

Memories of My Teaching Days

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Growing up I was not sure what I wanted to be, a nurse or a teacher. After fainting at the sight of blood in my high school Home Economics class when we toured the local butcher shop, I decided being a teacher might be the better choice. After all, my Grandma Vander Pol, Aunt Net and Uncle Alvin had been teachers and my older sister Charollene was a teacher and really seemed to enjoy the job. I received a scholarship to Yankton College where I received a two year teaching degree. At the age of nineteen, I was ready for my first teaching job. As luck would have it, I was hired to teach second grade at Beadle School in Yankton, South Dakota in the same building I did my student teaching. What a wonderful experience that year was with lots of supportive co-workers to guide me. I am not sure what I taught that first class but I know I loved what I was doing. I do remember having a set of black twins in my classroom. They loved to play tricks on me by sitting in each others assigned seats. The only way I could tell them apart was they wore different colored ribbons in the many braids in their hair.

The next year I taught third grade in an annex building at Annie Tallent School in Rapid City. Once again I was blessed with wonderful co-workers and a super lady named Y'Vonne Pailing who was a supervisor over new teachers in the district. Little did I know that later in my teaching career, I would be inducted into the Annie Tallent Club (now known as Honored Women Educators) and the school's name sake.

I taught third grade at Hillcrest Elementary in Brookings for two years while my husband finished college at SDSU. There again many wonderful educators and students touched my life during those years. Following my husband's graduation from SDSU, he got a job in Vermillion where we lived for eight years. During those years, I attended night school and received my four year teaching degree. Those years were especially special because I taught a combination fifth and sixth grade class in Meckling under the Vermillion School District. What wonderful farm families I met those several years. I learned much about caring, sharing, work ethic and helping others. The students were amazing. I am sure I learned much more from them than I taught them. Just last year, I heard from one of the girls that I taught in Meckling. Her family had moved out of state years ago but she moved back to South Dakota recently and found out where I lived. She sent me a copy of a note I had written to her when I was her teacher those many years ago. She had saved that encouraging note all these years.

We moved to Yankton in 1972 and I ran Kiddy Kampus Pre-School in my home for several years while my boys were in grade school there. In 1978 we moved to Pierre where I spent two delightful years teaching first grade at St. Joseph Catholic School. Once again, the family support and caring and sharing were heartwarming years there. I then taught second grade for several years in Pierre at Jefferson School and my last teaching years were spent teaching first grade at Buchanan School also in Pierre. I truly was blessed in Pierre to have wonderful co-workers, administrators and students.

Two of my favorite organizations that I belonged to as a teacher were Reading Council and SDEA. I had the privilege of being a presenter at many state reading council and SDEA conventions as I presented on various topics from poetry, math, whole language, phonics, writing and reading strategies.

My two sons and my husband remember helping Mom on the weekends prepare and put up bulletin boards as well as rearrange the room to make the room more conducive to learning.

Throughout the years, the students enjoyed the interactive bulletin boards as well as the fun Valentine Post Office we used for learning about the post office as we addressed, stamped, sorted, and put in the mailboxes the valentines for our Valentine Party. The students took turns working in the classroom post office.

Another highlight in my classroom that former students say were favorites were our end of the year programs we presented for parents and grandparents reviewing our year together month by month. After our program, we would present our writing journals to our families as a remembrance of our year together.

My teaching career was blessed with having many student teachers throughout the years that enriched my life along with my students. I also had some wonderful practicum students from Riggs High School that added some new perspectives to my classroom. It is great to see so many of my former student teachers and practicum students out in the teaching field and being very successful in their jobs. They like me, probably won't get rich but their lives will be enriched by sharing the joy of teaching with children.

There are so many memories of former students and our adventures together. One young man at dismissal time would always say to me, "Thank you so much for teaching me today, Mrs. Catlin." Another young man brought me flowers many times after school and would say that his Mom or the babysitter gave them to him to give to me. I found out later he was picking flowers in yards on the way home from school and bringing them to me. On the last day of school, my husband bought flowers for Dylan to give to me.

I retired in 1999 and oh, how I missed those students. So, I was hired part-time by the Pierre School District to help new primary teachers with curriculum and classroom concerns. Later I worked as a trainer for the AREA Program working with Pierre and Fort Pierre K-2 teachers and once again had the opportunity to be with teachers and kids. I am now a full fledged volunteer and do Reading Buddies in a first grade classroom, serve as a kindergarten tutor for nine kindergarteners as well as being involved with other community service projects.

The buildings I taught in were as unique as the students I taught. But the main thing to me was to create a friendly and inviting environment for my students to learn whether the classroom was big, small, crowded, drafty or without doors.

My beginning teaching salary was barely enough to pay our monthly rent and a few groceries while getting my husband through his last two years of college. But somehow, it didn't really matter much as we often shared food we brought back from home to share with friends and they did the same for us when they went home for a weekend. We all seemed to be "in the same boat" money-wise those two years.

My first year of teaching I lived in an upstairs bedroom/kitchenette apartment with a bath. The elderly couple that lived downstairs always furnished a good breakfast for me before I headed to school. I walked about eight blocks to where I taught. The second year my Dad helped me purchase a chestnut brown with white hard-top Ford Galaxy 500 so I could move to Rapid City to teach at Annie Tallent School.

As I look back on my teaching career, times and schools have changed somewhat. School curriculum has changed, teaching instruction and methods have changed, buildings are bigger, teachers are expected to do more, and technology has changed how students are taught. But to me, the thing that has not changed much are the students. Families now live in a much faster-paced society wanting bigger and better things for themselves and their children. But more than ever, children still want to learn, they want to belong, they want teachers and parents to take the time to listen to them and they want to be motivated and challenged.

My one disappointment in the teaching field right now is the importance of pushing kids to do more in each grade and for them to grow up so quickly. Maybe Father did know best in the TV series by that name where families ate together, worked together, learned to get along, learned right from wrong and were disciplined more at home than at school.

The wonderful thing about being a teacher is *that you get to write on the hearts of your students things that the world cannot change or take away from them.* We as teachers do make a difference in the world and we may never know which lives we made a difference for. I for one, would be a teacher again in a heartbeat. I loved teaching students. I loved learning to be a

better teacher and most of all I loved my students as they enriched my life in a million ways. What other profession in the world lets you know that the students you taught are now doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses, scientists, pilots, bankers, and parents and you had a small part in their becoming who they are today? Yes, being a teacher was the best choice for me.