job in my whole career. I had fun.” Part of her enjoyment stemmed from the total control she had over curriculum. “None of the other teachers, including the principal, knew nor cared what I was teaching.”

She taught math by placing numbers on the blackboard and then daring students to beat her in multiplying them. The winner would receive a silver dollar, which she says, with a wink, she still owns.

The rest of her enjoyment came from her sporting activities. She was the mainstay of just about every teacher's team that always seemed to prevail over the students. Malican was quite the athlete. Besides her baseball, basketball and dodgeball prowess, she bowled, golfed and, oh yes, raced boats.

Sitting in her Grand Island home overlooking the Niagara River, she fondly remembers her 24-foot, 150-horse solid mahogany Chris Craft. With typical Malican wit, she named her speed boat “The Old Goat.” She had to give it up recently when numerous operations on her joints made it difficult to get in and out.

Today, “Peg’s Pier” sits forlornly empty behind her house. Inside, her heart is a little emptier as well ever since her twin brother had to move to a rest home.

Not everyone appreciated Malican’s sporting instincts. Another female teacher back in the 1940s took offense at the way Malican joined in games with students and started talking behind her back. “She was telling everyone it wasn’t ‘ladylike’ to ride bikes and play basketball with the kids,” Malican said. “I cried when I heard that.” That situation was soon resolved with the intervention of school trustee F. Robert Greene who relieved the other teacher of her duties.

Malican got along famously with the rest. She remembers Miss Watrous, Edith Avery and Patricia Graser who married her brother. She and Graser were quite a pair, especially when they visited local hangouts, like the Lake View Hotel, with Claude, Graser’s pet skunk.

Malican could be strict when she wanted to be. Not often did she have to stand someone in a wastepaper basket. Usually, a flying eraser was enough. If that didn’t work, she would make the recalcitrant student call home and explain what he was doing wrong. She remembers once chewing out the parents of a rich Lake Shore family who asked for textbooks for their child while they cruised to Europe. “The kid just ripped them up and threw them overboard,” she said.

Most students, however, paid her back in admiration for her generous extracurricular support.

She remembers preparing Bobby Baker, Don Walker and Steve Greene for a ping pong tournament at the Butler Mitchell Boy’s Club. She trained them for weeks in the basement at Lake View School, then hosted them for a day at her house in Buffalo. All three quickly exited the tournament. Malican, tongue in cheek, explained “those losers” had exhausted themselves climbing in her backyard trees beforehand.

Malican doesn’t hold grudges. She has even forgiven Johnny Henrich who during a game of touch football behind the school tackled her and then fled in fear of what he had just done. “I was kind of knocked out,” she said, “and had to lay there on the field with my dress all out of place.”

“Boy, are schools different today.” she said. “I couldn’t do any of the discipline or support things. I’d be fired if I did.” Malican remembers well the move to Pinehurst Central in 1955. “That was the death of education,” she said. “When they centralized us, everything was larger and there were more rules and less flexibility.” Malican stuck it out at Pinehurst until 1970.

She brought her interest in international affairs to the school by starting a French Club and holding international meals for her classes. All students and parents prepared food from different countries and then ate it while observing the appropriate manners and customs.

She also brought a bit of Lake View culture along with her. Her classes, alone of all classes at Pinehurst, would meet for dodgeball during recess. Once in a while, she would bring along a ball and bat so the kids could play outside on the scraggly grass. “I remember once Principal Hildegard Bagg stuck her head inside the gym while we were playing dodgeball to see what all the yelling was about. She just about got her head knocked off by an errant toss.”

And, of course, during the long winters Malican kept her famous checkers tournaments going. All students were matched up against each other, their names listed game by game on the blackboard. “The winner always got a free trip to Hawaii,” Malican said, with a twinkle in her eyes.

What has she done during her retirement; has she, herself, traveled anywhere? “Heck no,” Miss Malican replied in her usual fashion, “I haven’t even been to Batavia!” For those who don’t remember Western New York geography, that’s just an eraser’s throw down the Thruway.

*Go back to [Lake View School](#) webpage.*