

Chapter 3-4

Echoes of the Past: A Mentor's Voice Never Goes Silent

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The road to education is a winding road for many, myself included. I was the quiet kid in the back of the class who often did not have her homework and would not dare look up for fear of being called on. I often laugh when I think back to the girl who graced the halls of Bellwood and Riverdale in the 1990s as I now push forward in my career, finishing my master's degree and dreaming of a Ph.D. So that begs the question, *How did a shy, insulated girl who graduated high school with a 2.0 grade point average turn into a champion for education?*

There was not a singular shining light. There was not a moment in my life where I came to grips with how I was wasting it all. Nothing striking like that. Instead, I am so passionate about my career because of the people who poured inspirational moments into me while I was still quiet, shy, and unwilling to look up. Most of these teachers had no idea how they changed me in small ways daily while I was in their classes. That is what makes them heroes. They worked day in and day out, never knowing or seeing any results. They showed up when it seemed I was not listening. They were there when I pushed them away. Now, almost 30 years later, I see them for who they are: heroes and mentors. I hear these voices daily in my classroom, even though we have not spoken for years. Their influence has been with me since I began teaching in 2007, and I hope to pass it on to my students today and tomorrow.

Mr. Bridger (pseudonym), my sophomore history teacher, was five foot six inches tall, with a long gray ponytail pulled low in the back. His front pocket had the indentation of a habit he warned us about almost daily, and his laugh would bounce off the walls in all the best ways. On the back wall of his classroom was a Pink Floyd flag, along with many other artistically inspired, mismatched knickknacks. Walking into his room, I felt at home. I felt like I had space to breathe and to be seen, and, heaven forbid, I did not hate school quite so much.

This room is where I first felt my heart break into shards of broken glass when my first real boyfriend broke up with me. This room is where I threw paper balls across the room at my friend so we could play “baseball.” This room is where I learned about real courage in the face of evil as I saw my teacher’s eyes water with his chest puffed out at the stories of Poles who chose to ride out on horses into battle on September 1st, 1939, against an invading army of Nazis, set on their destruction in their armored tanks. I cried when my teacher described the six ways men died in Vietnam, and I felt justified in my search for truth as he encouraged us to seek out knowledge, trying on different roles, voices, and ideas until we found the true source of all happiness. Mr. Bridger taught me I loved history, that empathy was a superpower, and that everyone deserves dignity.

Across the school parking lot, in a classroom annex, was my senior English teacher, Mrs. Fox (pseudonym), who I thought was my greatest nemesis at age 17. Tall, erect, and stern, she demanded our best and welcomed us to her class by extending her open hand, barking that she, and she alone, held our high school diplomas in her hand. I called her horrible names when I went home that day and every day for two weeks. Our crowded room dwindled from 27 students to 13, and I watched as she tore off the witch’s mask she had worn so well. Down went the angry, curt, and thorny disposition, and in its place was a woman who knew her self-worth while reminding us to fight for our own. She did not accept late work, openly scorned the use of “very” in our writing, and taught us to use the local university’s library for research. Mrs. Fox taught me the value of persistence, hard work, and never taking excuses from myself or others.

Coach Smith (pseudonym), my middle school health coach, was a basketball coach fresh from college. He was tall and already showing a bit of softness from his former athletic days. Coach Smith was new to the world of education, and it showed every day. He fought to maintain order in our classroom as he was quick to laugh at our antics while still learning how to walk that balance between a teacher and his students. But he loved us. His class was a reprieve from math, science, and history. His class is where we moved our bodies and learned to respect them. For example, he taught us how to throw a football and make healthy food choices. Coach Smith taught us that he would always be there for us, and I saw him as a mentor, coach, and teacher. Most importantly, Coach Smith taught students about self-worth, and I learned to love myself.

Mrs. Hickson (pseudonym) was the woman who taught me to question the world around me and did not back down when I openly challenged her. As my eighth-grade Science teacher, she gave me space to speak in honest conversation while also learning what respect in debate truly meant. She kept an emotional distance but never demeaned us; instead, she showed us what respect between an adult and a child should be. Free to speak, free to think, free to be ourselves, we wanted to respect her even as she ran her classroom as a well-oiled machine. Mrs. Hickson taught me freedom of expression.

Ms. Green held up a textbook to my 20-year-old self to put on a shelf in her new high school classroom. She watched me patiently as I flipped through the pages, asking questions about how she presented various topics, and I offered up suggestions on what she should add or leave out. Her words were simple and direct: *Have*

you considered becoming a teacher? I thought that was a strange comment, given my dedication to the path of pre-law, yet the idea did not leave me. For her, teaching was a noble profession. One where students came to learn about history and geography and explore the world around them. She was young, still early in her career. She was a smile in a sea of scorn. She was the teacher every student secretly hoped to have. Ms. Green, my big sister, taught me to believe in myself and the power of the classroom teacher.

My sophomore history teacher. My Senior Honors English teacher. My middle school health teacher. My eighth-grade science teacher. My big sister. These teachers fed into my life in both big and small ways. Each one impacted me uniquely, shaping me to become the woman I am today. I mention them in my classes all these years later, as they still mentor me today with their stories, examples, and the light they shone throughout my childhood. It is easy to dismiss the small moments, but it is, in fact, these little pieces of connection that have helped to create the classroom my students inhabit today. I am forever grateful to my heroes and mentors. Some are living while others have passed on. Some are still teaching, and some have retired; their legacy continues just like a good book. I only hope to do the same in the lives of students entrusted to me day after day.