

## Remembering our favorite teachers

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Please give yourself a quick holiday present by thinking back about one or two of your finest teachers. Most people smile when asked to do this. And you hear some remarkable stories. Here are a few people shared recently:

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It was the third grade, and my parents were getting a divorce. I was miserable. My teacher understood what was happening. She encouraged me to write her notes as often as I wanted. She always responded. For that year, she was my parent, and a very kind one.

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I was 14, feeling awkward and ugly. A drama teacher convinced me that I should try out for a play. I did, and got a role. Not the lead, but a role. I loved it. For more than 30 years I've been in high school, college and community plays. That teacher opened up a wonderful world to me.

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I wasn't a very good student. But football was another story. My coach decided I could be a leader. At the time, I was feeling pretty bad about school, and myself. But with his encouragement, I became a team captain. He found a tutor, who helped me do better in class. But what really improved my grades was his deep faith in me.

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It was 4th grade. Almost everyone else in class was a much better reader. I began to hate school, and sometimes told my parents I was too sick to go. They called my teacher, and had a conference. The teacher stayed after school once or twice a week for two months, giving me and another student a lot of help. He explained that some guys just took a bit longer to read. Gradually, I did learn. I caught up, and became a good reader. All because that teacher gave me extra time, and a lot of patience.

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My junior year I was on the student government. I was pretty cocky. We were debating something related to a dance. I thought someone's idea was dumb, and made fun of him. After the meeting, the advisor had me write down what I said. Then he had me describe how I felt when someone put me down. Finally he asked me to write to the person I had ridiculed. That teacher treated me with more respect than I had shown.

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I thought school was pretty boring. But my senior high school government teacher made things come alive. He had us research and debate current topics. We studied local problems, developed a possible solution, and took it to the city council. The council liked our idea, and adopted it. This man showed me government wasn't just about dry chapters in a textbook. It was about helping people. I became a lawyer, a legislator, and a judge.

Over the next year, I'd like to share some of your stories. Please write to me, [jnathan@hhh.umn.edu](mailto:jnathan@hhh.umn.edu). And have a great holiday season.

Reader response to 12/19/04 article  
(1 of 5)

1972. Mrs. Adler was from Texas. I was from NYC, attending a private school on the upper east side of Manhattan, and one of only two students of color in the first grade there. Mrs. Adler would take me and the other girl, sit us on her lap, and promise that if we, one, continued reading, and two, made it through the school to the twelfth grade, she'd come to our graduation, "Even if they have to wheel me there!" June 1983. We made it, through biased teachers, never reading but one book about a theme they said was related to us--is Nigeria anywhere near east 70th street or West Harlem?--and guess what, so did Mrs. Adler. Straight out of retirement and straight up from Texas. Cane and all, Mrs. Adler gently and slowly came down the aisle of the auditorium and the other girl and I ran from the graduation stage back into her arms. Intent, purpose, commitment. Mrs. Adler.

Lisa Arrastia, Director of School City as Classroom School

A public  
co-educational, 9-12 high school

Reader response to 12/19/04 article  
(2 of 5)

I just read your "Viewpoint" in the StarNews concerning

"your finest teacher". Thank you for taking the time to recognize the efforts teachers make to better their student's lives. As I reach the end of a 30-year teaching career, I find it more and more difficult to stay positive in a profession that has been eroding in respect, support and funding.

When I began teaching, I had about 20 students in a classroom. Today classes of over 40 are not uncommon. It becomes very difficult to get to know a student well on a personal level, especially since my area has been cut to only a quarter of a year, then a new group of students arrive.

Students come to school with pop and candy for breakfast, unable to concentrate on class because they are worrying about the abuse, chemical dependency, neglect, and family disruptions at home, and overdosed on violence on TV and computer games. The number one reason for children to be removed from their home in this county is methamphetamine use by parents. Many children are no longer taught to respect authority. This lack of respect carries over to teachers, law officers, and even to their parents.

Yes, there are still those wonderful, positive, respectful and eager learners who come to class loved and prepared. But they seem to be more and more in the minority. I found myself taken back yesterday when a student offered a "Thank You" when she was handed a paper. Maybe good manners have just become old-fashioned.

I work with a group of very hard-working, concerned, and dedicated teachers who put in many hours beyond their required day. They don't do it for the pay or the appreciation, but do it because they care about these children that they work with everyday. And it means a lot when someone like you takes the time to recognize their efforts. Thank you.

Reader response to 12/19/14 article  
(3 of 5)

Casey at the Bat! By Casey Lartigue

Back in the day, I was the co-editor of my high school newspaper. For 2 years, I also wrote a column, "Casey's Corner."

Whenever I sold the paper, I offered two versions of the same edition:

Unsigned by me: \$.25

Signed by me: \$.50

I got very few takers for the signed copies. In fact, some felt that I was damaging the paper by putting my autograph on it, so I should charge them less than \$.25.

People who think I'm arrogant now should have met me in my younger days! "If I were you," I'd confidently tell people as I signed the column, often against their will, "I'd save that paper. It only cost you \$.25 today. But it is going to be worth millions of dollars one day." As I said, I got very few takers (Thanks Ralph! You too, Claudine!). No one ever asked me if I was saving signed copies myself...

Last May I had my first ever book signing. It was for the release of the book *Educational Freedom in Urban America*. It later aired on C-SPAN. I was praised by just about everyone at the event, including Secretary of Education Rod Paige.

After the event, I walked upstairs to the luncheon. Then someone walked over to me, holding the book, and asked the magical question that I wasn't expecting: "Could you sign my book?"

I've been at many book forums, at which I've gotten autographs from other people. But it was my turn to sign. I signed the book, a bit stunned. Then several others approached me, pen in hand. They praised me for my speech, a few told me that they had seen me on TV and were thankful to meet me. I realized that I didn't have any cool lines or philosophical sayings ready to sign! I guess that I'll have to edit or write another book and work on witty signature quotes...

It is sad that I can't share this with the teachers who had a major influence on getting me into writing. The cycle of life and death means that the people who helped us along our way often aren't there later on to see our successes. People who once were at the center of my life have moved on. In some cases, I'm the person who has moved on.

I vividly recall the day that my 9th grade English teacher slipped me a note at the end of class one day near the end of the year. It was more of an order than a request: You are a great writer. Go see the journalism teacher. I've signed you up for the school paper.

So that was it. She believed that I should be on the paper. I remember walking to the office, dazed, and reading the note over and over again, to sign up for journalism as an elective. I can't say that I was entirely surprised. I enjoyed writing. I recall entertaining my classmates with my stories during creative writing time. I was at the center of the activity of my assignments, discussing the events and people around me. I guess that Ms. Robertson, who I had a crush on, was chuckling, too.

But I hadn't really considered joining the paper, it just seemed that other people did that. A few years ago, I called, then later stopped by the first high school attended. The folks there couldn't recall a Ms. Robertson and said that they couldn't locate any records. I guess that it would have helped if I could have recalled her first name. To me, she was Ms. Robertson, so I may not have ever known. I'll be going back home this summer, so I'll try again, this time, with her name that I've gotten from an old yearbook.

Ms. Robertson was the first teacher to get me thinking about a career in writing. The journalism teacher at the second high school that I attended was my true mentor.

My family moved a few miles to a new home. Due to the wonder of school zones, I transferred from a predominately black to a predominately white high school.

I was brand new to the school, but the new journalism teacher, Mrs. Flowers, quickly offered me a spot as a columnist on the school paper. I believe that it was because of our early creative writing assignments. I had suggested, in one of the assignments, that we change the name of the paper from "Viking Venture." I had wanted something more action-oriented, like "Viking Invaders!" I then wrote a long essay explaining why that made perfect sense.

She named me advertising manager position anyway. The staff photographer took my photo one day, Mrs. Flowers suggested that I have a column called "Casey's Corner."

I still recall Mrs. Flowers fondly. It is not because of her beauty. Unlike Ms. Robertson, who was a real beauty, Mrs. Flowers was a very plain looking woman. I have no idea how old Mrs. Flowers was-being that I was a teen, it just seemed that she was old. I would guess now that she was in her late 30s or early 40s (an age that no longer seems old).

I hadn't thought about it at the time, but I now realize just how bold that may have been for her to name me a columnist. I was the only black student on the paper. I was brand new to the school. I was a pretty good student who struggled in classes with students who were several chapters ahead of where I had been at the predominately black school I had attended. I'm sure that I aced two classes during my high school years--P.E. and Journalism. I'd bet anyone an adverb for lunch that I had serious grammar problems at that time. Plus, I was relatively quiet. Worst of all, I wasn't a senior, which for anyone who has ever been a senior knows how important that is to a senior.

Yet, there I was, sounding off on various issues every month on page 2 of the school paper. I also wrote news, features and sports. But I loved my job as advertising manager. It gave me the freedom to write and to shake down local businesses for ads. But if I knew then what I know now! To boost our advertising budget, I would have threatened to write negative articles on businesses that didn't advertise in the paper...

The next year, I was made co-editor and resumed writing my column. There apparently was some controversy about my becoming co-editor. Some wondered if Mrs. Flowers had been afraid to name a black person as editor of the paper. The reality is that she had to talk me into it. I really didn't want it. I had enjoyed the previous year being the advertising manager and writing the column. I had assumed that I would remain in that capacity. I didn't want to spend time editing the writings of others, especially when I knew my own writing wasn't that great.

Through it all, Mrs. Flowers was my biggest fan. My girlfriend at the time was probably a close second. After that . . . did I mention that Mrs. Flowers and my girlfriend at the time were my biggest fans?

In college, I joined the school paper. I sent some of my first articles to Mrs. Flowers. She praised me, she seemed to be overjoyed, but I also recall that she wanted to correct my grammar problems and to talk about how I could have better phrased some sentences. She was always teaching me, while praising me and letting me know that even though I had done well, I could always do better.

I went on to have a sports column when I was in college. I remember calling Mrs. Flowers and telling her that I was no longer "Casey's Corner." I had graduated on to "Casey at the Bat."

She cried when I called to let her know that I was graduating from college.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Flowers passed away while I was overseas, so I never saw

her again after high school. I wasn't able to share with her when, as a policy analyst at the Cato Institute, I finally got published in big-time papers like USA Today, the Washington Post, and Education Week, testified before Congress, and appeared as a guest on major radio and TV shows. Years later, someone else offered me some web space as a columnist with the title Casey's Corner. I'm sure that she would have enjoyed my first book. She probably would have even humored me by asking me for my autograph after redlining typos or pointing out sentences that I could have written in a better way...

"If I were you, I'd save this essay."

Casey Lartigue, Jr.

Reader response to 12/19/14 article  
(4 of 5)

I attended a small rural school in Jackson County, Missouri, from grades one through eight. I found my teachers to be OK, except for my 4th grade teacher, Edith Havenhill. I was always a big overweight lummoX, even in 4th grade. But Mrs. Havenhill was the first teacher who told me that I could do great things, become a leader. The first teacher whom I would call special was my 10th grade Journalism teacher at Central High School in Kansas City. We were bussed into the city from our rural area each day. We caught a school bus about 6:45 each morning.

The journalism teacher was Virginia Oldham. During the first week of school, she challenged us to select a social issue of the day about which we were to compose a series of essays and articles in the course of the school year. This was the autumn of 1952, and I chose school desegregation.

Everything in Missouri was segregated by law in Missouri---schools, movies, restaurants, hotels, cemeteries. Even Boy Scout troops. This issue had been on my mind since I was sent home from school in 1949 (at age 12) for arguing with my 6th grade teacher about why we celebrated Columbus Day. I knew that Columbus didn't discover anything. In 1492, Hispanola was populated. How can one discover a place where people already live and claim that the land belongs to a foreign government? In 2004, I have never received a satisfactory answer to my inquiry.

But Virginia Oldham introduced me to the world of controversy and debate. She alerted me to a court case that started in Summerton, South Carolina, and would be presented to the US Supreme Court as *Brown v. Board of Education*, Topeka, Kansas.

At age 67, I am still grateful for those assignments.

Jerome Winegar

Springfield, Massachusetts

Reader response to 12/19/14 article  
(5 of 5)

When I was beginning fifth grade my parents divorced and we moved to a new house in a new neighborhood. I had to start over in a new school which is difficult for any child, but fifth grade is especially difficult. I was blessed that year to have Mr. Hugh Morris, a fifth grade teacher in St. Anthony Village School District. Not only was he the most organized and creative teacher, he knew enough about my home situation to know that I needed extra attention or I was at risk of failure. He went that extra step that exceptional teachers are willing to take. He had very high standards, but worked with each student to motivate us to achieve at a high level.

It is thanks to him that I am also a teacher to this day!!! I wanted to grow up to be just like him, and I've spent my career trying to reach that high standard!!!

Julie Hutcheson-Downwind

Saint Paul Schools