

A Collaboration in Characters

FLC Professor
Shaila Van Sickle Publishes
Novel Set in a Familiar
Liberal Arts College
by Shan Wells



SHAILA VAN SICKLE hails from several generations of academics and is herself a retired Professor of English at Fort Lewis College in Durango, which she has called home since 1974. Shaila has traveled extensively in the Southwest and the continental United States, as well as abroad. During the course of her academic career Shaila has penned articles, critical reviews, handbooks and linguistic texts. Upon retiring Shaila was at last free to nurture her childhood dream of writing a novel. She revels in conversation, which is evident in her writing style and ability to gently place her reader within the walls of academia to explore its mysteries.

While teaching English grammar as a public school teacher, Shaila Van Sickle wondered why some people get grammar, and others do not. She pursued that question through several years of graduate study, especially when assigned to teach Structure of the English Language, an upper division and graduate course, at the University of Denver. “I was fortunate in having the woman who’d taught it for many years recommend that it be given to me when I became an instructor at the time she moved away from Denver,” Van Sickle recalled. “It was odd, at first. Many of the students in the class were my peers, so there was a real question as to whether I had anything to offer.” By the end of the term, however, all doubts as to her credentials were laid aside. “Everyone was quite satisfied and I discovered I wanted to make a career teaching linguistics as well as literature.”

Joining the English Department at Fort Lewis College in 1974, Van Sickle became friends with many faculty members then working at the school. She taught cross disciplinary courses with physics professor Dan Gibbons and political science professor David Bass, and with history professor Doreen Hunter.

Chemistry Professor Doreen Mehs also had prior experience working with colleagues in a variety of fields before she and Van Sickle teamed up to teach a sophomore composition seminar titled, “Problems and Puzzles,” for several years. FLC’s Integrated Learning Program later grew out of that course.

“The US Department of Education gave us a three year grant to design and teach the first years of the program,” said Van Sickle. From then on, Fort Lewis took over supporting the total immersion program, for which students earned a single grade since class work crossed disciplinary lines.

Van Sickle, Mehs, and Archeology professor Jim Judge taught the course for six years. Other collaborating professors included Jim Cross, Red Bird, Harry Rosenberg, John Byrd, Betty Leyerle, Kathy Simbeck and Dave Gonzales.

“It was fantastic,” Van Sickle remembered. “We wanted students to see that studying science depended on deductions and inductions,

not just dry facts, and that studying humanities depended on coming up with more than ‘anything-goes’ opinions, unfounded on evidence.”

Every year, the program’s instructors took students to the Grand Canyon. Camping in a group campground, they conducted discussions, hiked, and visited various places in the Park. They also heard talks from the staff at the Canyon, as well as from visitors such as Paul R. Ehrlich, well-known biologist and ecologist.

Continuing in this vein of cross-pollination, when Van Sickle and Mehs retired in 1999, they hit upon the idea of writing a collaborative novel that would be set in a fictional New Mexican liberal arts college. Coming together once a week, the pair would read aloud what the other had written, exchanging and then editing the manuscripts, each working to make the storyline clearer and the mystery it related more compelling.

Doreen Mehs began to suffer from vascular dementia during the course of the project, and after a time she could no longer write or type. However, she could still listen and make suggestions. “In later years, I had to do the typing and reading aloud since she could not do either. But Doreen was a terrific listener,” said Van Sickle. “She had an intact memory for our characters and our plot, and could still catch me in inconsistencies and suggest substitute wording.”

Meh’s death in 2009 set the project back, but former FLC President Joel Jones persuaded Shaila not only to finish the work, but publish it. “Van Sickle has written a well-crafted academic mystery novel that would make Amanda Cross proud,” said Jones.

By January of 2013, Van Sickle was proudly signing copies of *Seven Characters in Search of an Author* at Maria’s Bookshop in Durango.

For ordering information, please [click here](#).



Former FLC
Chemistry
Professor
Doreen Mehs