Teachers can be life-changers. They open doors to a love of learning or influence in the right direction. Mary Blackwell, 89, holds that special place in the hearts of the many students she impacted in her 25 years in the Chicago schools.

Blackwell taught middle school English – a subject replete with challenge. “Their nemesis seemed to be irregular verbs,” she remembers. She fondly recalls the escapades of a student, Alonzo. “He has tuned out to be a fine gentleman. His mother calls me regularly (decades later) and thanks me for helping her with her boys.” And Alonzo – well, he brings her brisket and ribs from the family restaurant when he visits.

Blackwell knows teaching was her calling. “You cannot learn to become a teacher in a college,” she said. “It’s in here (pointing to her heart). I don’t know of anything else that I could have been or wanted to be other than a teacher.”

“I love people,” she added. “I learned when I was very young you should realize your purpose. I know why I am here; I am supposed to help people.”

Blackwell’s female relatives, including the grandmother who reared her after her mother died, were teachers. She followed the family footsteps, then conveyed the gift to her daughter, Phyllis Reed, who teaches English at the college level in San Antonio after stints teaching on U.S. military bases around the world.

Blackwell visited her daughter in the Philippines, one of many excursions that brought learning to life. Information gleaned through extensive worldwide travel made her lessons leap off the page.

“I needed to have experiences,” she said. “Traveling broadens one’s scope. When I saw something in a book I could say, ‘This is it! I have seen it!’”

Her voyages have taken her to London, most of eastern and western Europe: Paris, Poland, Russia (including a peek at the Kremlin), Austria, Finland, (where her tour’s bus was reportedly stolen by the Russian mafia) Scandinavia, France, Switzerland, then on to Africa, and the Orient.

“I’d show my pictures, and the students would ask questions. It would open up a whole new world … that’s teaching!” she exclaimed.

Blackwell lost her beloved husband of 65-years, Richard, in April 2014. She determined it was time to be closer to her daughter and granddaughter, Regina Bamsebi, and joined the Independence Hill Retirement Community family last spring. Already she knows no stranger.

“A lot of people call me Miss Sunshine,” she confided. “I want people to feel good when they leave my presence.”

Blackwell sings soprano in the Independence Hill Hilltoppers Choir, plays bridge almost every day and enjoys weekly church services. As she plans her next adventure…. India or Australia top her list.