

Featured story:

MRS WARRINGTON

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Mrs Warrington was a person who was more than she appeared and taught more than just math. Her efforts and values were appreciated by many of her students and continued to influence them throughout their lives. This is an account describing her as a person and what she did in the class.

Mrs Warrington was a teacher I will always respect and admire. I know a lot of students don't like math and it's probably harder for the teacher to capture the interest of the student in math class than say, Fun New Technology or in university, Abnormal Psychology. Maybe it helped that I had a bit of a head for math and I found I actually liked discovering the abstract concepts. It's a really good feeling to encounter the realization of what something means or how to apply it. It's like unlocking a previously very stubborn door and some of the secrets released are very rewarding. My other high school math teachers were good, but Mrs Warrington was exceptional.

If she was walking down the street you probably wouldn't notice her unless you already knew her. Over the years I have gotten to know a number of 'spectacular' people in that way. I don't mean by passing them by in the street. I mean circumstances arising that give me the opportunity to interact with and know that person better than I might normally have chosen to do.

I remember one English teacher here in Barcelona proudly declaring in the teachers' room that she prefers to meet or spend her time with really interesting people. It made me wonder what would qualify one as interesting, at least by the standards that she would be currently setting. I also wondered at how well she would be able to meet those same standards herself.

Many of the people who have made a strong and positive impact on me are unassuming people, not seeking fame or particularly dedicated to cultivating a certain image. They have been people who have been perhaps enthusiastic about something or have had some good insights and have been willing to share them. They may have worked or even struggled hard over a long period of time to get to where they were, but it's not evident in the clothes they wear or in the image they're selling.

Mrs Warrington didn't have unusually fashionable clothes or stunningly styled hair to highlight her spectacular personality. It's not my intention to put down those who wish to make a statement through fashion or external appearances, or those who discover the courage to break through the self-conscious barriers they find placed on them. Merely that Mrs Warrington had other priorities and these are not easily appreciated by passing her by on the street or having a brief conversation with her.

She placed us grade niners around three big tables. One was for your typical students who encountered the normal successes and difficulties. Near them sat others who needed some more guidance and attention to sufficiently conquer the hurdles before passing on to the next year of studies. While everyone has their challenges, math did not occupy a high position in my particular set of burdens and that earned me a spot at the third table.

I don't know if it was from her own inspiration or if she decided to follow up on an idea she had heard somewhere, but she carried it out very well. She divided us up in that way but I never felt we were in a social class system, with one being superior or inferior to another. We simply had our own work and respective projects before us and we were encouraged by those accompanying us at the same table.

Every class she would speak to us as a whole then we'd enter the realm of our group tasks for the day. She was freed up to float between tables, monitoring each of them and give more directly beneficial guidance as needed.

At the third table we were given the book and told to work our way through it. We felt particularly proud to feel the trust she placed in us. There were plenty of examples and explanations, a glossary and answers at the back of the book. We had each other and what we couldn't work out collectively, she would help us with.

Perhaps she had different yet similar words for the other groups, encouraging them to rise to the challenge and feel good about it. The inevitable frustrations we encountered were softened by her support and we became proud of our achievements, as a group, as a class, and as individuals.

Occasionally people from one group would be joining another temporarily. He or she would be on loan, either seeking or giving help and we learned to incorporate patience, humility, mobility & problem-solving into our learning experience. It is one thing to enjoy the sudden revelation of understanding an evasive problem. It's another to have a firm enough grasp on its tail to explain it with humility to a peer that has yet to experience this revelation, whether this person is in your group or another.

As a teacher now, I still recall and draw on this experience, maybe adding a few modifications of my own. It was a good idea to have students teaching each other and I've incorporated this idea, especially in pair-work, frequently into my lesson plans. It's rare for me to separate students into stable groups according to their ability but on those few occasions I've played with it, I have given them each different tasks to conquer and every group has something to teach the others once their mastery has been achieved.

In my opinion Mrs Warrington was one of the most gifted teachers I have ever had and I feel most fortunate that I was a member of one of her classes.

Mrs Warrington has passed away and when I wrote this piece about her, it was after the fact. So I have made a promise to myself that if I encounter a person who I think is doing wonderful things, I try to find the courage to leave my frequent shyness or reservations to make a point of letting them know, while the experience is still fresh.

Her first name was Ann, by the way. Ann Warrington.