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WHY AND HOW I CHOSE TO BECOME A TEACHER

On September of 1940, I enrolled as a college freshman with aspirations to become a social worker. A war and parenthood interrupted my obtaining a bachelor of arts degree until June 1963.

During practicum, my senior year, I had creeping doubts about my ability to meet the emotional and material needs of clients. Also I felt in need of a potent spray to erase the atmosphere of dead-end despair in a county poor farm.

Being in a place at an opportune time led me to observe a university summer program for children having special needs. My curiosity peaked. I was turned on.

Upon reflection, I realize that my being a parent of two, gave me the incentive, experience with children and the confidence to choose a teaching career. My goal was certification in special education.

My first assignment was a self contained room of mentally, emotionally and physically challenged youngsters, from ages six to nine. The pupils ate lunch in the classroom with their teacher. A caring P.E. teacher adapted and modified a class for special needs students.

One event that is at the top of my memory list is when a child shouted, "I can read, I can read." She was a learning challenged youngster who after a three year struggle, hacked the reading procedure. She wanted her parents to come to school to observe the "miracle". They came. She read words and simple sentences while three tearful adults listened.

There were tears of joy in my teaching experience and also tears of sorrow when a pupil and his younger brother were victims of monoxide. I had no teaching preparation to help me explain such a tragedy to my students. I think of the two youngsters when I drive by Story Book Island where the single parent gave a monetary memorial of her only children.

Nor did any of the required methods courses prepare me for the times that I was summoned to appear in court during a custody hearing.

However, I do have humorous memories. When I asked a small boy to pick up paper that fell from his desk, he gave me a serious look and said, "Why, that's woman's work," my reaction was, "In this room picking up litter is work that we all do." I guided his hand, feebly holding the scrunched paper to the wastebasket. When his parents came for the

first conference of the year, I related the incident. The father with a mischievous grin, said, "Oh no! I tease my wife about woman's work."

After five years, I needed a break from special education and taught two years in a regular room in a different building.

My next assignment was teaching a class identified as Behavior I. I recoiled at the term behavior, as I believed that it sent a negative message. Instead my room was identified as the Primary Adjustment Room.

Frequently special education classes were assigned to a building or annex, where there was space and a willing principal. Having children in an annex, even with rest room facilities, was disruptive with students walking to the main building to lunch, for music and physical education.

I appreciate the ideas that student teachers, substitute teachers, aides, students and their parents brought to my classroom. I also have grateful memories of the help that I received from support players; the nurses, secretaries, custodians and lunchroom attendants, in addition to principals and teaching staff.

It is now illegal for public school teachers to strike; however in the fall of 1968, a majority of Rapid City teachers voted to strike. On the morning of the strike, I arrived when the custodian opened the building. I needed to know that the students' filing cabinet with confidential information was securely locked and that the individual lesson plans were in plain view on my desk.

An early memory in my teaching career lingers. I was shocked to learn that I was not considered the head of my household, by the Rapid City School District, because I was a woman. Only a man was regarded as head of a household and thus qualified for the \$500.00 a year household stipend. One school board member was still adamant when he left office, that women, with or without dependents, were not household candidates.

A teacher career enriched by retirement, How? I am a volunteer museum docent explaining exhibits to visiting students during the school year and to tourists during the summer. I also volunteer in a second grade where I have an opportunity to view the changes in curriculum especially in reading with the engaging colorful books, incorporating science, geography, history, animals and their habitat and the diversity of the human race.

What a contrast to my daughter's Dick and Jane reader. The only animal involved was Spot, a dog who was programmed for one activity, chasing a ball. The mother had the privilege of being a stay-at-home mom and wore a white apron that never had a smudge. Father came home every night on schedule. One job or position seemed to support the family. I can't imagine Dick or Jane ever eating a stand-up meal or finishing their breakfast toast on the bus.

My empathy for today's parents and parenting grandparents is compounding. I admired the coping skills of the parents whose children I taught, however, I view parenting in the year 2007 more difficult and exhausting than when I assumed that role.

Observing the learning growth and social skill development of my challenged pupils compensated for the times of frustration that I experienced. For me, a teaching career was the right choice.