

JUST MY KIND OF TEACHER

by

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It's marvelous to reflect on my life and realize how many people have made a difference. Even if I narrow the list down to school employees, there are still many names that come to mind. I could mention Mrs. Smith, my first grade teacher as one of the candidates. She was my first teacher at my previous school, Glenn Marlow Elementary, in North Carolina. She was kind; she made me feel comfortable, and she was caring. I could even say that it was Mrs. McCutcheon, my fourth grade teacher, at the same school. She was incredibly pleasant and shared my sense of humor, which encouraged me to become more active in class through the sharing of jokes and other stimulating activities. Even though all these teachers have had an impact on me, the one who had the greatest influence on me would be Mr. Watkins, my fifth grade teacher at John Hay Elementary School in Morristown, Tennessee.



Joshua Mandzak

It all began when my family and I left North Carolina and moved to Tennessee. We arrived in the middle of Christmas break in December, so I didn't start school until January. Therefore, halfway through the year I got assigned to Mr. Watkins' classroom. I was very nervous and scared during the first day at my new school. Only God knows how many questions I asked that day. Mr. Watkins was very patient with me and somehow got them all answered. Day after day, I started to realize that I had been blessed because I had been placed in the care of the best teacher in all of John Hay Elementary School. He made me want to come to school every day. I considered that a great accomplishment for a teacher due to the fact that in the past I didn't want to come to school at all. I had always found school boring, dull, and never ever exciting. Thanks to him, all that changed.

Mr. Watkins was comical and always "laid-back." Most of the time the mood in his classroom was light-spirited. Mr. Watkins was quite a prankster who appreciated the value of a good joke—even when the joke was on him. The average teacher would have gotten upset and retaliated by imposing punishment if "bested" by a student. --not Mr. Watkins... He would just laugh and shake his head.

Because he was open to humor, Mr. Watkins was just my kind of teacher. He loved to have fun, just like I did. He was serious when he had to be, but more often than not, he made learning just about the most pleasurable thing in the world. I always knew he would have some kind of engaging activity planned for the day. His activities were usually paperless. It was surprising how he could turn a boring, worksheet-type lesson into an entertaining game or

activity. For example, one day we were learning whether to say lay or lie, sit or set, can or may, and many other combinations of words. In any other class we would probably have done a

worksheet. Instead, Mr. Watkins thought of an amusing "Simon Says" game using many sets of troublesome words. He had all the members of the class stand up. Next, he would say things like, set the book down, lay the book down, may I use the bathroom instead of can I use the bathroom, etc. His activities involved lots of movement. They were not only enjoyable, but were also educational. They allowed everyone to interact one with the other in the classroom. If he would have assigned a worksheet related to the topic, I would guess that only about half of the people would have actually done it. He also might have had about twenty-five people standing at his desk seeking help during the entire class period. I have to admit, I probably would have been one of those people. To think that we did something like that every day in his class is mind-boggling. Looking back, it appears even more joyful than it actually may have been. It is astonishing how he could design all those hands-on activities. He had to have spent many hours just imagining ways to make boring lessons turn into delightful activities. Most teachers would not have spent that much time preparing lessons for their students. Mr. Watkins was just not your average elementary school teacher. As the year went by, I realized even more that I had been assigned the best and most helpful teacher in all of John Hay Elementary School. He really helped me in a lot of different ways many times.

One of the times he helped me the most though was during Scholars Bowl. Scholars Bowl is a competition where all the different schools gather to compete against each other in five academic subjects. Those subjects are math, reading/language arts, science, social studies, and general knowledge. Each school chooses a team consisting of a specific number of students to intellectually clash against one another in a safe, comfortable, friendly, and rivalry-filled academic environment. Each student may participate on one or more teams. I really hoped that I would be selected for Scholars Bowl. I got my wish, for I was given the opportunity to be a part of this prestigious event. I was a member of the reading/language arts, the science, the general knowledge, and the math team. I was captain of the math team. The people selected for Scholars bowl, including me, put in many practice hours after school. One of the practice days was Wednesday from 3:15 P.M. to 4:30 P.M. I did not have a way home because of my Mom's work schedule. Mr. Watkins and Mrs. Henegar were kind enough to wait with me at school until my Mom could arrive, which usually was around 5:15 P.M. The same reason caused me not to be able to get a ride to the actual two-day competition. Mr. Watkins kindly agreed to take me there and bring me back to school in his own car. I could not thank him enough for providing the ride. Unfortunately, I became sick with a stomach virus after the first day and could not attend the second day. I was quite down-hearted because I knew I had missed the end to a very intense competition.

As should be obvious, when it came to mentoring and supporting students, Mr. Watkins frequently did more than was required. For this reason alone, he is my favorite teacher thus far. Without him, I don't know if I would have become male valedictorian of my class. He always pushed me to do my best and was very encouraging from start to finish. Having had Mr. Watkins



as a teacher, I honestly believe that I have more self-confidence and I am much more open to fresh experiences. As a result, I encourage other students to try new ventures and not be afraid or nervous at an unfamiliar school. I hope many students are fortunate enough to have him as their fifth grade teacher, for Mr. John Watkins really stands out on the list of people who changed my life.