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Evan Barrett

Montana Tech of the University of Montana

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Teachers – Shaping One Life at a Time

Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

June 15, 2015

Teachers. All teachers, but especially gifted teachers, shape lives on an individual basis, one student at a time ... one day at a time.

At the policy-making levels of government and the non-profit arena, where I have spent many years, the programs and policies that emerge impact lives at a macro level – 100 or a thousand, even a million students at a time. Programs like “common core” and “no child left behind” and policies like a “tuition freeze” apply to all students. Policy-makers then wait for years to hopefully see measurable results that might reflect the success level of the attempt at good educational policies and programs.

The teacher, on the other hand, must deliver every single day in the classroom to specific students. There is no waiting for a five-year study -- day after day the teacher must bring education to the students before him or her. Day after day the lives of those students are shaped by the teacher. No studies, just delivery. No waiting, just putting it all out there daily. Teaching, educating, inspiring their students.

I am thinking of this as I prepare to go to Missoula to attend the funeral of John Whalen. John Whalen, teacher, mentor, man, passed away on May 20th. His departure leaves a void in me now, just as over 50 years ago his appearance in my life filled the voids within me with knowledge, wisdom, judgement, and life values.

To John Whalen, teaching was an honorable, in fact noble, pursuit. He saw every single student in his classrooms for all those years as an individual opportunity and an individual challenge - one from which he did not shrink. He embraced the challenge because he saw in each young face the possibility of a better educated person, a more well-rounded human being and a good citizen. John Whalen made that happen to so many of the young lives he shaped.

He did with me. When this guy with a tough Chicago exterior, Jesuit educated intellect, set of values and commitment to intellectual rigor entered a classroom in Red Lodge High School, he entered my life with a bang, not a whimper. When he introduced me and my classmates to “The Great Books” he began to open my mind to inquisitiveness, intellectual rigor, respect for thought and ideas, and reverence for education. He also taught me that the real value in education and knowledge was not in inward self-absorption or self-satisfaction, but in outward action to positively affect the lives of others.

No, John Whalen did not try to shape lives by the millions from afar. But day after day he actually shaped lives, one at a time. Over time he shaped the lives of several thousand young impressionable human beings, eager to learn as they were inspired by him ... one life at a time, one day at a time. As teachers always do.

The passing of this great teacher, this great human being, was a reminder we should not allow teachers and the teaching profession to be the whipping boy of negatively ambitious politicians. Teachers should be held in the highest esteem -- placed on a pedestal to be honored and respected, not forced into a corner to be attacked and vilified.

Education is not easy. Teachers are not perfect. But it is they who most greatly shape the lives of our children and grandchildren. One student at a time, one day at a time. Without the best pay and without the best conditions. So next time you hear a politician berate teachers and education, think of the John Whalen in your life -- that teacher who shaped you and your life one day at a time.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, thinking about John Whalen and all teachers who inspire and shape us. And as you read this I hope you'll consider posting a comment about the teacher who most affected your life.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 46 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.