

Watertown Area Retired Teachers Association  
Reminiscent Teacher Award, April, 2007

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“Those were the days, my friend, we thought they’d never end. . . .”

1968. Moorhead State College (not yet raised to the University status by simply changing its name). Moorhead, Minnesota. The voice of Judy Collins wafts throatily on the breezes (Okay, it was windy!). . . And yet, since this is being written for RETIRED teachers by a newly paid lifetime member, we can assume that somewhere along the line, they did—end that is. And oh, how they flew! Well, after being fired my first year because the administration thought I needed to have discipline in my classroom! Well, after 33 observations my second year (in my second job). Well, with the exception of that one semester when I sat in the parking lot every morning for 20 – 30 minutes trying to decide whether I should go in and teach or go home and cry. Well, with the exception of the late nights and early mornings on the debate circuit and that episode with the feather pillow.

“It’s impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain, but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object, there was none. Passion, there was none.”

I wasn’t going to be a teacher. I was going to be an actor. . . on Broadway. . . a musical actor! My sisters were teachers. Ugh. I visited the elder’s third grade classroom. I repeat. I wasn’t going to be a teacher. And contrary to the quotation by Poe (“Telltale Heart”, my favorite!), I can tell you exactly how teaching entered my brain. Ms. Lucy. My mother suggested to me that I have a back-up plan, just in case the Broadway thing didn’t work. (She had seen me in “Spoon River Anthology”, and while she loved me and my five portrayals, not to mention my playing the organ and sewing some costumes, she was a cautious woman!) So I took the ed block credits in English and Speech/Theater. (To this day, I marvel at the fact the only B I got in Speech/Theater was “Teaching of Speech in the Secondary Schools”. Not that it made an impression on me!) These classes convinced me I would NEVER teach. (Ms. Lucy also told me that NEVER is a long time!)

The last thing I needed to do was my student teaching. Fargo North High School. Junior English and Intro to Speech. Teaching Moby Dick. Oh, my god! I was hooked. It was pre-ordained. I’m not usually a fatalist, but I can give you no other explanation. From the first class in January, 1971, to the last time I was paid by an educational institution (graduation address, 2005), I could think of NOTHING I would rather have done. Even that semester when I almost always chose not to cry! I know I preach to the choir when I tell you that it had nothing to do with the pay. It had nothing to do with the fringe benefits (duties as assigned?). It had nothing to do with June, July, and August. It had everything to do with the kids—both the ones taking the classes and the ones with whom I had the privilege to teach, for the true teacher never grows up and never grows old.

There they were, my first class. I was 21, going on 14, and found everything to be funny. Especially the names. Especially a young man whose last name was Glasscock. Now, you have to understand that I recognized my limitations—even then when I was young and totally invincible—so I practiced saying

the name out loud until I could say it without so much as a smirk crossing my face, and when I called the roster the first day of class, I made it through Glass before I started to laugh right out loud. (Gee, I just can't imagine why I was fired!) I'm sure I was more embarrassed than he.

Then, to firmly entrench myself with my new administration—I scored again. It was the end of parent conferences, and having just survived, I jumped on the railing and slid down—right into the mother of one of my students. I believe that was the start of the 33 observations.

There were the quick jaunts to the faculty lounge for my 3 minute cigarette. There was the time when I just finished lecturing my classes on appropriate language and forgot myself. There were the times when the little darlings managed to push every button I had and I lost my temper. There were the late nights of correcting papers and the early mornings of planning lessons and the long weekends of doing both.

And there were the Kathy's. Kathy was in my intro to speech class. Kathy was incredibly shy. Kathy had yet to discover where she was smart. But Kathy did her speeches. And each one got better. And each one met the requirements. And each one tugged at my heart as I watched her blossom. And at the end of the semester, she received an "A"—up until then, the only one she had. And she earned it!

And there were the Mike's. Mike was my kind of kid! You know the type—really bright but not willing to let anyone know. Mike was that "iffy" kid who could fall either way—a good kid who liked to have fun or a bad kid who liked to cause trouble. For some reason, Mike decided he liked me and liked speech. Mike also received an "A". And to my last day in the classroom, his name was on my bulletin board, with the word "GREAT" after it. (I know what you're thinking—he put it there! You're right. But I LEFT it!)

For every Kathy and every Mike, there's been a Ruth and a Jon and a Dan and a Lovila and a Scott and a . . . Those were the big kids in front of the classroom who taught by example the joy of learning, the love of humanity, and the need for compassion. And for 32 of the 34 years, there was another Cathy. The one who made it all worth while. The one I could go home to and with whom I could share and cry and laugh. The one who was the best teacher I knew—and know.

The Earth keeps some vibration going there in your heart, and that is you. . . .

Fiddler Jones, one of my five "Spoon River" conquests, begins with this line. I am convinced that those of us who were lucky enough to teach did so because of that certain vibration. Whether it was the love of the subject, the love of the kids, and/or the love of the compatriots, it was a journey of love, and I can think of no better way to explain how it left me than the last words of the Fiddler:

I ended up with a broken fiddle—  
And a broken laugh,  
**And a thousand memories,**  
**And not a single regret.**

Those WERE the days, my friend!