The Teacher Who Changed My Life

Metropolitan Atlanta’s Ethnic Media
Honor Teachers
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Foreword

Most of us have known a teacher who made a difference in our lives or in the lives of our children. This booklet presents 31 short essays by writers describing one such teacher -- someone who provoked curiosity about a subject that had once seemed daunting or dull, who inspired a passion to learn, who gave you a glimpse of who you could become. The essays were selected by a panel of educators and journalists as finalists in an essay writing contest organized by six ethnic news organizations to recognize and honor teachers and the profession of teaching.

The essay writing contest is part of a community engagement project on education reform initiated by New America Media, a national editorial and marketing collaboration of ethnic news organizations, and supported by funds from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Southern Education Foundation.

Ethnic media partners will each publish winning entries from the contest to inspire audiences to reflect on the qualities that make up a great teacher.
About the Contest

No matter how long it has been since you sat in her class -- an hour, a month, a couple of decades -- you can still hear her voice. She is the teacher who turned learning from a chore to a delight; who introduced you to a subject that challenged and excited you; who listened and believed in you. She -- or he -- is the teacher who changed your life.

You will never forget such a teacher. He is the one who helped you become the person you are today. Did you ever tell that teacher how often you think of them, how much you feel you owe them?

Recognizing the enduring impact teachers can have on their students and the rare opportunities students have to share their appreciation, New America Media partnered with five ethnic media outlets serving diverse audiences in the Atlanta Metropolitan Area to organize an essay writing contest on The Teacher Who Changed My Life.

The ethnic media partners include Atlanta Daily World, Mundo Hispanico, Korea Daily, Azizah Magazine and Radio Informacion 1310 AM. Each promoted the contest to their audiences over a period of three months (December 2012-February, 2013) through advertisements, PSAs, and posters on their websites and social media sites, as well as word-of-mouth in their own communities. Their efforts generated over 75 essays written in English, Spanish and Korean and submitted in three categories: for teenage writers (14 to 18 years old); for adult writers (19 years old and above); and for immigrants and older adults who wanted to remember a teacher with whom they no longer have contact.

Essayists wrote about the ESL teacher who challenged them to read TIME Magazine, the Latin teacher who brought an ancient language into contemporary life, the Chinese language teacher who bestowed the gift of self-confidence, the vocational education teacher who prepared her student for his career.

Each ethnic media partner selected up to three entries from each category to be a finalist. A distinguished panel of educators, community leaders and journalists then selected one winner and two honorable mentions from each category. The two winners from the teenage and adult category each received a cash award of $500 and the teachers they honored each received a cash award of $500. Each honorable mention received a cash award of $100. The winner of “Teacher in Memory” received $500 to donate to a local public school of his or her choice. Judges also presented a special recognition certificate and $100 for the most compelling story.

Funds supporting the Teacher Who Changed My Life contest were contributed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Southern Education Foundation.
He wasn’t quite the tweed-clad, monocle-donning teacher I was expecting on my first day of Latin 1. In fact, he wasn’t like any teacher I was expecting: well built, thunderous, and a towering 6’4, he was a stentorian presence with a stentorian voice, who walked in strides and spoke with the tough cadence of a football coach. To neighboring teachers, he was the booming lecture that could always be heard four classrooms down the hall. To loitering freshmen, he was the dangerous confrontation that should be avoided at all costs. But to the rest of us, he was Mr. David – the man who would teach us the importance of hard work and endeavor, and the best teacher I would ever know.

Loud, fervent, and keenly articulate, Mr. David was a whirlwind of character with no shortage of zeal. Through spirited description and the gestures of an impassioned composer, he retold lifeless antiquity with vivid color, and revived for us the wonders of Caesar and Horace once lost to faded inscriptions. “Latin is everywhere,” he often said. “You just have to learn how to see.” And I did – I found it in literature, in music, in the cornerstones of our modern ideals. Enthralled by the world of our great predecessors, I shed my insecurities for the valiance of old wisdom, and fueled by Mr. David’s words, I immersed myself in the grammatical and cultural intricacies of a language I came to love.

“Latin is everywhere. You just have to learn how to see.”

Thanks to Mr. David, I found myself in a community bound as tight as family, where academia was a permeating atmosphere and ambition led to a fulfillment deeper than numbers on a transcript. I joined the Certamen team, and in the thrill of being fast on the buzzer, I discovered a competitive fire that I never knew existed. Encouraged by Mr. David’s unfaltering confidence, I was no longer the timid sophomore from the first day of Latin 1; I was a growing presence, bolstered by the academic zeal he had inspired. As a coach and a mentor, Mr. David did far more for me than instill a deep-seated respect for the Classics – he lent direction to my own scattered ambitions, and gave me the courage, finally, to pursue them.

I have often tried and failed to pinpoint how Mr. David strikes wonder so easily into his students. As the years passed, I settled on one obvious answer: nobody believes in students as much as Mr. David believes in his. To Mr. David, education has always been about far more than passing a series of classes – it is about igniting the zeal that is hidden in every scholar, and fostering an insatiable hunger to learn. When I was a sophomore, shrouded in self-doubt, Mr. David believed in me, and I am grateful every day for the person I am because of it. Now, three years later, I still hear Mr. David’s booming voice sometimes from down the hallway, lifting someone else from the mire.

“Latin is everywhere,” he is usually saying. “You just have to learn how to see.”

(From New America Media)
Teenage Category

Don’t Let Your Undocumented Status Be A Barrier
Honorable Mention

Essay Writer: Marie Andrea Cruz Jeanneau
Teacher: Mrs. Iris Mendoza
Translated from Spanish

Sometimes in our lives we meet certain individuals that wake something within us and impact our persona tremendously. Upon setting my first steps at Norcross High School Mrs. Mendoza would be that person- “La maestra que cambio mi vida”.

Enrolling in the classes she taught, Spanish for Native Speakers I & II, was only the beginning. Her class was always very interesting to me, for I come from a proud Peruvian Heritage and I have always been eager to learn more about the marvelous Hispanic world. Attending Mrs. Mendoza’s class was one of the strings that connected me with the Latina within me. Endless lessons about Ruben Dario’s poems, Miguel De Cervantes’ Don Quixote, Diego Rivera’s murals and Jose Marti’s poems expanded my horizons. She taught me to appreciate Latin America’s history and how Simon Bolivar guided our South America countries to their independence. Not to mention the history behind the Aztecs, and the Chichen Itza and Machu Picchu. Each lesson for her was like a voyage to the destination, even though we would be miles away. She’d make sure students got the vibe of each lesson - Costa Rica, Chac Mool’s history, Perú, Pablo Neruda - each of them delightful topics to learn about. Because of Mrs. Mendoza I was able to acquire a deep love for my heritage, which I’m confident will continue to grow as I get older.

More than a teacher, Mrs. Mendoza became my friend. Her class had always been a place for me to escape my daily worries -- it was fun and stressful. I knew I could always stop by her room and she would be there to welcome me with open arms. I would talk and she would listen, always giving me great advice. When I spoke to her about how uncertain I felt about my educational future, she encouraged me to keep trying and to not ever allow my undocumented status become a barrier. Knowing her has definitely been a major blessing in my life. She has been my teacher, adviser and friend. She has watched me grow from a shy freshman to a young adult ready to take on anything. She has built me up and inspired me to always dream and fight.

“I was able to acquire a deep love for my heritage.”

I cannot help but feel nostalgic as I look back at the past four years filled with memories. As I enter a new chapter in my life, I know I will miss the comforting feeling she showered upon me as I would walked into her classroom. Because of Mrs. Mendoza I carry the Latin pride and no words can express how grateful I am for her teaching and advice. Her caring and encouraging persona will always be one of the motivations that will push me forward. Now, as I make my college dream come true, I credit Mrs. Mendoza for keeping the Latina within me alive and for inspiring me to graduate college with a Spanish major.

(From Mundo Hispánico)
Staring Down Students With A Fierce Glare
Honorable Mention

Essay Writer: Shawn Choi
Teacher: Ms. Melanie Salmon

“English is boring!” I hated English as much as the next Korean American boy in my class. This is the story of how I became an exception.

Though American born, and American-raised, English was foreign to me. Korean, however, Korean was my heritage. Korean to me meant birthday parties, visits to my grandparents’ home, and precious celebrations with friends, while English was boring grammar rules, impossible spellings, and long hours of deciphering Shakespeare. How is it, then, that today I am seeking an English degree? My story begins in the fall of my sophomore year.

“On the first day of class, Ms. Salmon is not nice.”

On the first day of class, Ms. Salmon is not nice. This is the first thing I take note of about the magnificent lady at the front of the room. She stares down her kids with a fierce glare, and I fidget in fear, lest she will pierce a hole through my poor classmates’ heads. I later found out that this same angry glare is the one she used to stare down cancer a few years before.

The true impact of Ms. Salmon can only be appreciated in hindsight. Among the three sophomore English classes, our class is the only one that does not follow the county guidelines. Instead of assigning “The Catcher in the Rye,” she gives us Dicken’s “A Tale of Two Cities.” Her reasoning: “Although you’ll probably hate me for it, you guys will be better off citing modern British Victorianism and social satirical analysis in college, rather than talking about the silly meanderings of some teenage kid.” A chorus of silent scoffs quickly dies down under her growing glare. Today, after my first semester at college, I finally know that she was right. And by the way, British Literature became my favorite concentration of literary history that same year.

Embrace a healthy repulsion towards tradition and authority: this is the first lesson I learn in her class.

In hindsight, it is increasingly clear to me, even now, that Ms. Salmon treated me like a scholar. She did more than teach me how to spot metaphors and similes, she taught me to believe in myself. As cliché and ineffectual as this phrase may seem, it is, nevertheless, the story of my conversion from “I cannot” to “I have.” In Ms. Salmon, I went from “I cannot succeed. I cannot love. I cannot understand,” to “I have succeeded. I have understood. I have plenty.” Though I could not understand what she meant by a “paradigm shift” at the time, in hindsight I am beginning to understand, little by little, what she really meant. I think she meant we should stare down our own cancers that tell us we cannot, that we should not, and that we will not succeed. We can. This is the second lesson I learn in her class.

Exceptional students are the result of exceptional teachers. I am a proud exception. Ms. Salmon teaches me that I can do it; we all can.

(From Korea Daily)
Teaching The Basics In Pre-K

Finalist

Essay Writer: Tariq Johnson
Teacher: Ms. Greta Clark

At the age of four, I was inducted into the Blackstone Academy. I was starting school late and did not know much when it came to academics. I was young, inquisitive, and willing to learn. I was a clean slate that was ready to be molded into a student. Therefore, the majority of my success is accredited to the diligent work of my Pre-Kindergarten and Elementary school teacher, Ms. Greta Clark. This brilliant woman taught me all the basics of academic success, moral development, and self-motivation.

Ms. Greta challenged us by giving considerable amounts of work. It was at times unbearable, but she taught us that life was a struggle. She knew that “tremendous pressure produces greatness.” She taught us how to be earnest at such a young age that it sticks with me to this day. We were expected to overcome all obstacles and find a way to complete the task at hand. She purposely gave us impossible assignments to see our reactions in the face of difficulty. Yet, not only did she strive for our academic excellence, but much more.

“...morality were just as important as succeeding academically.”

In our class, the basics of morality were just as important as succeeding academically. It was shown that our actions had a lasting effect on not only us, but also those around us. As such was the emphasis, we received appropriate awards for both our good and bad actions. These methods led to a sharp decline in behavioral problems. Greta knew that as impressionable youth, any actions she took with us, then, would influence our choices later in life and that is what she was aiming for. Thanks to the small actions that she took, I am less prone to the difficulties normal teenagers my age experience. Even after doing so much, she still had more to offer, she embedded in us a natural desire for exceptionalism.

In the beginning, Ms. Greta rewarded us for our actions with items adorned by children our age. She used the power of association to produce a natural affinity towards greatness. With use of patterns, it became second nature for us to strive for excellence. The awards were no longer needed, but they were still given. We became a class that did what we were supposed to because we wanted to, not because we were forced to. It was a wonderful experience and I accredit my current success to it.

None of us, at that time, realized the magnitude of the effect her teachings had on us, but I can say that we all appreciate it now. We were taught all the skills needed to lead a successful life. We were taught that determination and hard work are necessary. It was emphasized that moral backbone is the key to self-development. We were molded into students that strived for knowledge. This brilliant woman Ms. Clark, taught me all the basics of academic success, moral development, and self-motivation.

(From Atlanta Daily World)
Shakespeare And The Depth Of Words

Finalist

Essay Writer: Julia Becerra
Teacher: Ms. Ebony N. Martin

Which teacher has profoundly changed my seventeen years of life?

From freshman year to this current junior year of high school, this teacher has opened my eyes to unforeseen opportunities. Without a doubt, my former Literature teacher supports me. She is Ms. Martin.

Right off the bat, I knew that Ms. Martin was a force to be reckoned with. First day in her Literature class, she instructed so meticulously. As soon as Ms. Martin taught, I was immediately enthralled by the world of Literature. She introduced me to the classic Shakespeare, sonnets, poetry, and the depths of words. Instantly I was determined to write about anything, especially my life. By doing so, I was motivated to apply for a study abroad program in China with my extraordinary essays. Anterior to that, I was selected to study abroad in China. I owe her partial gratitude for my selection. To say the least, my love for writing and words flourished under Ms. Martin’s wing.

Moreover, high school is a path where you are bound to have rocky paths. In those tumultuous moments, Ms. Martin encourages me to persevere despite the odds. She proclaims, “Perseverance engenders success.” To specify, in the darkest hour of my life, Ms. Martin quickly noticed and was worried about me slipping away from the reality. Until then, she fussed about my lack of effort in her class. Thus, I decided to unleash a sorrowful secret that was deteriorating me away. Once I broke the news of my mother’s diagnosis of breast cancer, I felt lighter. Instantly, Ms. Martin supported me during this time of need. Unlike other teachers, Ms. Martin sees my academic potential and encourages me to go beyond the galaxies and stars. She is more than a teacher. She is a mentor.

“Perseverance engenders success.”

In the long run, Ms. Martin illuminates and impacts my life because she simply cares about me as a student as well as a human being. By this simple fact, I strive to be the best. Due to her encouragement, she uplifts me in my darkest hours. Additionally, I pursue to write because of her incredible motivation. Above all, she is incomparable.

(From New America Media)
A Passion For Trigonometry
Finalist

Essay Writer: Lory DeOleo
Teacher: Ms. Emily Desprez

Trapped in a monstrous cloud of insecurity, I sunk under a sturdy, old school desk. I sat surrounded by this cloud that swarmed around me joined with the suffocating stench of fear. My heart throbbed as my lungs fought for the irresistible taste of pure, fresh air. Through a burnished, wooden door walked in a slender young woman that brightened the darkened room. A curtain of luscious, curly hair bounced on her back as she strode through the room with a sincere smile. I then pondered on the upcoming year. Would this be another year of complex math problems and a teacher whose principal objective is to earn a paycheck? Fortunately, I later learned that my senior year in Trigonometry would consist of the absolute opposite.

“She reassures us that math is conquerable, not impossible.”

Trigonometry, a subject that many tend to view as an endless maze of unsolvable problems, soon turned out to be the subject where I reached new levels of mathematical understanding. Ms. Desprez became a lustrous light of inspiration which guided me to attain a greater passion for math. From the very first day of school to present day, I have noted that this teacher withholds in her the ultimate requirements for an outstanding teacher. Her math classes consist of true learning. I put emphasis on this because her techniques for teaching Trigonometry work efficiently and allow each student to grasp the meaning of what math truly is. Every day in her second period class, she greets each student with care and humility. She prints out notes and elaborates on literally every piece of vital information. If even a single person is confused over a certain problem, she immediately stops and explains it to the best of her ability. Her positive attitude brings comfort and relief because she reassures that math is conquerable, not impossible.

Ms. Desprez has imprinted in me a desire to learn. She has been a lavish source of motivation in my life, teaching me that I can pursue absolutely anything I desire and accomplish it successfully. Her job as a teacher does not end at 2:10 on weekdays. She has basically opened her entire life to assisting her students and helping them achieve the best. If I need extra help, I am free to email her or stay after school whenever I please. She has printed out scholarship opportunities for me and emailed me reminders on deadlines for them. She has motivated me to do volunteer activities to make my college applications stand out. Indeed, she has taught me that if I dedicate hours of my day to studying, I can excel in any academic area and prove society wrong about the stereotypical remarks on uneducated Hispanics. Ms. Desprez has shown me that I can overcome any obstacle with perseverance, determination, and courage. The countless moments that she has taken out of her day to mentor and guide me have enabled me to mature in an intellectual level. Ms. Desprez: The perfect example of how a vibrant, vivacious teacher should behave.

(From New America Media)
Religion Teacher Fosters Open-Mindedness
Finalist

Essay Writer: Zabeena Dharani
Teacher: Ms. Ferin Abdulla

I must admit that at first I was not sure that I would like her class but as the year progressed, I realized how much I truly loved being in her class. She was an art teacher for about two years when she decided to be a religious education teacher. Being in her 7th grade class changed my life. Her name was Ferin Abdulla and on the first day I met her she told us to call her Ferin Miss. She helped me see the world with different perspectives, have a more artistic view, become more open-minded, and think beyond surface level. She also made me be a more critical thinker and to see the creative side of everything.

I used to hate drawing but she taught me that art is not just picking your pencil; it’s about using your imagination, self-expression, and pouring your heart and soul to make it worthwhile. My class and I would have the best time with her. I remember one time she taught our class how to properly say development; it was funny and educational at the same time. Another time, she spent half of class answering questions that we had about life like what would heaven look like. Not only did she teach me about my religion but she helped me find the person I was and the person I wanted to become.

On one of my report cards she said I needed to talk more in class and at first I did not know what she meant; I started to talk more and it helped me participate more, so I began to learn more in class. Aside from learning, I began to see my class as one humongous family and that we all ‘had one another’s backs’. Ferin Miss also taught me to go beyond the expectations and reach for the sky, and I think because of her encouragement and expectations, I now set higher goals to reach and once I have reached those goals, I set some more goals, and the cycle continues.

“She spent half the class answering our questions about life.”

When I was younger, I did not know how lucky I was to be an Ismaili Muslim and Ferin Miss helped show me how truly lucky I was, and she helped me concentrate on prayers more easily by making us do a small meditation in class. She has taught me to value my thoughts and helped me understand who I am and what I can do to make the world better. She has helped me find the sole purpose of life, which has improved my life, and made me never give up. I have learnt to love new things and try new things, be the best person I can be, and do my best at everything I do, so my teachers, community, parents, and God can be proud of me. Ferin Miss has greatly impacted my life and helped me create a better future for myself; she truly is a great inspiration.

(From Azizah Magazine)
Sharing A Love For Nancy Drew Books
Finalist

Essay Writer: Jauhara Ferguson
Teacher: Sister Gabrielle

On the first day of middle school, I walked into a room full of familiar faces— all except one. In my close-knit religious private school, student-teacher turnover was rare. Yet each of my peers and I had walked into a class with a brand new literature teacher. I was included amongst the sea of wide-eyed 6th graders staring at this novel teacher.

“Well, let’s begin shall we?” She introduced herself as Sister Gabrielle, or Gabby for short. She was middle aged, fashionable, curious, humorous, and to the point. Our first assignment was to write a creative story—the first day of school and I already had a favorite teacher. Or so I thought. I forgot one crucial rule; the story had to be written in ink. When I attempted to submit my brilliantly written story the next day, I was appalled when my beloved teacher wouldn’t take a single glance at the pencil written piece.

“Can you believe it?!” I exclaimed to my parents that night. “She didn’t even look at it!” As a self-claimed author, I was devastated that my hero wouldn’t be a witness to my written masterpiece.

That night I cried in my pillow.

However, the next day when it was time for us to write journal entries, I was ready. When she asked if anyone wanted to share, my hand shot up in the air. I was determined that she’d hear the brilliance, even if she didn’t want to see it. When I finished reading my piece to the class, a meager applause followed. I looked around at my supporters, and to my surprise and delight, my teacher, Sister Gabby was among them.

“She said the story had to be written in ink.”

I’ve always had a special bond with my literature teachers, but the relationship with Sister Gabby was unique in that I looked up to her like I would an older sister. She brought out my voice, both literally and metaphorically. As an introverted only girl in a family of two boisterous younger brothers, I often had to find ways to express myself through writing. Sister Gabby was the one teacher who deeply understood this, but pushed me in a way that made me transform myself into a young woman who could communicate both on a written and speaking level. As her student, I began mastery on the art of communication as an art form.

Sister Gabby is more than a teacher, she is family. She is the only teacher I frequently had intimate conversations with. The only teacher who shared with me stories of her life. The only teacher who shared the obsessive love for Nancy Drew books. The only teacher who took time to understand how I view the world. The only teacher who invited me to her baby shower. The only teacher who believed and believes that I can and will become a world famous novelist someday.

Sister Gabrielle is and will always be the best teacher I’ve ever had. She is my inspiration, my drive, and my role model.

(From Azizah Magazine)
A Teacher With A Tough Past
Finalist

Essay Writer: Ya’leedia Mejias
Teacher: Mrs. Madgeline Buskey

My teacher’s name is Madgeline Buskey. Mrs. Buskey is my 8th grade Language Arts teacher. Mrs. Buskey inspires me and therefore for this essay I choose Mrs. Buskey. She teaches at Ola Middle School in McDonough, Georgia. Mrs. Buskey is an awesome individual, the first day I met her was on orientation day. A day where students get to meet their teachers for the first time, and get to get a brief idea on to what they are up against.

On August 2, 2012 our first encounter while walking into her classroom, she opened her arms, stretched out and gave me a big hug and said “There you are”, “I’ve been waiting for you.” This all with a big smile.

“Every day she gives me the push I need to have a great day.”

Mrs. Buskey has an amazing way of making us feel special and unique in her own way. Everyday is a happy and warm feeling in Mrs. Buskey’s room. Mrs. Buskey is my first period class, and everyday she gives me the push I need to have a great day. She uses not only schoolwork but life events to teach us how it all comes to be. Mrs. Buskey is forever encouraging her students to do better. She gives all her time to helping us understand our work and make sure we learn everything we need. She has inspired me to read, write and ask questions. Everyday when I leave her classroom I wish we had more time together. Mrs. Buskey is a great person but she as well had a rough childhood.

Mrs. Buskey grew up in the Projects of Miami, Florida. It wasn’t easy for her growing up. Her mother was a hardworking woman and wanted well for her family. Her father was a good man as well but was unable to read or write. For Mrs. Buskey’s parents, education was a very important thing. Her father also was an alcoholic and due to this it caused a lot of chaos for her family. Mrs. Buskey is a tough individual through all this and till this day. Growing up she had many scary and difficult situations happen to her and through those things she experienced she teaches us and wants us to do good and prosper. Mrs. Buskey is a very caring and loving person and she truly cares about children’s education. Even on her worse days she comes into class with a big smile and makes the room light up.

I come into class everyday with the excitement to learn and her class is never boring, you are always waiting to see what she’ll do next. I always enjoy being in her class. Mrs. Buskey is a hard working women and cares very much for our education and especially us. There’s something very special about Mrs. Buskey and that something makes us kids feel loved and special. I’m glad to have Mrs. Buskey as my Language Arts teacher, she was an inspiration to me and made a very special impact on my life.

(From Mundo Hispánico)
Who Knew Polynomial Equations Could Matter At 7A.M.?

Finalist

Essay Writer: Kelly Nguyen
Teacher: Ms. Emily Desprez

Sometimes the things adults think is the most important has the least to do with who we are. We go to school because we have to. The law forces us to, our needs to, for us to get a good job. However, this year I was grateful to meet a teacher who changed my entire perspective on school. Ms. Desprez is my trigonometry teacher, she is young but she amazes me with how much she has accomplished within a couple of years. With her dedication and perseverance, at 26 she has graduated from Georgia Tech, travel along the globe, and earn a degree to teach students.

As a student, what we really want from a teacher is enthusiasm. A teacher that makes boring things seem interesting. Ms. Desprez is one such individual. She is free spirited and kind. You can tell that she loved teaching. Every morning as I walked through her door she would always give a positive attitude and energy that sets the entire class going.

“She changed my entire perspective on school.”

Who knew that someone can make polynomial equations interesting at 7A.M in the morning. For Ms. Desprez, it was effortless. She was always good at what she taught. If you raised your hand, she was always quick on her toes to come over and gladly help. She understands us and helps solve our problem the best she can. She pushes us to use our creativity to challenge us to apply what we know to discover what we don’t know.

Sometimes I would stay after school so I can get some help with a challenging problem. In those moments, the line between teacher and students blurred, and we both become cooperative learners. I enter this idyllic world and find a place without grades or homework, just simply pure learning.

This is when I finally notice how passionate I am towards this subject. I’ve always loved solving equations, and word problems. I was always good at it. But I have never given much thought to what I really loved until Ms. Desprez showed me. A teacher is the one who is known as the basis of our future, Ms. Desprez was the best example. She guided me through the process of my future to apply for financial aid, college applications, and providing me with the confidence to make something out of myself.

Ms. Desprez is not only an excellent teacher, but she is also an amazing person. She relates well to all her students and has a unique ability to make students laugh when we’re all tired from the early morning. She is kindhearted and she shows intelligences from the most practical to the most recondite subjects. She cares for her environment by volunteering for community service. Making her such a great role model to look up to, I cannot help but respect Ms. Desprez.

Ms. Desprez stand tall on my list of people I aspire to be like. I seek to emulate many of the qualities that she embodies: hard work, wisdom, and kindness.

(From Atlanta Daily World)
Chinese Language Teacher’s Lesson—Don’t Give Up

Finalist

Essay Writer: Anunde Reese
Teacher: Ms. Lea Durdin

“Ni hao! Wu shi ding lao shi! He gao xing neng ren shi ni!” I stared at her with a puzzled look on my face because I had absolutely no idea what she was saying.” Oh yeah, it is a nice day.” I quickly responded. I took my seat because the class started to become very crowded. Listening to all of the other kids conversing around me I could tell that it was going to be a very hectic year for me.

I return to class the next day nervous about what our next assignment was going to be. “No need to have that disturbed look on your face little one. This assignment is for beginners so it should be a walk through the park.’ said Ding lao shi (“lao shi” means teacher in Mandarin). She handed me the paper and it had all of this funny looking writing on it that I could not fathom. Thirty minutes passed by and I had given up.” Did you even try?” asked my friend Tori. “No not really. I am a bit frustrated, because Chinese is very new to me.” I replied. “It’s okay. You’ll get it eventually,” she said as she walked away.

Over the months, I realized that you cannot come into a new setting not ready to indulge into new things. I began to stay for tutorial and whenever I did not understand what Ding lao shi was saying she would stop her lesson and help me. Every year at the end of the school year all International Baccalaureate schools select at least five students from each classroom to take the “Youth Chinese Test.” I knew that only the best was going to get chosen so I did not even worry myself about getting a letter. As Ding lao shi came around with the letters, I did not think much of it on account of me knowing I was not getting one, but to my surprise I got one! “All of your hard work and long painful days in tutorial has paid off. Now go and make me proud!” said Ding lao shi smiling.

“Whenever I did not understand, she would stop to help me.”

The following week I began the Youth Chinese Test training. One practice test after another, I was finally ready to take the real test. Walking through the halls of Kennesaw State University with my parents and Ding lao shi, I became very nervous. “Anunde, I know that you are scared, but remember I will be here for you no matter what.” Hearing Ding lao shi say that gave me hope and confidence in myself. I signed in, got my ID badge and testing began.

An hour later, I met up with Ding lao shi and my mom. “We are so proud of you Anunde!” They both screamed. “I...” and then the tears came. I was speechless and all I could do was smile. “Awww, honey are you okay?” ask my mom. “Yeah, I am fine. I just think about the support that you and Ding lao shi gave me to help me not to give up and build self esteem and confidence in myself.”

(From New America Media)
A Band Director Who’s There For His Students
Finalist

Essay Writer: Bridgett Vega
Teacher: Mr. Lee Newman

I met Lee Newman at the end of my sophomore year in high school. He was hired at Norcross High School after our old band director accepted a new job at another school. It was really exciting to be a part of his first year at my school, and now it feels like he has always been here. I cannot imagine what these last two years of school would have been like without him. Mr. Newman is so much more than just a teacher. He is the one person in my life that I can always count on.

The first time he helped me was in October 2011. The top band was playing a song called Lux Aurumque by Eric Whitacre, and I was not in that band. This devastated me. The band above me was playing my favorite song in the world, a song I dreamt about playing for years. I went home and cried, feeling pathetic. Eventually, I went into his office and asked him if I could talk to him about something that was bothering me. He asked me if I was upset about something, and when I responded with “yeah”, he immediately sat up, his blue eyes lit up, and he wanted to know. That’s the moment I realized how special he was. He very kindly demanded that I tell him. We sat in his office for a while and I told him how much the song meant to me, and I cried the whole time. Later that day, I ran into him in the hallway. All I said was “hey”, and he hugged me. And then I cried some more. Not because I was still miserable, but because I could feel that he genuinely cared about me. He stressed to me that the only reason I couldn’t play the song was because of timing. The timing just wasn’t right.

“Every day after band class, he asks me what I thought of that day’s class.”

However, the timing of meeting Mr. Newman was perfect. At the end of my junior year, I was so happy that I would get one more year with him. Until I opened up to Mr. Newman, I didn’t think anyone really cared about me. I just didn’t feel very special. Everyday after band class, he asks me what I thought of that day’s class. That may not seem like much, but it means the world to me. He always makes the effort to talk to me, he notices me. He’s helped me in so many seemingly small ways that I’ve never taken for granted. When I told him I was self-conscious about a scar on my knee, he told me to not care about what people say. Mr. Newman encouraged me to apply to UGA when I thought I wasn’t good enough. Mr. Newman changed my life because he has simply always been there for me. He’s inspired me to be more confident and go after what makes me happy. Meeting Mr. Newman is the best thing that has ever happened to me in high school.

(From Mundo Hispánico)
Student Channels Grief Into Passion For Science

Finalist

Essay Writer: Wendy Rodriguez
Teacher: Mrs. Betsy Proffitt
Translated from Spanish

As a child, my sister and I played doctor and patient. She would take my pulse and I would listen to her heartbeat with my pretend stethoscope. It was all fun until the day I actually had to listen to her last heartbeat. She looked straight at me and I yelled for her to wake up. She passed away when I was thirteen and it seemed as if this sickening dream would never end. It was a confusing time because everything was so different. I had to start to adjust to a new life, a life without my sister.

School has always been my favorite place in the world; a place where I am unstoppable. So it wasn’t a surprise when I chose to use school as an outlet to grieve my sister’s death. At the time the only class that really caught my attention was science. Science was an escape for many reasons: an interest and a dedicated teacher that helped me through a rough time in my life.

That teacher’s name is Mrs. Betsy Proffitt. She was my 8th grade Physical Science teacher. Mrs. Proffitt takes her job as an educator above and beyond. She is more than just a teacher; she is an inspiration. She will encourage you to keep going and she never stops. She is a motherly figure that no matter what happens she is there to lift your spirits in the right directions and always takes the time to listen to her students. I know this from experience.

“When my sister passed away, she made sure to be by my side.”

When my sister passed away she made sure to be by my side through all of my ups and downs. This meant so much to me, because I felt so alone. She seemed to understand better than anyone else. She allowed me to take my feelings and transfer them into something constructive. I began to take more interest in the science that I was learning. I started to learn about my favorite word, Inertia. She always laughs when I tell her that’s my favorite word. She made me learn to change my perspective and try to overcome everything that was being thrown at me. I had to begin to learn how to smile again and have the optimistic attitude that I used to have. I knew that I could not allow myself to wallow around for the rest of my life; this should not define me as a person forever.

Thanks to Mrs. Proffitt I began to work very hard to move forward with my life. I am so thankful to have had her as a teacher. She helped me realize that I may not be able to control those dreadful things in life, but I can, with the little control I do have over my life, choose to dream a big dream. So, I will dream for big things and with some hard work those big dreams will come true.

(From Mundo Hispánico)
Compelling Students To Think 
On A Higher Level

Finalist

Essay Writer: Tarik Siddeeq
Teacher: Sister Zarinah Abdur-Rahman

My name is Tarik Siddeeq and I am 15 years old. In my life, I have had and known dozens 
of different teachers and learned from all of them. I have had chances to examine many 
different teaching styles and forms along with their merits and demerits. But until I entered 
high school I had yet to find a teacher that was truly exceptional.

In my first year of high school, I met Zarinah Abdur-Rahman, a W.D. Mohammed High 
School history teacher. Sister Zarinah is truly outstanding, a very original teacher. She 
is, as one student put it, headstrong. She has a strong sense of righteousness and is very 
outspoken. She has taught us to never accept something that is wrong, and to always 
speak up for truth and justice no matter the consequences. Her demeanor is on par with 
prominent people such as Martin Luther King Jr. or Rosa Parks. She is dedicated and eager 
to pass on her knowledge and opinions to her students.

“She praises us for exceptional work, and scolds us if we slack off.”

Her teaching methods go beyond just the printed facts in our textbooks. Her style of 
teaching compels her students to think on a higher level, open our minds, and to look at 
everything we learn in many different perspectives. She often encourages us to investigate 
deeper into matters that are vague or don’t add up. She doesn’t only teach us facts, she 
also teaches us very important life lessons that we utilize on a daily basis.

She incorporates discussions into her lessons that test our rational and critical thinking 
skills. When we learn about something that the book doesn’t clearly describe or explain 
she assigns us to do research on the topic. Her tests are not simply written tests but range 
from letters addressed to high-ranking government officers to skits about certain situations 
throughout history. Despite being a teacher she also cares deeply about the students. She 
praises us for exceptional work and scolds us if we slack off. She truly cares about the 
students like one would their family.

I have never experienced a teacher of her caliber before. Sister Zarinah is truly a unique 
person and an excellent teacher. Having been in her class for two years I have learned 
much and experienced even more. As I go through the rest of high school and then college 
I will surely meet many more teachers, but I will always remember Sister Zarinah.

(From Azizah Magazine)
I am honored to dedicate this piece to Ms. Merchant and to teachers everywhere who have helped their students discover their calling.

“She’s a very different child. So sensitive, so timid.”

I grew up hearing this comment, often made by adults in a hushed whisper as I stood awkwardly a few feet away, my back pressed against a cold wall in stiff concentration. Usually, the comment was from a teacher, flustered that I had cried yet again during a class reading of a fable or after witnessing a heated exchange between two classmates. Early on, I’d learned that I was more sensitive than others. On the outside, I was a petite, timid child, self-conscious and easily moved to tears. But on the inside, I was a self-aware, reflective young soul who stored everything in her mental cache for future rumination. Interesting words, poignant gestures, bits of perplexing conversations were filed away in my internal arsenal, where they patiently waited for a guide to teach me how to use this wealth I’d accumulated.

My guide’s name was Ms. Louisa Merchant, and she perplexed me as much as I perplexed her. She was in her mid-thirties, single, Buddhist, and white, an unusual demographic among the teachers in our Atlanta Islamic school. Many rumors traversed the school about our unfortunate Ms. Merchant. Some children swore she was a classic hippie from the 1970s and strolled around in bohemian clothes after school; others countered she was a spy sent to our school in a post 9-11 environment. Regardless, she changed my life. A beautiful soul with a rich, inner life, she showed me the weapon I would use to negotiate my personal world: a pen.

“She perplexed me as much as I perplexed her.”

The first major assignment I wrote for her English class was a story about a young male Chinese bookkeeper in the Qin dynasty who devised a plan to hide all the manuscripts the emperor had ordered to be burned. I submitted the piece with trembling fingers, certain that Ms. Merchant wouldn’t even read past the first page. My heart stopped when she paused the class in the middle of our test to read a long excerpt. Her face was flushed a dark red and her bouncing feet seemed to be on the verge of sending her flying. When she returned the assignment, she had underlined half the sentences with comments like “how old are you to write like this?” I went home that day and read her comments hundreds of times.

I had never before received a compliment on anything I’d written. The baffled look on Ms. Merchant’s was enough to make my twelve-year old body explode with pride. For the
remainder of the year, Ms. Merchant fussed over my work and taught me how to refine my ideas and sentences. “You’re a brilliant writer. You’ll be very famous one day,” she’d repeat. And I believed her. Since our first encounter, I have been a writer.

I battled severe depression as a child. My emotions overwhelmed me and I struggled to find an outlet. Writing became my lifelong escape, the way I sifted through the world and tamed my emotions. My first novel, A Stirring Soul, is set to be published this upcoming March. The characters capture my real experiences as an American Muslim on a college campus. The work took me almost two years to complete, but I like to think it really began the day I believed in my own abilities. The day Ms. Merchant taught me to believe in it.

(From Azizah Magazine)
Adult ESL Teacher Asks
“Can You Imagine?” – And We Do
Honorable Mention

Essay Writer: Veronica Lopez
Teacher: Ms. Carole Moseley
Translated from Spanish

CAN YOU IMAGINE! Dreaming, figuring out, thinking, understanding, perceiving, reflecting, recording, and permitting. All within your reach in just one class. Professor by conviction and teacher by choice, she makes the ordinary extraordinary.

Today is the first day of the next level of Adult ESL, and there she is, in front welcoming us to “our campus”, “our classroom”, as she calls it. She warns us that the class will not be an ordinary class, she is going beyond the established program and we must take this seriously. “If you don’t want it, there is no professor who can teach you.” A professor is one who teaches you, a teacher is one from whom you learn. The class starts and the students exchange bored looks as the teacher covers the agenda and vocabulary we will learn that afternoon. We must start to think, each one given a chance to work on pronunciation as the teacher corrects us, and our writing too, as she arranges her scarf. Is it so, that all super heroes wear capes?

As she gets closer to her knapsack, she rushes to get the TIME magazines she has gotten from her friend’s office, and some advertisements from various stores and from the library with the most locations called a mailbox. “Practice makes the teacher,” she says, there is no excuse for not getting an education and practicing when you have a library that arrives nearly daily in the comfort of our home. READ, READ beyond this classroom, and she demonstrated how we do this by taking us on an excursion to the library where we obtained our library cards.

“After my husband was deported, I felt lost yet there she was with that disposition.”

Keeping with the themes she is most passionate about -- geography and history – could it be so we don’t lose sight of where we are going? Or where we have come from? Our grand project is the complete map of the US to learn the history contained in the pages she has given us about each of the states, and with all those inspiring lessons about people who transcend history by doing the right thing without attention to skin color or gender, that simple right that humans have to live, to think and express. We learn of the role of women and all those battles of liberation, their dreams that became lifelong projects. Even though all of us have been through discouraging moments, there are events that still leave a mark even though they happen all around us so often, like the deportation of my husband, which is hard to assimilate. In those moments it helped me and gave me strength to come to these classes, I felt sad, frustrated, lost, and yet there she was with that disposition that characterizes her. We were studying the state of New York. She taught us that the Statue of Liberty was a gift from France in 1884 that of course dignifiedly represents a woman. Between 1892-1954 more than 12 million immigrants passed through as they searched
for their dream. Thinking of that representation or symbol of events, with her often used phrase, “Can you imagine?” Giving us an invitation to continue and be bold and to dream that all that we set our minds to can be accomplished and possibly even going to a University regardless of our age, COULD YOU IMAGINE THAT?

(From Mundo Hispánico)
Walking in excited about my first day of high school, my teacher was brilliant and amazing in my eyes. As class started, we discussed our goals and expectations for the semester. Mr. Elghotni, a curiously wide-eyed petite gentleman with a great gift for teaching and an infectious laugh, added to our daily Arabic lessons enchanting stories of Egyptian politics, culture, history and people which fueled my imagination.

My transition from Muslim private school to public school represented an opportunity to compete, for my life would be set in motion on a new and exciting course. With high hopes, I didn’t know what to expect. I realized that I had to “apply” to high school. North Atlanta High School boasted an internationally recognized Arabic program. Meeting with the program director and instructor during our visit of the school, I thought to myself as I looked at him, “Where is he from? If I’m accepted, would this be my teacher for the next four years?” Ahmed Elghotni was an intriguing Egyptian man about 5’6 with a strong accent. After our meeting, I was excited and welcomed the challenge. As I sat and pondered, pouring out on paper why I thought I was worthy to deserve the opportunity to attend the only high school with an Arabic program in Atlanta Public School, I thought of amazing things I could learn and opportunities that would follow if only I knew Arabic as a second language. Like other Muslim children growing up, I learned Quranic Arabic, but not conversational Arabic. I applied and was accepted to North Atlanta High School when my life changed.

“…add travel to your experience,” he said.

He planted seeds of wonder in my mind and helped to expand my horizons to the endless possibilities that were available to me in high school that would prepare me for college life and beyond. As I entered my junior year, Mr. Elghotni encouraged me to run for Arabic club president, and to my surprise I won! It was the first time I had run as president of any club. I would go on to win most improved student in the Arabic language studies department. During one class, Mr. Elghotni gathered us to tell us about an opportunity to participate in a summer study abroad trip to Egypt. “The program will strengthen your language skills and add travel to your experience YaQutullah,” Mr. Elghotni said to me. He continued to encourage my participation in the program and shared advice for living in Cairo, which prepared me to experience the culture, language, and opportunity of immersion. The thought of studying and traveling abroad for first time carried my imagination far. I longed to attend the program but being from a modest background, I seriously needed to fundraise. I spent that summer studying Arabic in Cairo with weekend excursions to Alexandria. The following two summers after high school, I returned to take college level courses at the American University in Cairo. I’ll never forget the experience and Mr. Eghotni’s impact on me.

(From Azizah Magazine)
Cultivating A Child’s Mind For A Lifetime

Finalist

Essay Writer: Sowmya M. Garton
Teacher: Ms. Kristina Holmes

Every once in a while you come across a teacher who was born to teach. There is something almost magical in how they instill the love of learning in children. My son’s teacher, Ms. Holmes, has ignited a passion for independent learning in my son. While many of the parents had hoped for a veteran teacher, I had hoped for a teacher that would understand my son’s curious nature and his thirst for knowledge outside of the traditional box.

Ms. Holmes quickly understood my child’s need for wanting to dig deeper into subjects. She is never frustrated with the questions children ask, enjoys watching them learn and most important of all, always treats children with utmost respect.

She often mentions eagerly about attending a class to better her skills or about visiting a place during her vacation that ties directly in with the curriculum. When she shares this with her class, her excitement and enthusiasm matches that of the children. Her passion for seeking out new knowledge and constant learning is infectious. Quite often my son will say, “I had fun writing a story in class and I’m going to go home and write more books this weekend.” This means the world to me since, prior to this, he hated writing. She has helped him put to practice the concept “if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”

“Her passion for seeking out new knowledge…is infectious.”

She’s not only sparked his interest in reading and writing but has made him more inquisitive of math and science as well. He will often ask to do a project at home based on a concept they have been studying or I will see him using newly learned information in his play. When I hear him say that his teacher spent time talking to him about her experience with learning the piano, I know she is extraordinary in taking time from her busy schedule to connect with my son in such a deep and profound way. Because of her vested interest in my son’s overall education, she even came to his piano recital this year. He was proud and delighted to have his teacher’s support at this special event. He also takes pleasure in talking about the many things he has in common with his teacher. This would not happen if a teacher just did her job. It can only happen when a teacher is devoted, caring, and passionate about her role in a child’s life. Ms. Holmes realizes that she is cultivating a mind, not just for this year, but for a lifetime. Her influence on my son has been incredible. His love of school, his feeling of fitting in, and his passion for constantly wanting to know more is a direct result of his teacher’s guidance. I’m happy to have met her at such a crucial time in my son’s schooling. Teachers like her are an asset to our community. They should be lauded for planting the seed for lifelong learning in our children.

(From New America Media)
A Parent Thanks Her Son’s Teacher
Finalist

Essay Writer: Florencia Zepeda Aviles
Teacher: Mr. John D. Nguyen
Translated from Spanish

Mr. John is a noble teacher, with exemplary dedication to his job. Mr. John is a teacher who interacts with his students so he can better understand what troubles them and what they fear. As a result, his students feel heard and supported as they tackle their challenges better prepared by the understanding, knowledge and tenderness that Mr. John has shown them.

“I help the children because I love my job,” were his words. This simple phrase demonstrates his sense of commitment and responsibility.

He has taught children how to reach their goals by finishing their homework and at the same time, enjoy discipline, reading and arithmetic. His students have learned how enriching it is to work side by side with people who think, listen, and learn in different styles without judgement based on race or religion.

I feel confident that he provides individual attention and unique respect to not just my son, but to all the other children. He is very patient and remains to the end of the day until he has finished helping the very last child. He does this day after day, year after year.

“He…remains to the end of the day until he has finished helping the very last child.”

His attitude, his passion and his humanity will remain no matter time or distance, like one of the best lessons a teacher can give his students and their parents.

For this dear teacher, and with the gratitude you deserve, I wish that you will always have good health and happiness. Thanks for your spirit and dedication, teacher John D. Nguyen.

(From Mundo Hispánico)
He Asked Me To Thank My Own Child
Finalist

Essay Writer: Young Hee Han
Teacher: Mr. Achim Horton
Translated from Korean

I was born in Korea but America always seemed like a familiar place. When I was young, my father’s cousin married an American man, who became my uncle-in-law. He was incredibly kind and was one of the reasons I wanted to live in the United States.

“In Korean culture, one thanks the teacher…it would never have occurred to me to thank my own child.”

As I grew up, I learned more about America beyond my early, childhood memories of my uncle. In 2007, I moved to the country with my own husband and two daughters. Everything felt unfamiliar. For my two daughters, who came here not of their own will, the shock was even greater. They were afraid, lonely, and resentful at being taken from Korea.

My oldest daughter, Jin, entered middle school right after arriving. My youngest entered the fifth grade. Were it not for Mr. Horton at Hull Middle School, life for them in this country would still be an enormous struggle, five years on.

My oldest daughter would come home crying at the end of a long day, unable to understand what was said in the classroom. My youngest daughter, Hyun, would talk incessantly at home, and then fall into a deep sleep. This is how my daughters coped with the stress. As parents, we couldn’t understand them. And because I didn’t go to school in the United States, I couldn’t understand the system here, and could offer little in the way of help with homework.

Mr. Horton’s attention to my daughters was the one source of comfort. Without his support and understanding, I could never have come to understand the pain my daughters were experiencing. Although neither my husband or I spoke English, he did his best to ensure we understood what he was telling us about our children.

By the time Jin finished sixth grade, I expressed my gratitude to Mr. Horton. He replied by telling me to thank my daughter instead. In Korean culture, one usually thanks the teacher. It would never have occurred to me to thank my own child. I never heard such a thing from my parents. But that day I told my two daughters how thankful I was to them and how proud of them I was.

A year after coming to the United States, financial pressures forced us to consider moving again. My younger daughter told Mr. Horton, expressing her worries about moving to a new school. After their conversation, she came home and said that wherever we moved, she would be ok.

My two daughters are now in high school, and while they still struggle with the uncertainties of the future, they always look back fondly on their time with Mr. Horton.

(From Korea Daily)
The professor that most had an impact on my life was Dr. Professor Timothy Askew. I was introduced to Dr. Professor Timothy Askew while taking an African-American Literature course at what is now known as Southern Polytechnic State University. At the time, Southern College of Technology was a predominantly Caucasian college where the number of minorities was limited. Being that I grew up in a predominately black neighborhood and attended an all-black high school, I was quite pleased to be offered the opportunity to take an African-American Literature course at this college.

One of the required readings by Dr. Professor Timothy Askew was “If This World Were Mine” by author E. Lynn Harris. This book opened my eyes to the then taboo world of gays. I would not necessarily consider myself a homophobe, however, I was not one who was truly accepting of what I would consider the chosen lifestyle either.

“Had it not been for Dr. Askew, I don't know if I would have ever changed my mindset.”

After reading this book, my heart became softer towards individuals who may have felt “trapped” in this lifestyle. I say “trapped” because many of the individuals living this lifestyle were unable to be themselves for fear that they would be judged or unaccepted in mainstream society. Being a minority, I am all too familiar with the pain of being judged and unaccepted for something that I felt I had no decision in. As I read this book, I had to lay my personal convictions and opinions aside to really glimpse into the heart of these individuals.

Had it not been for Dr. Professor Askew, I don’t know if I would have ever changed my mindset, nor my opinion to feel what the other person was going through. I have often thought: “Why would this Professor make this required reading in the course?” “Are Professors allowed to create their own curriculum or was this mandated by the state?” I may never have the answers to these questions. However I do have a better love and appreciation for Dr. Professor Askew who opened my eyes to what was considered taboo. Since that time, I have gone on to read all of E. Lynn Harris’ books and have learned to embrace, not condemn, those who live a lifestyle different than my own.

(From New America Media)
Math Teacher Can Help A Child When A Parent Can’t

Finalist

Essay Writer: Zsa Zsa L. West
Teacher: Mrs. Janiza Howard

Someone once said that our youth are the World of Tomorrow, but I beg to differ that our youth are the World of Today. In order to reach our Youth, we need to have caring and effective teachers that are dedicated to seeing our children succeed. I have always believed that an effective teacher can change the life of even the most challenged student. My daughter, Zsakayla has always had challenges in math since Kindergarten. However, a 5th Grade Teacher, Mrs. Howard, was the very instrumental in helping my daughter overcome that difficulty and made the biggest impression on my daughter as well as myself.

There is a huge difference between being a parent that is trying to help a child with math and knowing math as a math teacher. They are two totally different things because a teacher knows how to teach the methodology of math. One of the most attention catching moments was when my daughter had Mrs. Howard, a teacher for Clayton County Public Schools, for fifth grade. During that particular school year, a “light bulb came on” as it pertains to math. Mrs. Howard was able to do several diagnostic tests and monitor my daughter closely and she probed her until she figured just what was going on with my daughter. She met with me and wrote up an education plan to help my daughter improve in math. And as a result, at the end of the school year, my daughter made a 92% in math which was the first time ever.

When my daughter and I were reflecting about her fifth grade school year, she mentioned several things about Mrs. Howard that I think are essential to her being an effective and efficient teacher. She said that Mrs. Howard was caring, very easy to talk to and made her feel comfortable in class. All of those qualities are of utmost importance in the classroom. Teachers should always show care so that the students feel free to take risks to learn. That is a non-negotiable. Also, being “approachable” is another quality that makes for a wonderful learning environment. One of the reasons why my daughter may have not been able to progress in math is because she didn’t feel comfortable to ask for help.

“*There is a huge difference between a parent trying to help a child with math and knowing math as a math teacher…*”

Lastly, my daughter said that Mrs. Howard made her feel comfortable. When we expect a child to learn, the child must feel comfortable in the learning environment and must feel that it is okay to take chances in learning. In my opinion, Mrs. Howard is the greatest teacher that my daughter ever had thus far in school. I wish there were more Mrs. Howards in the World Today!

(From Atlanta Daily World)
Teacher in Memory Category

Voc Ed Teacher Parleys School Into Career Opportunity

Winner

Essay Writer: Crissandra Maddox Miller
Teacher: Ms. Yunette Hudson

It was the beginning of my senior year in high school and after 12 years I was eager to cross the graduation line. As I registered for my last few classes, my guidance counselor informed me that I needed to take an elective to satisfy my graduation requirements. We went through the list and the few that were available were not that interesting. It came down to a choice between Marketing/Distributive Education and Woodshop. For a girl that carried a clutch purse since the third grade, Woodshop was definitely out. So I grudgingly signed up for Marketing/Distributive Education.

On the first day of this new class I took the long walk from the academic building over to the vocational building. How embarrassing! While I had been labeled as ‘gifted’ most of my academic career, I had not been a stellar student. Now I had to pay the price. While my friends were rushing off to AP History and AP Physics I was creeping over to spend time in the ‘VOCATIONAL’ building.

As I entered the classroom and took my seat I tried to think of the ‘good’ that would come of this class. It would only be for a few months. I would only have to go to classes for half a day and I could earn some extra pocket money for college in the fall.

So there I sat waiting for class to begin and then she walked in. MS. YUNETTE HUDSON. It is often said that first impressions are lasting impressions. I will never forget. She made an entrance. No polyester pants and sensible shoes for this teacher. She wore a wrap dress and sling back high heels. Her smile was warm and friendly, but her manner and the pencil tucked behind her ear said ‘all business’.

“The main lesson she taught her students was how to work.”

For 12 years I had learned the standards of reading, writing and arithmetic with a few extra’s like typing and data entry thrown in for good measure. However, Ms. Hudson took my educational experience to a new level. She connected the dots and helped me understand that with all of the education that I had received and would receive I would need to parlay that into a career opportunity.

She taught the basics of searching for a job, preparing your resume, dressing for an interview, workplace skills and etiquette. By the end of the first few classes I had secured my part time job. I happened to get the ‘plumb’ job of working at a clothing store at the local mall. Ms. Hudson would not only go over topics in the classroom, but she would visit your workplace and talk to your manager to see if you were on task or needed additional coaching.

Today, over twenty five years later, as the recipient of a Bachelor’s and a Master’s Degree
I can truly say this was the best class I have ever taken. Ms. Hudson taught me so many valuable life skills. In essence, the main lesson she taught her students was ‘How to Work’.

I cherish the opportunity provided by this contest, because I have wanted to say THANK YOU to Ms. Hudson for many years. Sadly, I believe that she has passed away. However each time I receive a performance review I try to pay her back just a little. In over 25 years of working, I have always received the review of Excellent or Superior. Now that’s teaching that lasts a lifetime!

(From Atlanta Daily World)
My Peruvian Professor Nicknamed Chubby Cheeks
Honorable Mention

Essay Writer: Paul Jimenez
Teacher: Professor Alan Patroni, Lima, Peru
Translated from Spanish

It was a cold morning August 9, 2004 in Lima, Peru. I remember my first professor at the University San Martin de Porres. A white-haired man of about 60 years old, well preserved, of thin build about a 1.85 meter tall, distinctive slanted eyes and a serious look. I was nervous and prayed he wouldn’t ask me anything. Looking straight at me he asked who I was and what I wanted to be in life. He said, “Call me Professor Patroni, but my name is Alan and my second last name is Marinovich. My friends call me “chubby cheeks.” We burst out laughing.

I said, “My name is Paul and I want to be a good professional, to help my country and learn what I need to defend myself in life.” He replied, “It is easy to be good, it is difficult to be fair. How could you help your country if you just search for what is necessary and not for what you need to know? How could you, if you cannot even help yourself?” He said. “Wolves and hyenas are waiting, but as Christ said ‘The truth will set you free.’ Where is the truth? In you. If you persevere you will get what you want.”

Those words surprised me, I never forget them. One day I decided to buy ‘Peppermint’, a Peruvian medicinal plant, I took it to campus and plant it. I watered it every day after school. One afternoon, when he saw me, Professor Patroni said: “You think this plant can grow grapes or olives?” I replied that it would not be possible. I did not understand what he meant. He replied: “Son, planting is a noble action.” “If you sow peace, you will reap peace and if you sow hatred, expect the same. If you help someone they will remember you.”

“If you help someone, they will remember you.”

That was the birth of a great friendship. In 2008, he was named dean of degrees and diplomas. In 2009, before I graduated, he sent for me. At that time, my father was diagnosed with cancer. Professor Patroni was sorry but he said, “Paul, be brave!” I started crying. He got out of his chair and hugged me and said, “You remind me of me when I was your age, I had many doubts; I wanted to change the world. You gave me the same answer I gave to a teacher when I entered college. This is your heritage, dear student and if you can do the same for someone else as I have done for you, then we will be even.”

I’ve never had a teacher with such a philosophy, with such patience and simplicity of teaching. In 2010, I presented my thesis for my degree, there was a lottery to choose the three members of the jury and there was my teacher. Upon leaving the room after passing my thesis, I felt proud and remembered how that teacher whose gaze had terrified me six years earlier was swearing me in as a lawyer.
What you learn at home you improve in college and you apply it in life. It’s been several years and Alan Patroni, my teacher, continues to teach. They say he will retire this year; he has received many honors for his academic work. I lost contact with him, but his memory is still in my mind and heart. I know that to this day the ‘Peppermint’ I planted continues to flourish on my college campus just as the lessons that one teacher sowed in me.

(From Mundo Hispánico)
Teacher in Memory Category

Teaching First Graders To Write A Book
Honorable Mention

Essay Writer: Jenny Triplett
Teacher: Ms. Barbara Barr

Childhood is full of innocence and fun memories. We relish family gatherings and time with our friends. Kindergarten is met with great anticipation for a child as that is the first time where a formal learning process kicks in. Graduation from that grade means that you are a big kid and moving on up in life.

When I made it to first grade, I was so ready for all it had to offer. Since I have a sister that is only 14 months older than me, I had anticipated what I would do. Recycling paper could not come fast enough nor could the Young Writer’s Conference. I had been writing short stories over the summer. As a child I enjoyed more inside activity than outside activity. My parents had purchased the ChildCraft Encyclopedias and they helped nurture my curiosity and imagination.

“She sent me notes throughout the years acknowledging my accomplishments.”

The conference was always in the Spring so before that time Ms. Barr would prepare her class by having them write their own book. We had to write it, illustrate it and bind it. Yes, as first graders we had our work cut out for us but it was fun. I remember vividly that my book was about my family. My mom was from Florida and we always traveled there during the summers, spring breaks and school holidays to see her parents and brothers and sisters. Those trips were very memorable.

As I described how my mom would make a bed in the back of the station wagon with foam, our stops at McDonalds (it was always McDonalds) and our overnight stays at the Holiday Inn (it was always the Holiday Inn, mom preferred), Ms. Barr could not believe the details that a six year old vividly brought to life. The book actually made her feel like she was on the trip with us and wanted to be there with us. She knew then that I had a gift for writing.

My book was happily submitted to the Young Writers Conference where it won an award in the Youth Division. I had a Blue Ribbon for sharing happy moments in my life. I didn’t realize that could be possible but Ms. Barr knew I was going to be a star. She would always tell that to my mother who worked at the school for the other first grade teacher.

There have been other teachers who have been very instrumental in my life, but Ms. Barr was an avid supporter. She always helped with my gymnastics fundraisers and sent me notes throughout the years acknowledging my accomplishments. She even sent a gift for my high school graduation. She always encouraged me to never give up. She passed on several years back but her words will live on forever “Jenny, I believe in you. Always tell the world your story in your way and it will come to life.” Those words will live with me for life.

(From Azizah Magazine)
Student Learns Only Later How A Teacher Saved Him
Judge's Award – In recognition of a compelling story

Essay Writer: Bong Ho Kim
Teacher: Mr. Sae-cheon Jang
Translated from Korean

I spent my childhood in a small island village. On my way to school, I brought my books and other supplies in a bundle wrapped around my waist. On my way to school, I had to cross a small hill and walk through some barley fields. In early summer, I used to sit on a hilltop, where I would take a strand of barley and blow into it like a flute. In summer, I would take swims in the ocean with friends. When winter came, we would go sledding across the frozen rice fields.

In fifth grade, our teacher was a very handsome man. He wore black-rimmed glasses and came across to us youth as cool and dignified. One day, this teacher brought a set of workbooks which he handed out to students. Countryside schools rarely have these kinds of workbooks on hand. I was elated after I received mine. The unexpected gift made me want to study harder.

The teacher told the class that we would be working through the book in the coming days, so students should not try and work ahead. But I brought the workbook home and answered all the questions that night.

The next day, I brought the workbook to the school. When the teacher directed us to begin work, he noticed I’d already completed the problems. He sat next to me, flipped through the book and grew increasingly upset. I was nervous as he asked why I hadn’t followed his directions. My face grew red and I sat unresponsive.

“No matter the difficulties, don’t come back to the countryside.”

Back then I was the class president and so got more scrutiny from the teacher. And while I had disobeyed him, in truth I had done the work and so wondered why it had angered him.

Our teacher asked me to come to the front of the class, where he began to strike the back of my claves with a reed. When the reed broke, he asked another student to fetch one more. I couldn’t understand why I was being punished.

One year passed and I entered the sixth grade. However, I was stuck with the same teacher. I studied well, however, and so he showed some favoritism to me. In all activities, I earned praise from him.

Because my family was poor, after graduating elementary school I wondered whether I would be able to enter junior high. On graduation day I was so sad, even though I had been named valedictorian. I burst into tears.
When I came home, I began to think of my future and began to cry again. That night, I heard the voice of my teacher outside. I was surprised to see my teacher standing outside my house. “Bong-ho, let’s go to Seoul together tomorrow.” I asked him why, and he told me that it was so I could take the middle school entrance exam.

With my teacher’s help, I took my first train trip ever to Seoul, where my teacher left me. “No matter the difficulties, don’t come back to the countryside,” he told me. “Study well, and become a great person.”

I cried watching my teacher leave me alone in a city where I didn’t know a single person. That was the last time I ever saw him. Later on, I found out that despite his meager salary, he had managed to pay my entrance fee for middle school. In April of that year, riots broke out in Seoul. I never got word from him after that.

I studied as my teacher had told me to, remaining in Seoul. In summer, I sold popsicles on the street and did some part-time tutoring on the side. I sometimes worked labor jobs as well, on top of night school. Eventually I finished college.

I will never forget my teacher, who helped create for me a future. His name is Sae-cheon Jang.

(From Korea Daily)
A Teacher From 1st Grade
To College Graduation
Finalist

Essay Writer: Martha Castrejon
Teacher: Ms. Gilberta Garcia, San Juan del Rio, Querétaro, Mexico
Translated from Spanish

One of the most important figures in our lives are certainly our teachers. From a very young age they guide us on our academic journey. Their participation is essential in the formation of men and women who will be of service to our society and on this journey we meet so many teachers so that it would be unfair not to acknowledge that each of them have been valuable in our educational development. I will always be grateful to all my teachers. However, among them there is one teacher who was very close to me starting at a very young age, my teacher Gilberta (RIP). I will always carry her in my mind.

Who was she? Why is she so special to me? My teacher Gilberta Garcia (RIP) until her retirement taught 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade at Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz in San Juan del Rio, Querétaro, Mex. She worked admirably with dedication, commitment and love for her profession she was friendly, and showed the confidence and security that is necessary when you are 6, 7 and 8 years old, so you can go on to the following grades with enthusiasm. When she retired in 1984, after 32 years of service in the community she was paid a special tribute in the public square, which was attended by a large audience made up of parents, alumni, fellow teachers and the general public to acknowledge her work.

“She was the one who knew me and supported me at every step.”

For me it was even more special, she was my teacher for 2nd and 3rd grade, then I was honored to have her presence on each of my graduations all the way up to my university graduation ceremony. Why? Since she met me she always believed in me! I went into the second grade at the age of 6 and my teacher said I was too young for that level but if I worked hard I would go on to the third grade. I recall that I worked hard because I did not fail that grade, and now I can say that working hard has been the secret to life. That was the key, I made it to third grade and every grade level after that all the way to my degree and for me it was an honor to have her present at each of my graduations. She was my special guest. She was the one who knew me and supported me at every academic step and every personal step. She was a very important support for me. Not only did she give us her wonderful academic labor, but she gave us friendship and love. She will always be in my memories and very certainly in the memories of everyone that knew her, because she was a teacher whose work won the admiration, trust and respect of an entire city.

So in memory of teacher Gilberta Garcia (RIP) who I remember and will miss always, I offer this great recognition to each of the teachers, who with dedication and love for their profession laid the foundation so that their students could achieve their educational goals.

(From Mundo Hispánico)
Teacher Encouraged The Best
In Every Student

Essay Writer: Jathiya Shaheed
Teacher: Ms. Nadia Abdur-Rahman

The basic teacher always does just enough so they can be able to claim “I did my job”. However in a group of people that possess the same qualities there is always someone who stands out in the crowd. Always going above and beyond what they actually are supposed to do.

Middle school is a time where you are not a baby anymore but you’re still not grown yet either. For most, this is a crucial time of developing who you really are and finding your desires. I went to a smaller school, where everybody knew everyone, for the most part from the teachers back to the parents. One teacher in particular seemed to be on the tip of everyone’s tongue. However I was never blessed with the pleasure of having serious encounters with her until I went to the sixth grade.

My homeroom and social studies teacher, Nadia Abdur-Rahman, was unlike any other teacher; she was more like your cool auntie but at school. She encouraged the best in every student. If sports were your passion, you especially had her attention. She loved the game of basketball and was always quick to give tips on what she likes to call “getting low”. She would always say “that’s not it, when I say low I mean low”, she demonstrates as to what low she is referring to in the defense position. She loved the idea of extra-curricular activities. On certain weekends she would take a group of girls to the movies, plays and sometimes even to dinner.

She was all about fun, but nothing came first to the academics though. The games would stop immediately if your grades did not resemble that of a scholar. She was all about being on top of your studies. She was the ultimate tutor in whatever subject; if you needed help she had the answers to the problems. She would set up times after or during breaks at schools to keep you up on work, so you would not fall behind.

“If sports were your passion, you especially had her attention.”

As the year progressed the great influence still lingered, but by the time I got to the eighth grade she was moved to work in the high school. She wasn’t far though, she was across the street and I only had a year until I was back in her class again. When I finally did make it to the ninth grade there was one more year full a great adventures until the following year, when she had a huge announcement. She was leaving for a better teaching opportunity in Dubai. It seemed so unreal because we had so many great times that only those who were there could truly understand. I remembered I asked her why she was leaving us and she replied “Haven’t I done enough here? It’s time for me to help some other young ladies elsewhere.” I couldn’t disagree with that, because it was true, she did do plenty. She had a grand going away party and since then our contact has been little to none and virtually has been lost.

(From Azizah Magazine)
“Welcome To Life Sciences!”—
An Einstein In Iowa
Finalist

Essay Writer: Liheng Song
Teacher: Mr. Jim Duff

Squinting my eyes in the dim light, I scanned the page quickly and smoothly. Yes, yes, these are the courses I want. I heard Mrs. Talbot was nice. Oh, thank goodness I don’t have Mrs. Greene. Uh oh. Fourth period: Mr. Duff. Kaitlyn told me he was a mad scientist with dead animals. I could feel the fear gripping my heart. There was nothing more I wanted than to go home. My first three periods flew by on a breeze of kind words and motherly smiles. Fourth period was next. I stumbled into class just seconds before the bell blared, running into a jar stuffed with a pickled guinea pig. Of course. Dead animals.

“I found it fascinating that…a cell could make up all of life…”

“Welcome to life sciences!” a voice boomed. I jumped as I caught sight of him: a tall man with Einstein-like hair, thick glasses, and a lab coat stained with chemicals. I saw students’ eyes nearly pop out of their heads as they took in the view. The rest of the year was going to be hectic, or so I thought.

Three months later, I had gotten used to the confusing maze of hallways and middle-school life. I was even starting to like Life Sciences. I found it fascinating how something as small and seemingly simple as a cell could make up all of life as we knew it, and I was especially interested the study of human anatomy and physiology. In October, my teacher noticed my fascination with biology and invited me to join the eighth grade Science Bowl team, even though I was only in seventh grade. I eagerly attended meetings and pored over college-level microbiology and anatomy textbooks. Instead of dreading fourth period, I now avidly looked forward to a scientific relief from my other classes.

Just as December was dawning, my parents brought shocking news. We were moving. I was completely devastated. My young heart couldn’t take the change from a small rural school to a large, bustling school in the heart of Atlanta. I would miss my friends, and I would miss my teachers - especially Mr. Duff, who had grown to become my favorite teacher. When I told him the news, he just smiled sadly and said, “Well, you’ve got to fly from the nest someday. Just remember that you might fall a few times while you’re trying to fly.” As I flew from a small town to a big city, I was thrown into the fast-paced life of high school before I knew it. I fell down many times, but I was always able to get back up thanks to the advice of Mr. Duff.

He was an unforgettable teacher who taught me more in a few months than I would have learned in years. He was the epitome of the mad scientist, filled with passion that ignited the first sparks of curiosity in his students. This spark would later grow into a flame, burning brighter and brighter. The largest of flames starts with just a tiny spark. He was the teacher who sparked my passion for science, and the flame of knowledge burns brighter in me still.

(From New America Media)
Teacher in Memory Category

**Noticing And Rewarding Good Behavior**

Finalist

Essay Writer: Janani Rammohan
Teacher: Mrs. Reba Lantzy

At Open House, I hid behind my mother as she talked to my new teacher. Mrs. Lantzy was tall, with a loud voice and dark red hair. She seemed rather frightening and intimidating. That judgment could not have been more wrong.

On the first day of first grade, I stood timidly at the door, afraid to step inside and attract attention. I peeked around the corner.

“Come on in! You don’t need permission!” Mrs. Lantzy smiled and ushered me in. “Here’s your seat.” I sat down gratefully, blushing furiously under the curious stares of my classmates.

That first day, I didn’t speak at all. Two years ago, I had moved to Atlanta. I had barely spoken English and spent much of the first few months of kindergarten wishing to go home. Towards the end of the year, I felt much more comfortable, but today all of those feelings resurfaced. It was a new classroom, new students, new teacher… I was lost once again.

**“She helped me enjoy school.”**

I felt a little better when we started doing a math worksheet. This was something I understood; something I didn’t have to speak out loud and risk embarrassment for. I finished quickly and handed Mrs. Lantzy my worksheet. She graded it quickly, marked with a “100” and a smiley face, and smiled at me.

“Great job!” Tentatively, I smiled back. The next day I didn’t dread coming to school as much. I still lingered by the door, but when I came in, it was with much less foreboding.

Mrs. Lantzy made sure to include me in every activity, even when I hung back and didn’t volunteer. One of my proudest moments was when we were practicing spelling. While my classmates received words like “always” or “crayon,” I was given the daunting challenge of “question mark.” Mrs. Lantzy knew my capabilities, and never tried to drag me down. Once, she even gave me a third grade math book to practice with, because I was already advanced in the subject.

She always noticed and rewarded good behavior. Granted, I “behaved well” mostly because I was too shy to talk much, but was nevertheless compensated. Mrs. Lantzy gave out rewards to the best behaved student, and I’ll never forget the happiness I felt when I got a pencil topped with an enormous apple eraser, or a set of markers that snapped together.

She helped me enjoy school. She encouraged me to speak to others and answer questions in class. Mrs. Lantzy was the reason I stopped spending every day waiting for 2:30. She encouraged me to enjoy school, and that is one of the best gifts I have ever received.

I’m sorry to say that I have lost touch with her. I moved several years ago, and recently was unable to find her on the school website. Even so, I will always remember my favorite teacher, and everything that she has done for me.

(From New America Media)
Every Teacher Is Also A Student
Finalist

Essay Writer: Reyna Monroy
Teacher: Mr. Mateo Contreras Lopez
Translated from Spanish

I thank all my teachers for teaching me the basics needed for education, but there was a teacher who by his example and his teaching led to an improvement in all areas of my life. He was the person from whom I learned to believe in myself. When I saw him coming with just a pen and a marker to the class it was interesting to listen to him introduce a subject without having a book in front of him. Sometimes during a class which was not on his specialty he spoke of the importance of honesty and humility in life. For example, when we had an exam he would always address any questions we might have, then he would leave the room and wait for us to finish. That to him was a requirement which he had to do. He would evaluate us by what he saw everyday. He knew each of his students and that was invaluable.

He did not like being called teacher and would always say “I’m an instructor, the real teacher is in heaven.” Another example of his humility was remembering that always one is both a teacher and a student.

“He did not like being called teacher and would always say ‘I’m an instructor.’”

In his classes he was not only the teacher, he was also a student, so that helped me to develop a way of describing a problem and finding it’s solution, using my own reasoning. To develop this ability in a student was his purpose and for me it gave me very good results.

He was a very responsible teacher in his duty and that made me be punctual and very demanding with myself and that helped me to make a great leap in life. All I had to learn I learned and if I could hear him answer I’m sure that he would say, “All that I had to teach I have taught you.” You just have to put it into practice. The aim was projected, the result we each knew. I can proudly say that what he planted in me has borne fruit. And if things don’t turn out the way I expected, I know that I will get ahead with courage and strength.

Unfortunately I never saw him again, but I know that he is somewhere and that place must be very special, for he is there. Thanks for being an example for me to follow. With all my affection for teacher, Mateo.

(From Mundo Hispánico)
Afterword

Over 75 people submitted entries to New America Media and our media partners. Thanks to each of you for your submissions. Your participation made our contest possible.