

Teacher Stories

Everyone Has One. What's Yours?

A MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY

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In 1956, when I was seven years old, I loved to sing a catchy tune, “Mutual Admiration Society,” recorded by the perky singer Teresa Brewer. I recently learned that the term “Mutual Admiration Society” was first coined in the 1800s and linked to British literary societies. But back then, as now, that term refers simply to people who admire and flatter each other. Bruce, you and I have belonged to a Mutual Admiration Society for 58 years!

It all started at Walter Hines Page Senior High School, in Greensboro, North Carolina, fall semester of 1963, when I was 14 and you were 24. Today I am 71 and you 81. For nearly six decades we’ve talked on the phone, written letters, visited each other in five different cities, cherished each other’s families, celebrated joys and achievements together, and, like all good friends, comforted each other in times of great sorrow. One particularly moving memory is when Michelle Obama called you to say she’d chosen Sidwell Friends to send the Obama girls to. You hung up from her and immediately called me. There were, in equal parts, pride and humility in your voice as you reflected that your civil rights work had started in Greensboro, at Page High, and would have a wonderful bookend when you welcomed the Obama girls to Sidwell Friends.

You have given me the extraordinary compliment of saying that, in over fifty years in education, I have been your favorite student. Truthfully, Bruce, in as august a career as yours, many students have held a stellar place in your heart and mind. But I will take the compliment, with equal parts pride and humility. And though you were my 10th- and 11th-grade guidance counselor and technically not my teacher, I want you to know that you are the teacher who’s made the greatest impact on my life. You have been my favorite teacher. My life is almost inexpressibly better for having you as my friend, educational inspiration, and role model for tolerance and inclusivity.

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Let's go back to Page High, 1963. December report cards had just come out. I flunked geometry. This might seem unremarkable because many students stumble academically in high school. But my story had a twist.

I had always been an excellent student, even in math. In elementary school I won academic awards. I was one of a handful of students in Newburgh, New York selected for a regional Gifted Students Program. I skipped the sixth grade. But after my father died and my mother remarried a man who could only be described as disturbed if not deranged, and we moved from upstate New York to rural West Virginia and then to Morgantown, West Virginia, and Greensboro, North Carolina in rapid succession, I ended up, in the tenth grade, essentially going to three schools in one semester.

This sorry situation started with my enrollment in 10th-grade "new math" honors geometry at Page High and then (deep breath)—when my mother and younger sister and I escaped in the middle of the night from my abusive stepfather and moved in with my two brothers attending the University of West Virginia and I enrolled the next day in regular geometry class at Morgantown High School, and then, when that living situation (no surprise) didn't work out and, after six weeks, we had to move back to North Carolina and return to my stepfather and I returned to Page High and that god-awful new-math honors geometry, having missed out on all coherent explanations of geometry of *any* kind—I was utterly lost.

I got my report card and was devastated to see that F in geometry. I knew who "Mr. Stewart" was because you'd played a visibly calm and inspiring role in helping our school integrate that semester. I had heard you speak at school assemblies and often heard your voice over the loudspeaker, but didn't really know you yet. Still, I screwed up my courage, walked into your small office, next to the other two guidance counselors, and asked if I could speak to you. "Sure," you said warmly. I closed the door and remember sitting in the chair across from your desk and bursting into uncontrollable tears. And then trying to catch my breath and trying to catch you up on my dismal math situation and just a few of my family's problems. I remember feeling desperate.

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Two years earlier, my beloved Aunt Ray had committed suicide and though I knew I did not want to kill myself, something about my life at 14 felt over. I was losing my academic grip but, of greater importance, my confidence grip. And because, like my older brothers, I would need a full scholarship to go to college, and I was pretty sure my F would blow those chances.

You listened quietly and then said, “Jennifer, your problems are real and they are serious. But I will help you.” Oh my goodness, I could breathe again. You continued, “I think I can find other people to help you deal with some of the problems at home, but you need to know that this whole geometry mess was not your fault. I will arrange for you to take geometry again, with the other students who didn’t pass geometry, and whatever grade you make, *that* will be on your transcript, not this one.” The next semester I took geometry from a great math teacher, Mrs. Joyce King, and got an A. And I learned to love geometry.

Life is simultaneous. We experience it through our own private lens—but open the aperture, even a little, and broader historical forces are always swirling around us. Amidst the turmoil in my personal and academic life in the fall of ’63, a much larger story was unfolding at Page High. You were central in that story, too.

Back then, high school started in the 10th grade. And my first day of high school was the day our high school integrated.

Of the over 500 students enrolled at Page, something historic happened that first week of September: nine of the students were Black. I want to name them now: Norris Aikens, Glencie Clark, Meri-Li Douglas, Arlene Dunbar, Jacqueline Jeffrey, Karin Kirksey, Stephen McLaughlin, Jeannette Rankin, and Julius Rankin. Because of your Quaker commitment to social justice, and your excellence at Page as a history student teacher, you were hired to help shepherd the integration process. I am certain you helped each one of these nine student, many times, and always with your particular blend of respect, composure, earnestness, and wit.

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This week, I spoke to two of those African-American students, Karin Kirksey and Meri-Li Douglas. Here's what Karin Kirksey, now a civil rights worker in Raleigh, wanted to say to you:

Bruce (but I still like to call him Mr. Stewart) was a testament to the notion that there could be normalcy for me in school again, that I could return to being seen as me and as a successful student, especially in English. Because, when we transferred to Page, our grades at Lincoln Junior High (which was all Black) had been depreciated, I felt I was not placed appropriately. Day 3 of the first week of school I went into Mr. Stewart's office and implored that I be put in Mrs. Betts's honors English class, and was. But it was always the person, Mr. Stewart, not his position as guidance counselor, that I was being helped by. He took our talent and psychological needs seriously, and gave them credence.

Meri-Li Douglas, a Presbyterian minister in Chapel Hill, said this about you: *Bruce always had a sympathetic ear. Always. He was never a high profile, social justice mover-and-shaker, like a Bishop William Barber or a Congressman John Lewis, but he definitely had impact toward creating a more just society through the influence he had on the lives of individual students throughout his career. I was one of them.*

And I got testimonials from three other classmates whom I know you remember fondly. This from Susan Bernstein, who's recently retired as Director of Social Work at Mt. Sinai Hospital, and lives in New York City: *I want to pay tribute to the length and strength of Bruce's legacy, his long-haul commitment to racial and social justice. So much of his work is now infusing a whole generation of students. The ideals that he stands for he demonstrated to so many people in so many ways and for so many years. To describe him is simple: He knows what is right, and what is just.*

From Celia Snavelly, our Class of '66 valedictorian and a retired social worker, who lives in Greensboro: *I remember Bruce not only as our guidance counselor but also as a revered teacher at Page. His emphasis on social justice in high school was just so notable, and everyone respected him for it. Also his love of students: that was absolutely crucial to him, and we knew it.*

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And finally, I called Angela Hoffler, a retired educator herself who lives in Greensboro. She admitted that she had difficulty capturing your essence because “it was like trying to capture a moonbeam.” Nevertheless, she said: *Bruce is one of those people just embedded in your soul. He carries a powerful aura in his life. At our high school, he was like a rock star: tall, handsome, and inspiring – but you could always trust him too. When I studied education in college, he was both my role model and a mentor to me. And he has been subsequently, for my oldest and youngest daughters, a generation later.*

So yes, it's a lucky club that many of us belong to: The Bruce Blakely Stewart Mutual Admiration Society. Please know, especially, that our words of admiration and affirmation come to you because so many words of admiration and affirmation *came* from you. We salute you for the educational and social ideals you have dedicated your entire adult life to, but mostly we love you simply for who are you, our friend. As Karin Kirksey, who, as you know, was my college roommate, said to me the other night: “Bruce's door was always open to listen to you and to help you. I was so happy to have him there, with us at Page. He felt like a friend.”

So thank you, Mr. Stewart, or more recently, Bruce. You have been a teacher-friend to so many, certainly to me.