



**MARQUETTE**  
UNIVERSITY

**College of Education**  
**Office of the Dean**

Hi Again, Education Majors—

If you can, take a few moments to **think back on the school teachers in your life who have truly made a difference for you**. I'm not necessarily talking about your favorite teachers, although they might be one and the same. The educators you decide upon should have influenced you to become distinctly more or better—those who moved you to stretch, to flex, and most of all, to aspire.

I have two educators who made a significant difference in my life. One was my **high school basketball coach**. Back when I wrote to you about being on a mission, I mentioned my ability to reach down and summon an inner mental and emotional strength in times of adversity. "Coach" instilled that never-say-die attitude, and it has served me very well to this day. I am deeply in his debt for pushing me far beyond my limits -- teaching me not only that I'd survive hardship, but that I'd profit from it.

The second difference maker for me was an unlikely candidate, my **senior year English teacher**. A truly gentle and demure soul, **Mr. G.** found himself teaching in a tough, blue collar school district just on the outskirts of a major urban area. His students were a mix of unusual kids with college dreams, a popular clique of athletes, cheerleaders, and good-looking or edgy types, and a third group -- hoodlums, both male and female.

It wasn't a hostile or violent school by today's standards, but there were days when I was afraid to go there. Any fear I had escalated my junior year when three of the hoodlums knifed a senior to death over his new motor bike. The victim had been a very upstanding guy who hired me to help with his newspaper route in middle school.

His sister was in Mr. G.'s class with me. But so was, believe it or not, one of the three assailants. The charges against him were, rightly or wrongly, of less severity than the other two, who received life sentences, and he was released in a year. This same classmate had threatened to kill me in sixth grade when I beat him out for the eighth grade basketball team. I took the threat seriously. He had flunked two grades to end up with my class, and his superior size and strength made him a terrifying bully. Fortunately, the coach added him to the team when a player was injured a day later.

I share this background with you only to highlight the extraordinary challenge Mr. G. faced in teaching a diverse class that consisted simultaneously of nerds, in-crowders, and hoods who came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. With his timid and modest style, he somehow broke down social barriers, and captured the minds and hearts of all of us. We worked together in ways that now strike me as being unimaginable – even the sister of the murder victim and one of his attackers.

Mr. G. never had to raise his voice to keep our classroom orderly and productive, although our senior class had a reputation for rowdiness. We behaved because we loved and respected him. Why? Simple – he loved and respected us, and taught us how to love and respect one another. In his quiet and unassuming way, he convinced every single one of us that we had inherent value and the capacity to do great things. And many of the kids in that class have gone on to achievements that no one could have predicted. I had never been in a class more thoroughly satisfying before, nor did I experience another one even close to it ever again.

Mr. G. instilled a love of literature and the English language in me and countless others over a teaching career that spanned more than 40 years. Although I never set out to become a high school English teacher, a few years later that is exactly what I found myself studying to do, in part, so that I could also be a high school basketball coach!

Speaking of “Coach,” I reconnected briefly with him a few years ago, and then wrote him a letter saying what he had meant to me. He told my sister that he cried when he read it, which believe me, was astonishing for this man to admit. And a friend who saw him recently told me, “Coach loves the Marquette Basketball shirts you’ve sent him.”

Now, getting back to Mr. G., I had the chance to tell him how I felt in person during the last year he taught. I visited the school about 35 years after graduating, three inches taller, 50 pounds heavier, with radically different hair and clothes -- literally unrecognizable. As he emerged from his classroom door, my escort said to him, “Well, Mr. G., here’s someone you might remember.” He took one full-length look at me, smiled softly, and said “Billy Henk, class of 1970; second row, fifth seat; you were a fine student, a nice young man, and an exceptional basketball player.” He then proceeded to name every kid in my class (and where they sat, I might add), and he recounted the antics of that cast of characters with uncanny accuracy and completeness.

The encounter left me nearly speechless, but I managed to tell him about becoming an English teacher, then an elementary school reading specialist, and finally, a college professor who prepared teachers. He was gratified and even stirred by what he heard. He grudgingly accepted a tiny measure of the mountain of credit I tried to heap on him, and for one fleeting moment, his boundless humility gave way to a modicum of pride.

As I reflect back on Mr. G. now, I realize that he regarded teaching as much more than a job or a profession, but rather as a calling. **Teaching was his life, his identity, his purpose.** In the devoted way he tended to his calling, he didn’t just change MY world; he literally changed THE world. And you can, too. In the meantime, maybe you should let the special teachers in your life know that they have “Been THE Difference” for you.

Sincerely,



Dr. Bill Henk, Dean  
College of Education