

Part of

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Chapter 4-1

Taking a Chance on Honors

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Education was never a priority in my home growing up. We did not grace the doors of the local library, nor did we engage in any summer enrichment activities within our southern, small-town community. I was told “if” I went to college, I would have to figure it out myself. Though never labeled as a “natural” or “passionate” about learning, I performed well in school. In high school, I had done well in one of my math courses and had the opportunity to take an honors class, so I decided to try it. That was when I met Mr. Watson (pseudonym), my new Algebra 2 honors teacher.

Mr. Watson was the essence of care. He was the teacher who looked me in the eye when he spoke and talked to me because he cared. Those conversations were not just to pass the time before the class started; they made me feel seen. He took time to explain the why of mathematics and not just the procedures. He invested his time in me, asking me about my future career or passions and making suggestions. Because of those questions and conversations, I learned and felt seen and cared for. Let me be clear: I not only learned, but I also flourished. Learning became fun, and I was encouraged to stretch my wings and accomplish more than the path set for me by my parents. I longed to stretch beyond my small town.

Mr. Watson’s influence helped drive my passion for learning, leading me to who I am today. Although none of my degrees are in mathematics, he inspired me to learn and share my passions to inspire others. He saw me as that lost teenager, unsure of herself or her path in life, and he saw my potential. He was that trusted adult and mentor that I needed at that point in my life. Mr. Watson listened to me and suggested pursuing teaching after listening to how much I enjoyed working with children. He encouraged me to think beyond myself and to make an impact on the world.

As a novice teacher, I did my best to make it through the day, getting all the lessons taught and assessments completed. I did not think I did a good job making connections, or so I thought. A few years ago, a former first-grade student reached out to me on a social media platform after more than twenty years in education. He was about to graduate with his master's degree in mathematics and get married. He thanked me for being one of his favorite teachers, for seeing him and encouraging him to find answers to his questions. Using what I learned from Mr. Watson, I was able to help a young student realize that he could drive his learning and rise to his dreams.

When I think about our MTSU (Middle Tennessee State University) slogan of *Difference Makers*, I always think about Mr. Watson. He made a difference in my life, and I use that influence even with my current students to inspire them daily. He taught me to see people for who they are (as he saw me) and make connections, so I start each class with "celebrations." Such connections are an opportunity for students and teachers to share anything in their lives that is noteworthy or significant, like having a birthday or adopting a new dog. I can learn many things about my students through celebrations and develop a sense of community in the classroom. He also taught me to look to others for help or inspiration. I often share inspirational quotes in class to make deeper connections with students. Many students print out the quotes and put them on their laptops! This action is a visual example of the impact that has been made on students' lives through the mentorship and teaching of Mr. Watson through me. I hope my teaching makes students feel seen, heard, and valued. I want to be the teacher for others that Mr. Watson was for me.

The last time I saw Mr. Watson was my wedding day. Many years after graduation, I tracked him down and asked him to perform my wedding ceremony. It was an amazing experience to have my mentor perform this ceremony, joining me and my spouse, the love of my life, while I was in college pursuing my teaching degree. Upon my graduation, I sent him an announcement and got a sweet letter back from him with words of encouragement and pride. He sadly passed away before I was able to tell him that I earned my doctorate in education, but in my heart, I know he already knows.