



Where Excellence Is Tradition

Those special teachers

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The beginning of the school year is often a time that I reflect on specific teachers who had a profound impact on my life. While there are a number that helped shape who I am, a few particularly stand out. Not long ago I received word that Miss Anna Armia Heikinen died. She lived to be 106 years old! Miss Heikinen was born in Northern Minnesota to Finnish parents and completed her training at Duluth Teachers College in 1926. After graduating she went to French Indo China (Vietnam) to start a school for missionary children. Dalat School opened in 1928 with three pupils; later a high school was added. After 28 years of teaching in Vietnam, she moved to New Guinea in 1958 to help start the Sentani International School and served there until her retirement in 1968. She was my second grade teacher in 1966. Miss Heikinen would have preferred to continue serving and teaching in New Guinea, but she returned to Minnesota to be the caregiver for her sister who was in poor health.

Each of us has fond memories of a special teacher who knew us well and helped shape who we are today. Miss Heikinen was one of those special teachers in my past. She taught two, sometimes three grades at a time, was highly organized and detailed and was also the school's principal. She moved quickly around the room facilitating multiple small learning groups simultaneously while keeping everyone on task. It seemed like she was everywhere. The passing of the weekly spelling test for every student was a ritual she ensured took place, even if it meant staying in from recess to study words. Even though you knew she cared for and loved you, she became the benevolent Marine drill sergeant when it came to classroom discipline. Miss Heikinen was one special person and was just the teacher that I needed.

The school year has just started and we are reminded of what an impact our teachers have on shaping and molding the lives our children. Beyond ensuring mastery of information and passing the state assessments, we know teachers serve a profound role in developing character, shaping personalities and nurturing identities. The stories and memories we share with each other typically are not about the grades we achieved or the state standards we met, but about the special teachers who influenced and guided our individual journeys.

I can already observe the special relationships and connections that my own children are having with their new teachers this fall. Kirsten, who is a senior at Glenbard South High School, and Ethan, an eighth-grader at Glen Crest Middle School, are already sharing stories at the dinner table about their teachers who clearly are having a positive influence on their lives.

We owe a great deal to teachers. They challenge our students, encourage their creativity, support them when they struggle and help them realize their full potential. They truly shape our lives.

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