CHAPTER FOUR

The House That Mina Built

Mina Shaughnessy began her City College career in 1967 as she began most things: determined to work as hard as necessary to succeed. She knew her job would not be an easy one; there was the inevitable confusion that arises when a program is first getting under way, coupled with her unfamiliarity with the machinations of City College.

Mina was well grounded, however, in New York City's politics, a result not only of her fifteen years as a resident but of the knowledge she gained through her marriage to Donald Shaughnessy, a knowledge that would be invaluable to her in her work at City College. Although Don was a staunch Democrat (as was Mina), he supported John V. Lindsay, the Republican candidate for mayor of New York City, and in 1966, when Lindsay was elected, Don was given a job with the administration. Through him, Mina gained an intimate knowledge of the ins and outs of New York City politics. Furthermore, Don had been born and raised in New York City and understood almost intuitively the way that ethnicity affected so many things that happened in the city, where struggles for political power usually involved Irish, Italians, and Jews; blacks were just beginning to enter the fray.

In the early 1960s, an unusual permutation of city politics had evolved at City College and in the other divisions of CUNY over the years: the vast majority of City College students were Jewish, while at Brooklyn College and Queens College, there were larger numbers of Irish, Italian, and Asian students—a reflection of the population of each of the boroughs. When *SEEK* and Open Admissions programs were instituted in the CUNY system, a far higher percentage of

Mina and Donald Shaughnessy in the Brandts' apartment. They had stopped by on their way to a dinner at Gracie Mansion with Mayor John V. Lindsay, 1966. Courtesy of Alan and Priscilla Brandt.

black students enrolled in City College than in the other four-year institutions, reflecting the far higher percentage of blacks living in Harlem and upper Manhattan. Mina's work with the students at City College was always guided by principles of justice and fairness, but she knew that most of the decisions made affecting those students were for political—not pedagogical—reasons.

During her first month at City College, however, Mina was far less concerned with the politics of remediation than with the logistics. In a two-page, single-spaced memo written to her chair, Edmond Volpe, on September 22, 1967, she outlined the progress she was (or was not) making as she got the English component of the program started. The program was being touted as a "grand" and "revolutionary" experiment in increasing the numbers of black and Puerto Rican students at City, but it was Mina who was in charge of the details. "I won't bother you with all the crimps and clanks and near-breakdowns in the machinery of registration," she wrote, but "the right students now seem to be meeting the right teachers in the right classrooms, and for that I am grateful—and a bit surprised." In fact, Mina was still unable "to get the total Pre-bac registration." (The title of the program had officially changed from Pre-Baccalaureate to SEEK in 1966 when it became part of a statewide program; however, many of the people at City continued to refer to it as "the Pre-bac" program simply out of habit.)

Mina proceeded to outline her progress in the area of procuring tutors and scheduling lectures. Ever the pragmatist, she had decided to work in "a few central lectures" on such standard problems as "organization, verb tenses, fragments, etc." In this way, she could be certain that "all students have instruction in those problems that are often neglected or are skimpily treated by teachers who want to get on with the discussion of great big ideas."

Mina had already begun to sense the resistance toward the program on the part of many of the faculty members in City's English department. "I have persuaded most of the Pre-bac teachers to attend the English department faculty meetings," she wrote to Volpe, "but they clearly feel unwanted and uncomfortable. I hope something can be done this year to reduce that feeling. Unfortunately, Professor Lavender omitted me from your agenda at the orientation meeting. He did give my name and then added, with the smile of a professional mourner, that everyone wished me well."

Mina had other concerns as well:

And while I am being negative, I must again bring up the subject of office space. Everyone is aware of the space problem; the disgruntlement rises more directly from the fact that every teacher in the regular English program has some kind of office space whereas not one teacher in the Pre-bac program has any office space. The counseling time that is worked into the teachers' schedules is not an adequate substitute: no one can reach the teachers by telephone except in the evenings, and the teachers, in turn, run up their telephone bills at home; they have no place to "land" when they get to campus; they cannot meet students' requests for appointments; and most important, their contention that they are invisible is seriously reinforced by the failure of anyone to allot them space. Is there nothing we can do and no one we can bother about this?

Along with the memo, Mina sent to Volpe a copy of "Milton," the poem that had been published in the *Hofstra Review* the previous spring. "I attach the Milton poem you asked about," she noted. "I can't quite remember how it felt to have time to read poetry, let alone write it!

"Within two weeks of her official start at City College, she had already begun to experience that condition so common to developmental educators: the inability to even read—much less write about—other areas of interest. (Shortly before her death, Mina expressed a strong desire to teach during the summer at Bread Loaf in Vermont so that she would finally have an opportunity to teach a course on Milton.)

Even before Mina joined the faculty at City, many of the faculty members in the English department and from other departments had begun to express their opposition to the SEEK program, claiming that City was abandoning its high standards. Their protests took the usual forms: committees, memos, speeches, editorials, rallies, even entire books devoted to the topic with titles like *The End of Education* and *The Death of the American University: With Special Reference to the Collapse of City College of New York,* both written by City College professors and filled with grave forebodings about the destruction being wrought upon their great and glorious institution of higher learning. "Surely the greatness of our nation rests in large part on the type of men and women turned out by the educational system," Louis Heller wrote in *The Death of the American University*. "As rightly understood by the enemies of the country, if that system is destroyed, the downfall of America itself is imminent. Consequently there can and must be no retreat, no craven capitulation to the anarchists, Communists, and know-nothings who would bring down the society" (12).

However, the opposition took far more personal and threatening forms as well. Mina and the other SEEK instructors were accused of being incompetent; their credentials were questioned; they were made to feel unwanted. City College was no place to teach the fundamentals of writing, many of the tenured professors claimed. "Is this what I'm being paid to do?" asked Geoffrey Wagner, one of the staunchest (and most vocal) opponents of Open Admissions. When he noticed a line of students waiting in the hall to visit the basic writing instructor with whom he shared his office, he exclaimed: "You've brought the slums to my office." Mina often found threatening and insulting notes in her mailbox or scrawled on her office door, and in one instance, pornographic photographs were placed in her mailbox with the word "whore" printed across them.

Mina did not take her detractors personally, nor did she engage in confrontations with them. Her reaction was based in part on the innate respect she held for professors. "Mina really thought that professors were

something, with their advanced degrees and publications, even if it should have been very apparent to her that many of them were assholes," notes Leonard Kriegel, an English professor at City who became one of Mina's closest friends and allies. In fact, she was slightly intimidated by professors; she had once asked Edmond Volpe to extend an invitation to several of the professors in the department because, she wrote, "professors scare me." Furthermore, she respected their literary accomplishments. "Mina may have become the most successful advocate Open Admission students ever had," Les Berger recalls,

> but that does not mean that she was abandoning her own background in literature and her passion for it. Mina loved Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Henry James—and she wanted her students to love them as well. She and the other members of the SEEK program spent endless hours putting together anthologies of black and Puerto Rican writers, fully recognizing the legitimacy and importance of such literature. But Mina was not abandoning the traditional canon; she was trying to develop ways to bring the canon to her students.

One of her poems reflects this concern:

> The blue books are passed out. Then the examination questions. And the scribbling begins: the skin stretches white over the knuckles, eyes look out occasionally from pathetic isolation.
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> Could they be writing about the pilgrims of Canterbury with such stern faces? Could King Lear ever arouse such dispassionate busyness?
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> No—surely this has nothing to do with Lear.
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> But suppose some student should, now, in this room, accidentally grasp Lear's terror, feel the burn of that great pessimism. Would the scribbling stop? Would he, perhaps, sit there weeping all over the blue book?
>
> And would I give him an A?

Mina's reaction to the criticism she and the SEEK students received also stemmed in large part from the realization that confrontation was probably the least effective way to proceed as she sought to make City College a place where the professors would be willing, as she later explained in *Errors and Expectations,* "to make more than a graceless and begrudging accommodation" to the students' "unpreparedness" (293). Instead, she

adopted a far more effective method, one that she described to a man who had written to her asking advice about setting up a basic writing program. First of all, she advised, be prepared to work harder than you've ever worked before. Next, develop a camaraderie among all the people assigned to teach basic writing: let them get to know each other, enjoy each other's company, and learn from each other. Make sure there are enough meetings and discussions for this to take place. In addition, try to recruit people from the senior faculty because that is where some of the best teachers are often found, and they will become the most effective teachers in the program not simply because of their experience, but because of the knowledge and influence they have on campus. But most important, she said, make it look like you're having fun.

Faculty members who worked with Mina recall the way she applied those principles to her work at City, to such good effect. In 1972, Leonard Kriegel published a book entitled *Working Through,* in which he described his work with Mina in the SEEK program. (Her philosophy and actions had such a profound impact on him that he dedicated the book to her.)

> The SEEK teaching staff was directed by a woman who had joined the department that September [1967]. She was one of the few people I had ever met who had actually thought about the problems involved in teaching essentially noncommunicative students how to write, how to grasp the idea that communication itself required logic and assertiveness.... Time and again during our staff meetings, she would force us to concentrate on the problems of teaching these students. From her point of view, they were the beginning and end of our academic responsibility and purpose. Whenever any of us turned away from these problems to speculate on the meaning of the program, she would gently but forcibly bring us back to our students....
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> She had a single thought in mind: to educate. She had little patience with political rhetoric, but she had great tolerance and an enormous feeling for the SEEK students.... Although she wished to guard the program from those intent on preaching diatribes, she re

> alized that it was essential that our students change their images of themselves and of their capabilities. Wary of any tendencies toward illusion and self-deception in herself, she would not tolerate them in others. For her, mastery of the art of communication was revolutionary... She wanted to give her students the power to command language, to say what they meant....
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> Her sense of what was real kept her sane and made her an effective teacher and administrator. While some of the teachers in the program discussed who was and who was not a racist, she moved quietly through the immediacies of City College. She was able to drive herself with incredible diligence, and she shamed others into making the effort their students required of them. (172)

Mina's tendency was always to learn from others—"she was the most careful listener I have ever known," Janet Emig recalls—and to share knowledge and information. From the outset of her career at City, Mina conducted faculty meetings in order to share ideas, experiences, and information. Blanche Skurnick, who joined the faculty at City while still completing her Ph.D. in literature at Columbia, remembers the high quality of discussions at these gatherings:

> As a black woman, I decided to teach courses at City for the very specific purpose of helping the people who had until that point been systematically deprived of an opportunity to attend college. Mina had this uncanny ability to attract teachers to the program who were intellectuals and who were committed to teaching—not always a priority at the college level.
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> Mina appealed to these people because she was an intellectual, and she was the first person any of us had ever met who was making a formal, scholarly inquiry into the teaching of "basic" writing. She read linguists, grammarians, sociologists. She was particularly interested in William Labov's sociolinguists, in Otto Jesperson's grammar, in Janet Emig's landmark study of the composing process of twelfth graders. And she read existing and emerging studies of Black English. Mina was taking an intellectual, research-oriented approach to teaching writing.
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> I cannot begin to understand where Mina found time to do the reading she did during that period. She then measured these ideas and research against the writing of our students and brought some of them into the structure of our basic writing courses, such as formal one-on-one student-teacher conferences (these were weekly and required), and into the Writing Center.

> As she amassed her own database from our students' writing, she met with us and urged us to read what she was reading. That is not to say she dominated the discussions at our meetings. She had hired talented people to work with her, and she drew them out. Pat Laurence, Ann Petrie, Barbara Quint Gray, Sarah D'Eloia, Betty Rizzo were all doing interesting and innovative research and testing existing ideas in practice, and Mina constantly encouraged them to write about their findings.
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> One of the best results of these meetings was that they got us out of the grind of teaching and grading, and they prevented us from feeling isolated. In academia, teaching composition is work for junior faculty. But with Mina we understood we were on the cutting edge of work with broader social relevance that cried for scholarly inquiry.

Patricia Laurence had also recently joined the faculty while completing the requirements for her Ph.D., and she remembers the importance of the meetings to the success of the program:

> During those early years, there was a core group of people [some of them would later become members of the first editorial board of the *Journal of Basic Writing]* who built the curriculum that had to be created in response to the new linguistic needs of the students. In addition, no books existed in the field, so we created modules of instruction, and we created a writing center.
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> In those years, we were changing institutional structures and ways of thinking about linguistic problems; we were figuring out how to remedy the problems of students whose linguistic habits, caused either because of ESL or dialect or poor early training in the high schools, so they could enter the mainstream of courses.
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> Mina held this all together. She was very single minded, very dedicated. Various people in the group gave birth to their children during this period, and many of us were in doctoral programs at the time. We all led very complicated lives. Mina was freer than we were in many senses; she was at a point in her career where she was ready to move into something with commitment. The combination of this commitment with her personal charm, along with the timing of Open Admissions, contributed to her success. When she began, she was thrust into a position, she rose to it, handled it, worked very hard, and structured a program that earned credibility in a terrain that was ready to disbelieve and be critical.

> But we didn't see ourselves as revolutionaries or as establishing a new paradigm. We were too busy, too close to it all, to perceive it that way. And we kept a sense of humor through it all. We had one module committee that we named the "S" committee because we worked on the S inflection for at least a year; we once figured out that the letter S in the English language probably cost the City of New York at least a million dollars.

Ann Petrie also worked with Mina, and she, too, recalls the influence that Mina had on everyone who came in contact with her:

> I was hired as an instructor because I was a creative writer, along with other writers such as Erica Jong, Joseph Heller, and Israel Horowitz, but there I was stuck in this elite little program with elite students to whom I was supposed to teach creative writing when I became aware of this group of passionate, interesting, young, brilliant people connected with the Open Admissions program, and there was this amazing woman, Mina Shaughnessy, in the middle of it all. They would talk about ways of teaching with a passion and motivation I had never seen before.
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> Everybody says this, I know, but Mina Shaughnessy changed my life. She was one of the most charismatic people I have ever met, and her interest in the students was so far above the politics swirling around her. Her motives were genuine; that's what set her apart. She insisted on high standards and helped us to develop the pedagogy to achieve those standards—and everything she did was so that the students would have a chance. It was that simple.
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> After I was "retrenched" (most of us were laid off during the budget cuts in the mid-seventies), I began to work in film and spent a year producing a documentary about Mother Teresa. It was then that I began to realize that there are certain qualities that these people with vision have. I noticed that Mother Teresa has a certain kind of fearlessness stemming from an inner faith, and this translates into a kind of charisma that is absolutely irresistible. And as I spent time with Mother Teresa, I began to be reminded of Mina's behavior—it was the same fearlessness, the same willingness to do whatever had to be done.

Barbara Quint Gray, who had also been hired by Mina to teach basic writing, remembers being impressed by Mina's devotion to her students, given the amount of administrative work with which she had to contend.

Gray recalls one incident in particular which helped her to appreciate Mina's intense involvement with the students in the SEEK program. Gray had invited Mina to a dinner party and asked her to bring a bottle of wine. "I can't do that," she replied, explaining that she was trying to live on the same amount of money that was provided to the SEEK students through their stipends. "Not only can't I afford to buy a bottle of wine on this budget," she told Gray, "I'm not sure I can afford to eat dinner at all. I'm grateful to friends who offer to feed me."

This is not to say that Mina behaved like a zealot, however. In fact, she abhorred political rhetoric. Ed Quinn, who worked with her at City and who would become one of her closest friends and allies, recalled her reaction at a rally they attended together:

> I remember being with Mina at a demonstration in the late sixties or early seventies. I can't remember—it was either anti-war or pro-open admissions—one of these two. (There were a lot of rallies in those days.) In any case, it was one of those in which the sentiments were unimpeachable but the language dreadful. Mina submitted to about three hours of that really bad rhetoric and then she said, "On a day like this the only thing you want to do is to go home and read Nabokov."

Mina believed that one way to discover what the students should be taught in the SEEK program was to discover what they would be expected to know when they took courses in other disciplines. She encouraged the basic writing faculty to audit these classes, and when she later wrote the section on academic vocabularies in *Errors and Expectations,* she drew on the research conducted by Valerie Krishna and Gerald Kauvar. "The[se] authors were City College writing teachers who took introductory courses," Mina explained in a footnote,

> one in biology and the other in psychology. As students in the courses they experienced the language tasks of each subject and observed the experience of other students. Their reports attempt to describe the language "problems" in each subject and to recommend ways of helping students cope with what seemed to them a formidable academic task, even for college teachers. (219)

Mina surrounded herself with strong allies—tenured professors who had been in the English department for many years—and they quickly became friends as well. Len Kriegel and Ed Quinn, a Shakespearean scholar who would later become chair of the English department, would, Quinn recalls, often "run interference for Mina." Les Berger, the dean who had first invited her to join the City faculty, and Theodore Gross, who would succeed Edmond Volpe as chair of the English department and later become a dean of the college, were staunch supporters and admirers of her work. Although Volpe admits that he "resisted all the way" the implementation of the SEEK program, it was Mina who was able to convince him "that it was the right thing to do."

> I was chair at that time, and she saw me as the point person to make this program "legitimate." She would make an appointment, arrive at my office at that time, and we would talk. She had to work very hard; I was not an easy subject at all. I had come from the Columbia University literature tradition; I had recently published a book on Faulkner, and I was not anxious to lose the respect I had in the department. So here she was with this enormous charm and attractiveness—she was never coy—and she would begin to show me some of the students' writing from their blue books and discuss the observations she was making about the way they wrote and about the way they were learning. It all made perfect sense as she described it to me, so I began to support and defend her right to continue to do this.

Other conservative members of the faculty were not so easily converted, however. When Gross replaced Volpe as chair of the English department in 1970, he remembers that Mina's efforts were still being largely ignored, and in some cases denigrated, by many of the tenured members of the department. During the summer of 1970, Mina, as director of basic writing, hired more than forty full- and part-time faculty members to keep up with the growing numbers of students who were enrolling at City College. Each student was required to take one or more of the three sequential basic writing courses that Mina and her colleagues had designed in an attempt to place the students in courses to suit their needs and current level of competency. Gross recalls:

> Mina was one of the few faculty members on campus during the summer; she was working harder than anyone else at City, yet she knew that her work was being disparaged by these traditional, tenured full professors who dominated the English department. Mina's beauty and poise kept them from confronting her directly, but they made it clear to her in so many other ways that she was unwanted, that they perceived her work as destructive to the institution. She had a great sense of humor, she radiated charm and confidence through it all, but I remember one phone call after a particularly bad day. She called me about ten o'clock at night and said, "I don't need this job, you know" But that was the only time she complained, at least to me.
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> When Mina began at City, two-thirds of the courses being offered by the English department were in literature, and one-third were in writing. Two years later, it was exactly the reverse. Imagine the reaction of this very conservative department as we hired more and more writing faculty—and Mina was the one who was seen as "responsible" for this change. There was so much resistance.

The effect of Mina's beauty on her success simply cannot be ignored. Almost twenty years after her death, it is often the first thing people comment on when they are asked to discuss Mina Shaughnessy and her work. They describe her blond hair, her blue eyes, her exquisite cheekbones, her poise, her clear and pleasing voice. They remember her beautiful clothes and her make-up. Her beauty was all the more striking to people because, as Len Kriegel notes, "In the academic world, we are not supposed to care about such things. But Mina cared, and the effects were exquisite. She once told me that one of the most important decisions she made each day was which perfume to wear." Ed Quinn remembers walking into the faculty dining area one day in September 1967 and seeing Edmond Volpe sitting with Mina. "She was easily the most beautiful woman any of us had ever seen in that room, and I, and I suspect many others, made it a point to get to know her." As Patricia Laurence says, "At City, there were the women who worked with Mina, and there were the men who were enchanted with her."

Les Berger remembers when he first met Mina. "It's hard to describe the effect she had on us," he recalls, "now that the feminist movement has made us so much more aware that our responses could be perceived as sexist, but to put it simply, she was strikingly beautiful." She would hold her head up high, look people in the eye.

> She would never get into a struggle or an argument. Even the elitists on campus didn't tangle with Mina directly—she somehow managed, with her appearance and her demeanor, to rise above the petty behavior that so many people were engaging in at that time. And there was that theatrical training. Mina may have been depressed, disgusted, overwhelmed—who knows what emotions she felt during those tumultuous years—but she never showed them in the "arena." She "performed" for one of the toughest academic audiences in the country at that time, and the performance was always flawless.

Mina made it look easy, Les Berger recalls, but in actuality, "she was probably working harder than anyone else on the campus," and this made it difficult for her to maintain contact with her friends. During this period, Priscilla Brandt remembers she and Mina would often go for weeks without seeing each other, and when they did get together, "Mina always had a stack of blue books with her." Mina's already close relationship with the Fosdicks continued, but Betty remembers that Mina's weekend visits to their Connecticut country house were one of Mina's few sources of relaxation. "Mina was under enormous pressure at the time; she was clearly overworked and bearing great responsibility." Betty also remembers that Mina would arrive carrying, along with a bunch of flowers or a bottle of wine, "stacks and stacks of blue books to be graded."

During the summer of 1970, the Fosdicks invited Mina to join them as their guest on a two-week trip they were planning to take to Greece. Raymond had suffered a heart attack in 1968, and Betty remembers that they all realized it could very well be his last visit to Europe. Mina needed the rest desperately, and she enjoyed being with the Fosdicks. Betty remembers one incident from the trip in particular that pleased Mina very much:

> On one of our trips to the Peloponnesus, we visited the restored theater of Epidaurus. The acoustics were such that when standing in the center of the stage, those in the upper rows could hear a pin drop. To prove that this was true, we took turns reciting some favorite passages. Raymond recited Shakespeare, Mina recited Chaucer; and I recited some Homer in Greek.

Betty still remembers how she and her husband laughed when Mina asked after the recitation: "Are we the same three people who sing those old-time hymns together in Newtown, Connecticut?"

In 1971, Donald Shaughnessy, who had left the Lindsay administration several years before as a result of major disagreements over policy and practices, began to work abroad for the State Department. He was sent to Vietnam, where he remained until 1973, and he was reassigned to Zaire, after a short visit home, until 1977. About once a year, he returned to the United States on leave, and during these periods he and Mina would travel to South Dakota to visit her family or they would vacation in places like Mexico, Puerto Rico, or the Bahamas. During these years, Mina lived alone in a small but comfortable co-op apartment she and Don had purchased on the Upper East Side. She developed a particularly close friendship with the couple who lived in the apartment directly below her, Alvin Schlesinger, a prominent New York judge, and his wife. The three of them often went out to dinner. "We knew that Mina was married," Judge Schlesinger recalls, "but Don was very rarely home, and that seemed okay with the both of them. "When the Schlesingers purchased a new piano, they gave their old one to Mina. Judge Schlesinger remembers how much the piano pleased her; she played it practically every evening when she arrived home from work.

Soon after joining the City faculty, Mina asked Edmond Volpe to invite Marilyn French to join City's faculty; the expansion of the SEEK program was creating job openings, and Mina was anxious to fill them with people who would not view basic writing "as a college contagion ward" (*Errors,* 290). When French declined, Mina was disappointed but not surprised. "You can't blame me for trying," Mina wrote to her. In the same letter, Mina described the difficulty of her work at City, one of the rare occasions when she admitted to anyone that she was feeling overwhelmed. In this letter, she seems to have come to the realization, perhaps for the first time, of the permanent and profound change her position at City was having on her life:

> I am writing from under water—way down deep in a churning, murky, frenzied world full of sentence fragments, and sweet, betrayed students, and memos and suspicious colleagues. Hofstra had its faults, but looking back I see that it was a rather simple place. And I remember you—

the luxury of our talks together. I remember how we had read some of the same things and how we talked about them almost as if we were essays. And how there was time for drinks—and the long, vacant ride home on the good old Long Island Railroad. I remember it all—but it was long, long ago....

Well, as you can see, I am going mad. I cannot imagine keeping up with the many demands this job makes and I am too busy to contemplate the outcome. Strange, but I simply cannot imagine what it would be now to *not* think every day about black and white....

It is midnight and I have a stack of papers. Let me know when I can see you.

Mina was so consumed with her work at City that it was becoming more and more difficult for her to separate her professional life from her personal life. She planned lunch and dinner dates, attended theater and ballet, went to parties and out for drinks, had small dinner parties at her apartment, but she did these things more and more with other people who were involved—even consumed—with the SEEK program. She maintained her friendships with people outside academia, but Priscilla Brandt remembers that Mina began to compartmentalize her life at this time, suspecting that her friends would not be able to understand what she was doing at City College—or why she was doing it.

Alice Trillin, with whom Mina had taught at Hofstra, had also been hired to teach at City College. She and Mina worked closely in the SEEK program, and their friendship grew. Alice gave birth to two daughters, and Mina "adopted" the girls. Alice remembers that she would often arrive at the Trillins' Greenwich Village apartment and inform the girls that she had just met a fairy princess on the street. Pulling trinkets and toys from her pockets, she would explain that the fairy princess had asked her to deliver them to the girls.

In 1971, as SEEK enrollments continued to expand, along with Mina's responsibilities, she was able to hire an assistant, Marilyn Maiz. Her area of specialization was statistics (a useful skill for evaluating the efficacy of the program—as well as for the tedious function of arranging schedules and room assignments).

Although Marilyn was more than twenty years younger than Mina, they developed such a close and enduring relationship that Mina came to rely on Marilyn's unconditional friendship for the rest of her life, especially during her long, final struggle with cancer in 1978.

In addition, Mina was finally given approval to hire a secretary. After interviewing several candidates, she hired Dorethea McGill, who still remembers the day Mina called her to inform her that she had been hired. "I remember her friendly, encouraging voice over the phone, saying 'I think we will work well together, don't you?'" McGill worked for Mina for more than six years, a period during which McGill came to understand "just how magnificent Mina was."

> Because I was African American, some of the students would initially express their doubts to me about whether or not this lady with the blond hair and blue eyes was "for real. "Their concerns were justified, of course. If you came up the hard way, as these students did, with so much racism, you begin to think that white people aren't interested in you. But Mina got that straight very fast. For her, there was no black and white. She was simply not affected by race. She never patronized, and she never discriminated. She didn't see color; she saw need. She saw kids who had been disadvantaged, kids from poor neighborhoods, kids who needed someone to help them. She took so many students under her wing, helping them with their work, giving them money, lending them books, taking them to lunch, calling them at home, that it amazed me that she got any work done at all.
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> But she got enormous amounts of work done. I believe that woman worked in her sleep. And boy could she delegate. Once she asked you to do something, that was it. She just assumed it would get done. She didn't look over your shoulder. And she defended us against criticism or bullying. Once, when someone "important" insisted on seeing her rather than speak to me about something, Mina very calmly explained that I was in charge of that particular issue, that in fact she knew very little about it.
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> We were doing serious things, and we were overworked, but Mina always had time to talk about our families and our problems. After my daughter died suddenly and unexpectedly of an aneurism, Mina helped me get through that very terrible time, giving me time off, calling me at home, helping me with paper work and official matters. I took custody of my two grandchildren, and when I couldn't get my

> grandson into a school near work for a couple of months, Mina simply said, "Bring him here; I'll teach him reading and writing, and Marilyn will teach him math." And that's exactly what they did. That boy learned more in two months than he had learned all year.
>
> And there was fun in that office as well. Mina would often practice her ballet steps in front of us. She was graceful and beautiful, of course, but she thought she was clumsy and would laugh at herself, and before you knew it, we would all be laughing, too. Mina was right. We did work well together.

Shortly after Mina joined City, she met Adrienne Rich, whose reputation as one of the foremost poets in the country was already secure. Rich had been asked by Edmond Volpe to teach in City's renowned creative writing program, but she was already teaching at Columbia. However, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., she decided to apply for a job in the SEEK program at City. She joined other prominent writers, among them Toni Cade Bambara, Paul Blackburn, and June Jordan, who were committed to serving those students who had "traditionally been written off as incapable of academic work."

Mina valued Adrienne Rich's friendship; she drew strength and reassurance from her absolute devotion to the students and to the cause of Open Admissions. When Mina wrote to her during the summer of 1969 to confirm that she would again be teaching two sections of writing for the SEEK program, Rich responded that she would be most happy to teach and enclosed with her letter a quotation that she had copied from *Letters and Papers from Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German clergyman who was executed for his resistance to Hitler. Mina saved the quotation in her files; given the often tedious and unpleasant nature of Mina's job at City, she must have welcomed Rich's recognition of the heroic quality of the work that she was doing.

> As long as goodness is successful, we can afford the luxury of regarding success as having no ethical significance; it is when success is achieved by evil means that the problem arises. In the face of such a situation we find that it cannot be adequately dealt with, either by theoretical dogmatic armchair criticism, which means a refusal to face the facts, or by opportunism, which means giving up the struggle and surrendering to success. We will not

> and must not be either outraged critics or opportunists, but must take our share of responsibility for the molding of history in every situation and at every moment, whether we are the victors or the vanquished. To talk of going down fighting like heroes in the face of certain defeat is not really heroic at all, but merely a refusal to face the future. The ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation is to live. It is only from this question, with its responsibility towards history, that fruitful solutions can come, even if for the time being they are very humiliating. In short, it is much easier to see a thing through from the point of abstract principle than from that of concrete responsibility The rising generation will always instinctively discern which of these we make a basis for our actions, for it is their own future that is at stake.

In 1972,Adrienne Rich wrote an account of her teaching experiences at City. Entitled "Teaching Language in Open Admissions," the eighteen-page essay describes not only the trials that the teachers and students endured—budget cuts, small, poorly ventilated classrooms, the effects of tracking begun "at kindergarten (chiefly on the basis of skin color and language)," the responsibilities the students carried in addition to school, the cruel resistance to the students' presence by many on campus—but the privilege and pleasure they experienced as well:

> What has held me, and what I think holds many who teach basic writing, are the hidden veins of possibility running through students who don't know (and strongly doubt) that this is what they were born for, but who may find it out to their own amazement, students who, grim with self-depreciation and prophecies of their own failure or tight with a fear they cannot express, can be lured into sticking it out to some moment of breakthrough, when they discover that they have ideas that are valuable, even original, and can express those ideas on paper. What fascinates and gives hope in a time of slashed budgets, enlarging class size, and national depression is the possibility that many of these young men and women may be gaining the kind of critical perspective on their lives and the skill to bear witness that they have never before had in our country's history. (67)

Adrienne Rich remembers why she so valued working with Mina at City College: "It never occurred to Mina that the teaching of basic writing could be a mere task," she recalls. "She seemed far more concerned that the poets and wri-

ters then being hired to teach basic writing were imaginative enough, responsible enough, lucid enough, to benefit the students." Rich also remembers the way that conditions changed—for the worse—as the Open Admissions program expanded:

> When I first went to teach at SEEK in the late sixties, conditions were better, less crowded; there was more money for SEEK itself. After Open Admissions, the overcrowding was acute. In the fall of 1970 we taught in open plywood cubicles set up in Great Hall; you could hear the noise from other cubicles; concentration was difficult for the students. I also remember teaching in basement rooms, overheated in winter to a soporific degree. My feeling was that the message was being sent that the new students were being no more than tolerated at CCNY; but also, of course, I could only respect their tenacity, working part time, with families, traveling for hours on the subway, and with barely any place to sit and talk or read between classes, none of the trappings of an "intellectual life" such as the Columbia students enjoyed a few miles downtown. Mina fought for space in every way she could.

Rich also remembers the meetings Mina conducted with other members of the SEEK faculty, the way that she dealt with those not directly involved in the program, and the way that she interacted with her students:

> In SEEK, we were working in an overall awareness that language can be a weapon of domination and oppression, or a liberatory tool. Mina often gave lucid, beautifully structured, yet expressive articulation to this understanding, both in our meetings as a group and in my personal encounters with her. She was certainly adept in the politics of knowing how to win support for policies and programs, but I'm talking about politics in the larger sense.
>
> Mina had a strong sense about the idea of "failure." She often suggested that in teaching language it might be the teacher who "failed" the student, in a double sense. Not because she believed (far from it!) in lowering standards or "letting them pass." But she did believe that teachers can use language in authoritarian, dominating ways, calculated to "write off" certain kinds of students. And that most of us highly skilled writers and teachers had absorbed some of those tendencies in our education.

> One of Mina's favorite books was *Letter to a Teacher by the Schoolboys of Barbiani.* Barbiani was a small, poor village in Italy where in the fifties and sixties a young priest had established an alternative school. He wanted to demonstrate that the dropout rate from state schools of poor and working-class students was not a result of their lack of capability for schooling but of antiquated pedagogy, class arrogance, the "failure" of teachers licensed by the state schools. The book is close in spirit to Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* but was written and put together by the students themselves. Mina urged us to read this book.
>
> Mina was able to get along with and address herself to a wide range of colleagues, but embedded racism and intellectual arrogance aroused her ire. She was grounded in her experience as a South Dakota-born daughter of immigrants, who had made her way to the big city, sold cigarettes in a night club, used her looks to earn an education. Perhaps she understood experientially that if you looked a certain way (tall and blond and beautiful, or black or Puerto Rican) you could be perceived as "dumb."
>
> Mina was effective in the classroom because she met each human being as such; there were no stereotypes in her head and this was evident in how she responded to questions, gave instruction, met students outside of class. She also had a wonderfully lucid and structured mind, a passionate love for literature, and a genius for ordering material so that it could be readily absorbed by someone coming newly to it. Her whole stance was reassuring. She never seemed to "wing" it or glide along on charm or personality. She *was* grounded, and I think students felt and trusted that.

Marilyn Maiz has saved Mina's copy of *Letter to a Teacher,* and Mina's passion for the work she was doing is evident in the phrases and sections she either underlined or copied into the inside cover:

> Besides, we should settle what correct language is. Languages are created by the poor, who then go on renewing them forever. The rich crystallize them in order to put on the spot anybody who speaks in a different way. Or in order to fail him at exams. (12)

> I tried to write the way you want us to. (15)

> We do not linger over every mistake in grammar. Grammar is there mainly for writing. One can get along without it for reading and speaking. Little by little one gets it by ear. Later on, it can be studied in depth. (16)

> The most important tools were in their hands: motivation, belief in a capacity to break through, a mind already underway on linguistic problems. (19)
>
> People who get no criticism do not age well. (20)
>
> Teachers are like priests and whores. They have to fall in love in a hurry with anybody who comes their way. Afterward there is no time to cry The world is an immense family There are so many others to serve. (35)
>
> Whoever is fond of the comfortable and fortunate stays out of politics. He does not want anything to change. (87)
>
> To get to know the children of the poor and to love politics are one and the same thing. You cannot love human beings who were marked by unjust laws and not work for better laws. (87)
>
> It is language alone that makes men equal. That man is an equal who can express himself and can understand the words of others. Rich or poor, it makes no difference. But he must speak. (90)
>
> True culture, which no man has yet possessed, would be made up of two elements: belonging to the masses and mastery of the language. A school that is as selective as the kind we have described destroys culture. It deprives the poor of the means of expressing themselves. It deprives the rich of the knowledge of things as they are. (100)
>
> Teachers are not deeply concerned, or not concerned at all, with the human predicament, with the problem of creating a world and a society in which all men in their many ways may lead good, rich and human lives; but are busy producing or collecting knowledge and skill to be sold like any other commodity to whoever will pay the highest price for it. (166)

One of Mina's first students at City College was Lottie Wilkins, an African American woman who "was supposed to become a secretary, but then the SEEK program started." Lottie and Mina developed an extraordinarily close relationship, and many of Mina's friends believe that Lottie came closest to being the child that Mina never had.

Nowhere is Mina's dedication to the SEEK students more apparent than in the interaction that occurred between her and this student. They first met in a summer basic writing course that Mina taught in 1968, and Lottie remembers that Mina "was just the most amazing teacher I had ever had":

> She would sit you down if you had a problem writing and try to figure out what exactly was going wrong. You didn't have to be bright to earn Mina's attention, you just had to be willing—she would do absolutely anything to get you to the next step. The minute students mastered something, subject-verb agreement, whatever, and we'd master it by completing the zillion practice sheets they had developed in the writing center, then you'd be expected to stay in the writing center and teach it to someone else. As the program developed, Mina managed to get us paid as tutors for doing this under a work-study program.
>
> Very few of the students were aware of the politics that existed at the time, but because I worked in the center and because Mina and I were growing closer, I saw and heard a lot, maybe even more than Mina saw and heard. I would overhear conversations, and the general feeling was, When is she going to go away and take her program with her? When will she let us get back to running our college the way it's supposed to be? Why doesn't she realize that these kids don't belong here and we should not be expected to teach them how to write?
>
> You have to remember that, as Mina's constituency, we were absolutely helpless—most of us didn't know what was going on; we could barely write; when we were not with the SEEK faculty we were made to feel unwelcome and inept very much like second class citizens. Mina fought for us. She wouldn't let anyone stand in her way—she was fighting on two fronts: trying to figure out how to teach us while trying to figure out how to get the college to let her and the rest of the SEEK staff do that teaching.
>
> I fell in love with Mina right away, probably because of her beauty and fairness. I'm still not sure why she fell in love with me, took me under her wing so to speak. She followed my progress all through City. I remember once when I got a C in a political science course, she sat with me and went over the papers I had written line by line, showed me where I needed tighter analysis, clearer thinking. She never offered pity or con-

> descension. When we finished that session, I realized I was lucky to have gotten the C.
>
> Mina was fascinated by my relationship with my mother; she wanted to know how my mother had instilled in me a desire to learn. That's the way Mina operated—she'd find out how and why things worked for students and then try to duplicate it for other students. She knew how poor I was. I had never shopped in a store below 149th Street and Third Avenue; I didn't even know there was a world beyond that. Mina showed me that world. She would take some other students and me to plays on Broadway—she was so dignified in her behavior toward us—no condescension whatsoever.
>
> Then as graduation approached and I started to talk about the possibility of law school, Mina really got into gear. The next thing I know she's on the phone, writing letters, arranging interviews and loans, and presto—I'm accepted into Columbia Law School. That's when she took me to Bloomingdale's. I remember how scared I was, but Mina realized that there were some things I had to know and have before I started at Columbia. She bought me some perfume and other little things; she was trying to teach me to be comfortable in a strange environment. I still cannot walk into Bloomingdale's without thinking of Mina.
>
> Throughout law school, Mina kept in close touch and helped me over some very rough, uncomfortable places—I was probably the poorest student in my class. Then again as graduation approached she was back on the phone, this time to her good friend, Judge Alvin Schlesinger. Before I know it, I've got a clerkship. I was so naive at the time that I didn't realize how rare and valuable these positions were—I had gotten used to Mina and her magic wand.
>
> In 1989, when I was elected to be a civil court judge in Bronx County, Mina would have been proud of me, but I wouldn't have been a "specimen" to her, an example of *her* success. She would be equally proud to know that I married my childhood sweetheart and have two wonderful children.

Between 1967, when Mina first began her work at City, and 1972, extraordinary changes occurred in the SEEK program, in the college, and in the CUNY system. The precipitous growth in the number of students being admitted to the SEEK program exacerbated even further the strain being placed on City's

budget and caused those who were opposed to the SEEK program to fight even more vociferously for its removal. In April 1969, SEEK students and their supporters began a protest, occupying the entire south campus, demanding greater minority representation and stronger support for minority students. Scores of accounts have been written about this period at City, describing in great detail the demands made by the Black and Puerto Rican Student Caucus; the formation of Faculty for Action, a group of white professors who sided with the students' demands; the closing of the college; the destruction by fire of the Finley Student Center; the arrival of two hundred police officers to stop the violence that erupted after the college reopened; and finally, the resignation of Buell Gallagher, City College's seventh president.

Jean Campbell, a SEEK student who had first met Mina in 1968 and who had become extremely close to her, remembers the way that Mina reacted to the riots and shutdown:

> As a black woman, I saw those protests and strikes as a way for people like me to change things, to gain the power and control we needed to get an education. But Mina and I were at loggerheads about this, and we were careful to avoid talking too much about the issues exploding around us. As long as we could get on campus, she refused to cancel her classes. Mina had decided that she would practice her "politics" in the classroom, not on a soapbox. She told us that she was providing the SEEK students with the tools to think, to write, and to read; that was the greatest contribution she could make. From anyone else, perhaps this would have been hard to take, maybe even impossible, but there wasn't a black or Puerto Rican student on that campus who didn't know that it was Mina Shaughnessy who fought hardest for the SEEK students. In fact, when some of the buildings were occupied, the students did a lot of damage in some offices—but not Mina's. She was the best thing that ever happened to us, and everyone of us knew it.

Those protests, and others like it across New York City, ultimately resulted in 1970 in an Open Admissions policy that guaranteed every student who graduated from a New York City public high school a place in one of the two- or four-year divisions of the City University of New York. The result at City was an increase in the SEEK population to more than thirty-five hundred students. Jean Campbell remembers that during this period, Mina was "absolutely exhausted":

> I worked in Mina's office part time, and I remember that she worked constantly. When she wasn't teaching or advising, she was working on schedules or in the writing center. As if that wasn't enough, she was constantly working on reports and studies. When I would ask her why she worked so hard on her research, given all of the other things she had to do, she would say, "I'm going to produce the research that is needed to prove that these students can learn, and I'm not going to let anything or anyone interfere with what I am trying to do." There were thousands of blue books in her office and at her apartment. We would make jokes about them, but I swear she knew where every blue book was, maybe even what was in each one.
>
> When we got really close, I began to call her "Lady." A lot of the other students called her "Shaughn." She would tell me to just call her Mina, but I explained that the word *Lady* was special to me—you had to be just the right kind of person for me to call you that. After that, she let me call her Lady all the time. Sometimes I would change it to "Miss Lady." [Campbell also had a nickname for Toni Cade Bambara: "Miss Black Loretta Young."]

"Lady" was only one of the nicknames that Mina acquired during these years. Marilyn Maiz recalls that people began to refer to her as "'the Countess,' with great affection and approbation. It wasn't because she looked like a countess, although she did," Marilyn recalls:

> It was because of her ability to get what she wanted from administrators and bureaucrats at City and CUNY. She would decide that the program needed something, or that someone needed funds to attend a conference, or that something special had to be done for a student. At first, we would tell her she was crazy to think that an exception could be made or that it could be done at all, but then before we knew it, Mina had gotten precisely what she wanted. In fact, as her career progressed at CUNY, we elevated her to "the Queen." She would just smile—if she was going to use her charm for anything or anyone, it was going to be for her students.

Some of the research to which Jean Campbell referred—and those stacks and stacks of blue books—would eventually result in *Errors and Expectations,* but during 1970 and 1971, in addition to teaching and administering the largest Open Admissions program in the CUNY system, Mina was preparing a research proposal and several reports requested by the college's administration. She had

spent an entire summer developing a graduate-level course in composition that she would teach the next fall to the writing instructors in the SEEK program. In addition, she was frequently being asked either to make presentations about City's basic writing program or to explain the program to visitors from other institutions. Mina's City College personnel file bulges with letters and memos thanking her for her time and praising the expertise she exhibited in her presentations, along with notes from various deans, provosts, and presidents of City informing her that they had received great accolades about a particular presentation or address.

Despite such recognition, however, in 1970 it was still necessary for a waiver to be granted in order for Mina to be promoted from instructor to assistant professor in the English department—because of her lack of a Ph.D. In addition, Ted Gross, who was chair of the department at that time, recalls the response of the tenured members of the English department faculty to Mina's promotion application. (At that time, nontenured faculty members did not have a vote in promotion or tenure decisions.)

> I remember when Mina's name came up in one of the meetings—she had become eligible for her first promotion; the response was overwhelmingly negative. They opposed her in every way they could: that she didn't have the terminal degree was a big issue. "She teaches verb endings," I remember one of the faculty members saying. They claimed that the department was being destroyed. I remember standing up in the middle of this storm and defending Mina—one of the things I'm still most proud of in my career. "This woman is probably working on the single most important subject in this university," I said, "and you're telling me she shouldn't be given a promotion because she doesn't have a Ph.D.? You've got to be kidding."

When Mina's promotion was finally approved, she mentioned it in a letter she wrote to her parents, making only the most oblique reference to the resistance many of the tenured members of the faculty had exhibited:

As I mentioned, I have been promoted to assistant professor, which I'm sure doesn't sound like much of anything, but for some silly reason it is a hurdle very difficult to get over if you don't have your Ph.D. I hope no one stops it

further on up, but anyway, it was good to have the full endorsement of the Department, which is one of those rather traditional and strict departments on matters of the Ph.D.

Somehow during this tumultuous period of Mina's professional life, she managed to find time to write a twenty-page essay entitled "Teaching Basic Writing," sometimes referred to as "Some New Approaches toward Teaching." The essay, which was published by CUNY's Office of Academic Development in a collection of essays entitled A *Guide for Teachers of College English* and reprinted in *the Journal of Basic Writing* in 1994, can be seen as the beginning of the observations and theories that would eventually evolve into *Errors and Expectations.* More important, however, it reflects her thinking as she and her colleagues tried to develop the curriculum for the three levels of classes being instituted for the basic writing students. Mina lamented the fact that writing teachers often "expect (and demand) a narrow kind of perfection which they confuse with the true goal in writing, namely, the 'perfect' fit of the writer's words to his meaning." She had come to recognize, through her students' attitude, behavior, and writing, that

> teachers have not only ignored the distinctive circuitry of writing—which is the only source of fullness and precision—but have often short-circuited the writing activity by imposing themselves as feed-back. Students, on the other hand, have tended to impose upon them-selves (even when blue-book essays do not) the conditions of speech, making writing a kind of one-shot affair aimed at the teacher's ex-pectations. Students are usually surprised, for example, to see the messy manuscript pages of famous writers. "You should see how bad a writer Richard Wright was," one of my students said after seeing a manuscript page from *Native Son*. "He made more mistakes than I do!" Somehow students have to discover that the mess is *writing:* the published book is *written*.
>
> A writing course should help the student learn how to make his own mess, for the mess is the record of a remarkable kind of interplay between the writer as creator and the writer as reader, which serves the writer in much the same way as the ear serves the infant who is teaching himself to speak. No sooner has the writer written down what he thinks he means than he is asking himself whether he understands what he said. A writing course should reinforce and broaden this interplay, not interrupt it, so that the student can use it to

> generate his own criteria and not depend upon a grade to know whether he has written well. The teacher can help by designing writing situations that externalize the circuitry principle. The teacher and the class together can help by telling the writer what they think he said, thereby developing an awareness of the possibilities for meaning or confusion when someone else is the reader.
>
> But if the student is so well equipped to teach himself to write and the teacher is simply an extension of his audience, why does he need a teacher at all? The answer is, of course, that he doesn't absolutely need a teacher to learn to write, that, in fact, remarkably few people have learned to write through teachers, that many, alas, have learned to write in spite of teachers. The writing teacher has but one simple advantage to offer: he can save the student time, and time is important to students who are trying to make up for what got lost in high school and grade school. (4-5)

This lengthy essay provided the first exposure for many people at City College and in other divisions of the CUNY system to Mina's literary style, and they were immediately struck by the grace and clarity of her prose. Adrienne Rich recalls that all of Mina's writing was exquisite:

> In a field, English composition, where deadly subhuman academic textbook writing abounds, Mina was a remarkable literary stylist. Many of us who were members of the SEEK staff remember even her office memos as having a grace, a liveliness of language which was not a self-conscious English professor's wit, nor false poetry, nor phone colloquialisms; it was rather the style of a woman who loved language enough never to use it without pleasure.

In July 1971, Mina attended the York Conference in England, where she met Jarnes Britton, along with almost every other then prominent figure in the field of composition studies. Her election in 1972 to the National Council of Teachers of English's Committee on the Teachers' Right to Teach further expanded her growing national role and visibility.

Beginning in early 1972, Mina also began to meet on a regular basis with faculty members from other CUNY institutions, many of whom were either

directing the writing programs or the writing centers, and all of whom were experiencing the same difficulty dealing not only with the academic needs of their students, but with the strong and often hostile resistance of other faculty members. She drew on the work and discoveries of these colleagues as well in *Errors and Expectations*.

These meetings, which continued throughout the years when Mina worked on *Errors and Expectations,* were the beginning of what would later evolve into CAWS, the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors, but initially, Ken Bruffee recalls,

> It was a sort of floating craps game of anywhere from three or four to eight or ten people from around the city. I called some people in CUNY to find out if any of us knew anything about what we were supposed to be doing, and everyone told me that Mina Shaughnessy at City College seemed to have a handle on things. We'd meet in restaurants and have a cup of soup or coffee, and we'd talk.

Eventually, the group decided to come together "as a study group of sorts," and Bruffee remembers discussing such books as Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class* and Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture:*

> We were ranging pretty widely in our reading. I have a note in my journal from this period, for example, to read Suppe's *The Structure of Scientific Theories,* also Sanford's *American College,* and Wilson's *College Peer Groups,* in addition to some mention of reading about "behavioral research." We quickly realized that everything we were doing at our own institutions was being done in grungy faculty rooms or basements, and there was a tremendous amount of labor and confusion involved. I had become known at Brooklyn College as "Mr. Open Admissions, the Destroyer of Western Civilization." Mina wasn't faring much better at City, neither were Bob Lyons and Don McQuade at Queens, or Harvey Weiner at LaGuardia. The group later expanded to include many others, and we eventually began to push the MLA and NCTE to begin to at least recognize our existence.

Janet Emig, who was at Rutgers University at the time and whose study *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* had been published by NCTE in 1971, was also included in this group of faculty members. She and Mina de-

veloped a close friendship; in addition to the meetings, which usually took place every Friday afternoon about three or four o'clock, she and Mina began to meet at other times as well. Emig remembers "many Thanksgiving dinners together after the annual NCTE convention."

More and more, Mina was being recognized as an expert, perhaps *the* expert on basic writing, and her work at City College was further recognized in spring 1972 when she was chosen as one of the recipients of the 125th Anniversary Medallion of City College. Under her direction, the citation read, "the Basic Writing Program of City College has attained its present stature as one of the outstanding programs of its kind in the country." But in the English department, Mina still held a minority position in her belief that her students had as much of a right to be at City as any other students, and a right to the kind of instruction that would contribute to their success. She was overworked; more and more demands were being made on her time, and educators from across the country were beginning to view her as the one who could provide the quick answers and solutions that would "solve" their students' writing problems. She later described the frustration she was feeling at this time in the introduction to *Errors and Expectations:*

> Here were teachers trained to analyze the belletristic achievements of the centuries marooned in basic writing classrooms with adult student writers who appeared by college standards to be illiterate. Seldom had an educational venture begun so inauspiciously, the teachers unready in mind and heart to face their students, the students weighted by the disadvantages of poor training yet expected to "catch up" with the front runners in a semester or two of low-intensity instruction. (3)

Mina was becoming more and more convinced that unless she was given the time to engage in a systematic study of basic writing, these students would be deprived of the type of instruction they needed to succeed. She explained her position early in 1972 in a twenty-five page proposal to the college administration for released time and funding that would enable her to prepare a comprehensive report "on the basic writing program at City College and on the writing problems of its students." She wrote:

> During the long debates that preceded Open Admissions, it was common to hear professors, administrators, and even students refer to the arrival of the new students in the metaphors of disease—of debility, decay, paralysis, contagion, even of mortality rates. "Preparation" for Open Admissions seemed, in such a context, to mean "protection" for the teachers and their "bright" students, those who had been classified by their academic records as "college material."
>
> This concern for what came to be called "maintaining standards" pressed most directly on the remedial teachers of the college, who were charged with the task of transforming within a semester or two their "disadvantaged" students into students who behaved, in academic situations at least, like "advantaged" students. This, of course, was impossible. More seriously, it started things off in the wrong direction: it narrowed the base of responsibility for Open Admissions students to the remedial programs, giving "regular" departments an illusion of immunity from change; it channeled most of the Open Admissions money into remedial programs and into counseling that was aimed at helping students adjust to the college world; but it provided no support for research into the learning problems of the new students (significantly, the only research so far to emerge from Open Admissions has been statistical reports on grades and drop-out rates); and it encouraged remedial teachers, under pressure to produce imitations of the model "bright" students as quickly as possible, to go on doing what writing teachers have too often done before—work prescriptively rather than inductively, removing mistakes without trying to understand them.
>
> This was a wrong direction—not because "bright" students should not be imitated or mistakes corrected but because learning seldom takes place if the teacher has no idea of what is going on in the mind of his student, and the teacher is not likely to be looking there if his eyes are fixed on the model "bright" student. He will be ticking off, instead, the incidences of failure to match the model and making judgments about the intelligence of students who continue to make the same mistakes....
>
> Meanwhile, we are learning that the ability of our students to master written English is hindered less by their deficiencies than by our failure, too often, to understand more precisely what is going on in them when they don't learn what we try to teach. Often, our very formulation of a problem keeps us from understanding it.

Mina was asking for time to sort it all out, to make sense of what she had experienced—and discovered—during the past five years. Her proposal was

submitted by City College to the Carnegie Foundation, and in May 1972 she was informed that the foundation would appropriate $46,079 to City College to be used to subsidize her research and writing of "a report on the writing problems of disadvantaged students." Ted Gross informed the department of the grant and announced that Blanche Skurnick would assume Mina's duties for the 1972-73 academic year. A party was held in Mina's honor to celebrate the grant, and it was attended primarily by those instructors who taught with her in the SEEK program. With the exception of Len Kriegel, Ed Quinn, and a few others, the full-time tenured professors did not celebrate her achievement.

A month later, on June 21, 1972, Mina's parents celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. During the previous winter break, she had visited them in Arizona—where they had gone in an attempt to find some relief for Albert Pendo's arthritis. Because of the work involved in preparing to turn the basic writing program over to Blanche Skurnick, however, Mina was unable to travel to South Dakota to be with her parents on their anniversary.

She wrote them a letter instead, telling them that although she could not be with them, she was spending the evening "looking at your wedding picture and the two pictures I took of you in Arizona this year." She saw the faces of "two people who have taken on the world, faced its difficulties, tasted its joys, satisfactions, and its bitterness, too. They are wonderful faces ... that belong so much together that I cannot see one without somehow seeing the other."

In the last paragraph of her letter, Mina expressed gratitude to her parents for the love they nurtured in her, but she also asked: "What was it that made things work?"

Was it, in part, your assumption that things had to work, that one made this decision once and then stayed with it? I think even more than that, it was a kind of generosity of heart, an impulse toward affection covered a multitude of difficulties. It was the quality that has always made our home a place where people want to come. It was a place with love in it, and that love was generated by you and spread out among your children and your friends.... You will be celebrating your marriage—a marriage ... that started no doubt with all the gossamer dreams of newly weds but did not end there. It became

rooted in the real earth and has grown like the strong tree, and I will be celebrating that creation with you.

Perhaps Mina was comparing her parents' circumstances with her own marriage. Her husband was halfway across the world, their relationship reduced to weekly letters and occasional visits. She had no children of her own. But there were strong similarities as well. Mina had found challenge—and satisfaction—in her students; she, too, had "assumed that things had to work" and had "stayed with it," with a "kind generosity of heart."

"In a period of much pedagogic drama and experimentation," Adrienne Rich would later write of this period in Mina's life, "Mina represented an extraordinarily pure concern for the actual learning processes of actual students," while "teaching grammar, inventing new ways to teach it, training teachers, conceptualizing our everyday collective experience, negotiation and struggling with higher administrators, writing grant proposals, dealing with students and staff alike, on the most human and individual level" (1).