

## Chapter 3-2

# Memories of My Favorite Heroes and Mentors

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### INSPIRATION FROM HEROES AND MENTORS

Throughout my journey, I have encountered numerous heroes and mentors who have profoundly shaped my life. Their guidance has influenced my professional path and enriched my growth in ways I could never have imagined. Each lesson they imparted has left a lasting impression, and I am deeply thankful for their contributions.

Join me as I share stories about some remarkable individuals who have inspired me as an educator. Their stories and insights may ignite a spark within you and encourage you to reflect on the heroes in your own life. Discover how these influential figures have made a difference and continue to motivate us to strive for greatness.

### MRS. J: A HERO IN EDUCATION

One of my earliest heroes was my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. J. When I entered her classroom, she had already become a legend in our town. She is a hero because she inspired my dream of becoming a teacher, surpassing even Miss Barbara from Romper Room!

Mrs. J had a unique way of turning every lesson into an adventure. Even over 60 years later, vivid memories of her classroom remain fresh. I recall how she meticulously cut paper napkins into four sections for our snacks, showcasing her commitment to conservation long before it became a popular practice. Her respect for books was remarkable. Each time she shared a story, the sound of the plastic covers protecting our treasured books echoed in my ears, highlighting her care for these valuable resources. One of the most unforgettable moments of my kindergarten experience was the Mayfair Festival. On this joyous day, Mrs. J invited our entire

class to her home, where we danced around a maypole and enjoyed delightful refreshments and games. Her enthusiasm for learning ignited a passion within me that has lasted ever since.

## **SISTER CLAIRE WHALEN: A LASTING INFLUENCE**

Sister Claire Whalen served as my advisor and professor during my undergraduate studies at Marian College (now Marian University) in Indianapolis. Initially, I found her presence somewhat intimidating; however, her warm smile and unwavering passion for teaching quickly transformed her into one of my most significant role models.

One of Sister Claire's most remarkable qualities was her deep understanding of effective teaching practices. She emphasized the importance of developing a conceptual understanding of the material, teaching us that authentic learning comes from grasping concepts rather than rote memorization. She consistently challenged us to present information in ways that would allow our future students to understand and connect with the content meaningfully.

Early in my college journey, Sister Claire played a pivotal role in shaping my leadership skills. She invited this shy girl from New Jersey to take on various leadership positions within the teacher education program, providing me with invaluable experiences. Observing her in action as she chaired the education program taught me priceless lessons that have remained with me throughout my life.

More than 45 years have passed since I graduated from college, yet I remain connected to Sister Claire and deeply indebted to her influence. The lessons she imparted are timeless and continue to resonate with me. Even in her nineties, Sister Claire actively serves her religious community and has recently been recognized as an advocate for renewable energy in her local area. She embodies the spirit of a lifelong learner and servant leader. Sister Claire's impact on my life is profound and unforgettable; her mentorship has shaped me in immeasurable ways.

## **DR. FRANK SPERA: A LASTING INFLUENCE IN EDUCATION**

Dr. Frank Spera served as the principal of the K-8 school where I taught in Quakertown, New Jersey, a quaint, rural community characterized by its middle-upper-class residents. His enthusiasm for hiring younger educators was palpable, particularly since many staff members had long tenures at the school. I consider him a true mentor, as he consistently encouraged me and motivated me to pursue growth in my career.

During classroom observations, Dr. Spera offered timely and constructive feedback, always framing his suggestions positively. His encouragement extended beyond immediate teaching practices; he inspired me to explore new books and professional journals, enhancing my knowledge and skills.

A few years after I stepped away from my tenured teaching position to welcome the birth of my daughter, I had the privilege of collaborating with Dr. Spera on a writing project. It was an honor to be included

in this endeavor, showcasing his recognition of my expertise. Since we both had transitioned into a faculty role in higher education, we continued to share our experiences in teacher education.

Dr. Spera's belief in my abilities instilled a sense of self-confidence in me. He championed my teaching position during a period of teacher retrenchment, ensuring I felt valued as a colleague. He embodies the Cambridge Dictionary's definition of a mentor as "a person who gives a younger or less experienced person help and advice over a period of time, especially at work or school." (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). I will always be grateful for the profound impact this exceptional mentor has had on my professional journey.

## **DR. K. (PSEUDONYM)**

While feeding my infant daughter one day, I happened to channel surf and discovered a fascinating show titled "What Every Baby Knows." The program featured a Harvard pediatrician renowned for his deep passion for babies and families, alongside a wealth of pediatric expertise. The series documented his visits with various patients and included training sessions for new parents. He was like a rock star to young parents, embodying the warmth of a loving grandfather and Solomon's wisdom. His show captivated me, and I explored his books and other writings. His research soon found its way into my early childhood education classes.

A significant highlight in my life was attending a conference where Dr. K was the featured keynote speaker. The excitement of meeting him in person was profound, and he truly lived up to my expectations! He exuded warmth and charm and demonstrated a genuine commitment to families. He also had a masterful way of engaging with his audience, techniques that I still use in my teacher education classes. I regard Dr. K as one of my heroes, as he has deeply enriched my journey as a parent and a professional. Much of my love and understanding for young children and their families originates from the passion he instilled in me.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mentors play a crucial role in shaping the career paths of those they guide. I am grateful for the profound influence that four exceptional individuals and many others have had on my career journey. My appreciation for my heroes and mentors runs deep, and I recognize that the most meaningful way to express my gratitude is by paying it forward through mentoring others. It is both a privilege and an honor to step into this important role, helping to guide the next generation as they navigate their own paths through the profession of teaching.

## **REFERENCE**

Cambridge Dictionary (2024). Mentor. In *Dictionary.cambridge.org*. Retrieved December 14, 2024, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/mentor>.