

Rick Lavoie

A Great Teacher

July 2003

It was heartening and encouraging to receive a call from LDOnline informing me that the website would feature the theme of "What Makes a Good Teacher" and asking me to reflect that theme in my monthly Tales from the Road column. At a time when "teacher bashing" has become a favorite indoor sport on many LD websites, it is refreshing to see that LDOnline recognizes and reinforces the tireless efforts of America's teachers and continues to build bridges - not walls - between parents and educators! Bravo!

I often quote the African Proverb, "When Elephants fight it is the grass that gets trampled." That is, when the adults in a child's life are squabbling, it is ultimately the child who is hurt. Parents and teachers must work together as partners and equal shareholders in the LD child's educational process. A recent informal university sponsored survey resulted in a list of expectations that parents held for teachers...and a parallel list of expectations that teachers held for parents. These lists give all of us much to reflect upon and can be the springboard for discussion and reflection for all of the adults in a child's life.

Ten things parents wish teachers would do:

1. Build student's self-esteem
2. Become familiar with each child's needs
3. Communicate honestly and openly with parent
4. Assign effective homework
5. Set reasonably high academic standards
6. Care about the kids
7. Be fair
8. Enforce positive discipline
9. Use a variety of teaching methods
10. Encourage parental participation

Ten things teachers wish parents would do:

1. Be involved in child's education
2. Provide resources at home for reading and learning
3. Set a good example
4. Encourage children to do their best in school
5. Emphasize academics
6. Support school rules and goals
7. Use parental pressure positively
8. Be proactive
9. Accept parental responsibilities
10. Inform school of situations that may impact school performance

In my thirty plus years in Special Education I have seen countless selfless, devoted, creative and gifted teachers in action. These fine people invest limitless time and energy in designing and implementing programs to meet the unique learning needs of kids who struggle with language. The information and inspiration that they provide these kids can have a lasting, life-altering effect. As Henry Adams said, "A teacher effects eternity; she never knows where her influence will end." The autobiographies of innumerable famous or accomplished

people often cite the enthusiasm of an elementary school teacher who sparked the person's interest in science, music, writing or the arts. That teacher is often unaware of the influence that she had over that student's life. This month's column will feature such a teacher.

In May, I was afforded the high honor of delivering the Commencement Address at my alma mater, Fitchburg State College. The small Massachusetts College holds particularly warm memories for me, as it was there that I met and courted, Janet, my wife and partner since 1972. We looked forward to the event and walking the greatly enlarged campus brought back wonder-filled memories.

One memory in particular involved Dr. Albert Berkowitz... a teacher who had tremendous influence on me, and doubtless never knew it.

I was not a stellar student as an undergraduate. I was very involved in the "social side" of the college experience and classes, seminars, readings and essays were largely viewed as an interruption of my social activities. My credo (from journalist Linda Ellerbee) was "God didn't create the world in seven days...he fooled around for six days and then pulled an all-nighter". If that was good enough for God, it certainly was good enough for me!

At the end of every semester, I invariably found myself in the position of needing extraordinarily high grades on my final papers or exams in order to offset my lackluster performance during the term. I was generally able to rise to the occasion. Dr. Berkowitz was the professor in my Nature and Needs of the Exceptional Child course. In 1970, district wide programming was in its infancy as school systems experimented with resource rooms, self-contained classes and innumerable other placement formats for their students.

Near the end of the semester, Dr. Berkowitz announced the topic for our final paper...we were to go to the Board of Education in our hometown and investigate, analyze and document the various programs offered to a variety of special needs kids. A good assignment. However, I immediately recognized that I would have a problem. I needed to get a B or high C on this paper in order to pass the course. However, nearly half of the students in the class were living in Fitchburg and we would all be outlining the same material! How could I make my paper stand out and achieve the grade that I needed? I decided to approach the assignment in a unique way. I created a fictitious family (the Sped family) that had twelve kids with a variety of exceptionalities ranging from physical impairments to emotional disturbances. The "family" had recently re-located to Fitchburg and each child would be accessing a different special education program or offering. The paper followed each individual child as s/he departed the bus on the first day and traced the child's steps through the tailored programs.

On the last day of class, Dr. Berkowitz announced that our graded papers could be found in our mailboxes by the end of the day. As we filed out of class, Dr. Berkowitz called to me, "Lavoie, hold up a minute." I was puzzled - and a bit concerned - as the Doctor and I had not ever shared a conversation and I very seldom participated in class discussions.

I approached the Doctor's desk, hesitantly. He reached into his briefcase, removed a large sealed envelop and handed it to me. Without saying a word, he left the room. That was the last time I ever saw the man.

I rushed nervously to the men's room and tore open the envelope. It contained my paper with a large uppercase "A" on the cover page...(I hadn't ever seen one of those before!).

There was a message written in Dr. Berkowitz's distinctive slanted handwriting. It read:

Mr. Lavoie,

You have sat silently in my class all semester. I realize now that this was a loss for both of us.

Your paper was outstanding and reflected great creativity, sensitivity and insight into the needs of exceptional children.

You know - if you decide to get serious about all of this - you could make a real difference in our field.

I was thunderstruck as I read and re-read that final paragraph. No one, anywhere, had ever said that to me before. Those 21 words of encouragement and inspiration made a marked change in my life.

Over that summer, I decided to "get serious" about my chosen field. I worked at a special residential camp that July and August. I entered my senior year with new resolve and earned a 3.8 average that year. Since then, I have earned three degrees in the field and an honorary doctorate from Fitchburg State...the institution that featured me on their "Academic Probation list" for eight of my ten semesters. Through my videos and speaking engagements, I reach and teach tens of thousands of my colleagues every year. I guess I have "made a difference" to a small degree.

I often wonder if Dr. Berkowitz has any idea of the difference that he made in his student's life with that 21-word paragraph? Probably not. He was just "doing his job".

Teaching. What a job! What an opportunity to change others! What an honor! What a blessing!

Until next time...

With every good wish, Rick