

## An Educator's Life — Mentoring Youth

*Overview: Following my mother's lead, I just try to "help somebody" in everything I've done. "Help somebody" are words that were spoken at my mother's funeral. While much of this philosophy was expressed in my education career, I also have tried to follow this North Star in community organizations and endeavors.*

A year after Dartmouth and a one-year, teacher-assistant position in the "busing" program at the Holy Trinity School in Wallingford, CT, where I was initially greeted by nonreligious people, young and old, with unwelcoming signs, I sought the services of an employment agency in Hartford, CT, where I honestly stated in my written objective: "I want a job helping people." I was told, "You can't write that. You have to say you want a job at an insurance company." I remember those words, word for word, fifty years later. I worked in the corporate world for one year, and then realized "I gotta get outta this place." My manager, telling me I was doing a great job, could not convince me to stay. I was going home! I found a "home" as program director of the Dixwell Community House in New Haven, CT, located immediately adjacent to the subsidized housing community and across the street from the liquor store. The year was 1970, and ever since that time I have continued to do what someone in 1969 told me I "can't" do – help people, especially the young, who oftentimes cannot help themselves.

I finally became an elementary principal in Egg Harbor City, New Jersey. The school superintendent greeted me on the playground, my first day, with these welcoming words: "We're in a helluva lot of trouble." Indeed! The State of New Jersey was going to take over the school, if significant improvements were not made. I accepted the challenge and after three years of "getting the house in order," noticeable and documentable changes were evident in the predominantly Hispanic, Fanny D. Rittenberg School, whose namesake was on the Egg Harbor City school board. But meeting the challenge had a very significant impact on my health, resulting in acute viral myocarditis, which, if not diagnosed immediately, causes permanent debilitating health or death. After six-month of bedrest, I went to Massachusetts and became a teacher. After nine years of teaching, I told myself I wanted to be a principal again. And the Good Lord heard and understood "my calling" and granted me another principal position, this time at the East Falmouth Elementary School, just down the street from where I lived. I was "home" again and ready for another challenge.

Indeed! The challenge was waiting for me – the lowest performing of the four elementary schools; seventy-plus-percent of the students were from single-parent homes; almost nonexistent parent participation. But I heard a parent say, "My daughter went to school here, and the teachers were great." So, I greeted students, parents, "others," bus drivers, and teachers every day, expecting the best. I offered support to all, especially to one special education teacher, who had been unceremoniously exited (she had no prior notice...a fellow teacher told her) from "the" elementary school uptown. I welcomed my new teacher and her new idea of inclusion – bringing the support teachers (special education, Title I, speech) into, instead of taking the students out of, the classroom, embarrassing them. For many parents, but especially one, a marine biologist in Woods Hole, Kathy Sherman and her co-teacher JoAnne Leaf had performed a miracle with his daughter, who had multiple special needs. The biologist wanted to recommend both teachers for the 1995/1996 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year Award.

Ms. Sherman applied, representing the "down and out" school, and was selected for the Award. This shone a light of recognition on all the other East Falmouth teachers, staff, parents, and community for their devotion to learning and being an active participant in the children's education. In fact, East Falmouth Elementary School, "coming into its own," advanced from number seven to number two in parent participation, only behind North Falmouth School, a predominantly, two-parent-home community. A few years later, all the class officers of the graduating Falmouth High School seniors were former East Falmouth Elementary School students.

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Yes, I have held other positions, paid and voluntary, especially my involvement with the Cape and Islands Chapter of Concerned Black Men focusing on “caring for our youth.” But my main reason for sharing a little of my life with you, my Dartmouth brothers and sisters, is to ask for your support in our schools, especially for our young children, many of whom are without “real fathers” in their lives. If you volunteer in our schools, I can almost assure you that your life will be changed, uplifted, as was the case with the retired husband of one my volunteers who was sick one day and needed a substitute. Her husband, with white hair and plenty of time to spare, reluctantly volunteered for that “one” day, and his life was changed by the kids. He assumed the classroom volunteer role and was present every day for years in Leslie Chretien’s second-grade classroom...until his passing. My Dartmouth brothers and sisters, there are so many children waiting for you with their smiles and innocence, waiting to greet and hug you...in your new “home.”

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