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"THE FIGHT OF THEIR LIVES"
FROM OUR 09.15.2011 ISSUE



THE HEIGHT OF SMART GROWTH

ONE OF **CHICAGO'S** MOST STORIED NEIGHBORHOODS IS EXPANDING THE RIGHT WAY

• SEPTEMBER 01, 2012

AMERICAN WAY

AMERICAN AIRLINES • AMERICAN EAGLE

On the big screen
and in real life,
VIOLA DAVIS
is the consummate
educator

Helping the Helpers



As the NFL season kicks off, see who ESPN's
JON GRUDEN
predicts will soar above the competition

REGIONAL DIALECTS
From coast to coast,
we use different words to
say the same thing

SWEEPSTAKES
Win tickets to the 2013 DISCOVER
BCS NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP
GAME (Page 10)

TWICE MONTHLY

And Know They Love You

STILL IN SUMMER shock, my 6-year-old is having a hard time waking up, readying herself in great haste and trudging to the bus stop. And I know with absolute certainty that this scene is playing out across the country as the 2012-2013 academic year gears up and routines are once more implemented.

Over the summer, Maddy expressed — dramatically — how much she'd miss her kindergarten teacher, Ms. Hood. I thought it was cute that she connected so well with her first teacher, and I assured her that whoever her first-grade teacher is will be just as good as Ms. Hood. Then one day, while Maddy was at summer camp and I was in the office, I read a draft of our cover story on Viola Davis (page 46). Long a fan of her acting, I was looking forward to reading about her backstory, as I do with all of our celebrity covers. Davis has a fantastic tale to tell, but what struck me most was her family's unwavering commitment to education. She often returns to Central Falls, R.I., to speak with students at her alma mater. Her sister, Deloris Grant, still teaches there, and she is one of those teachers who routinely goes above and beyond her job description.

These two events — Maddy missing Ms. Hood and our fantastic cover story, as much a salute to educators as to Davis' career — made me stop to reflect on the memorable teachers I've had over the years. I'd remember a day from a long-ago school year, then I'd remember the teacher, and I'd nod my head and smile. After each passing memory, two teachers' images and lessons continued to cycle in my head. They were the first two teachers to not only recognize my learning disability but to actively help me overcome my dyslexia. Laurie Barron, my reading and English teacher, and Mary Ann Kocher, my homeroom, math and science teacher, didn't let me quit. When I was down and feeling sorry for myself as a student at Brady Middle School in Pepper Pike, Ohio, Mrs. Barron and Mrs. Kocher knew exactly what to do to inspire me — to make me as excited about learning as they were about teaching.

In fact, my desire to become a writer was shaped in the forge created by these teachers. My worst subject

was, back then, everything. When you have a learning hurdle, you become discouraged. You lack self-confidence. And you fail to consider that you might be talented at something. Anything. You don't feel special. Mrs. Kocher picked up on my hopelessness, and she worked with me after class and sometimes over recess to help me grasp concepts that the rest of the class was grasping.

In Mrs. Barron's reading and English classes, after she identified my trouble with reading comprehension but also my photographic memory (a trait exhibited by many dyslexics), she made the bold move of casting me as Romeo in the fifth-grade production of *Romeo and Juliet*. I earned a measure of respect from my classmates because of that play, and I gained confidence. I also found an appreciation for the written word. I'd wanted to be a writer since the fifth grade, all thanks to Mrs. Barron and Mrs. Kocher. And now I am.

I reached out to them 25 years after sitting in their classrooms to let them know I still think about them and their lessons all these years later. I wanted to thank them on behalf of the thousands of students they'd taught during their combined 66 years in education. Both have retired, yet their commitment to teaching continues. Mrs. Barron still tutors in the Orange school system, and Mrs. Kocher teaches math to learning-disabled students like me from an office on Chagrin Boulevard

in a Cleveland suburb. When I emailed and re-introduced myself as one of their students from 25 years ago, not only did they remember me, but they also remembered particular instances from my time in their classes. Folks, that's the mark of a dedicated teacher. But why do it?

"Loving the kids and wanting so strongly to find their individual talents along with making learning accessible and engaging were always at the top of my priority list," Mrs. Barron says. Mrs. Kocher shares her decades-long colleague's sentiment, and in that trademark devoted manner of hers, adds, "It does seem like yesterday that you were walking into my classroom!"

Our Viola Davis cover story genuinely inspired me, as did my Maddy's adoration of Ms. Hood. So much so that I'm going to stop writing now and fly to Cleveland, my former home that I've only visited four times in the last 17 years, to personally thank Mrs. Barron and Mrs. Kocher for instilling a desire to learn in me, and for making me realize that even though I wasn't gifted, I was still special. Folks, know this: Your former teachers unconditionally loved you.

So I'm going to stop now and fly to Cleveland. Mrs. Barron and Mrs. Kocher deserve a long-overdue thank-you from me, the self-appointed ambassador of their former students. I'm going to give them each a giant bear hug and tell them how much they've meant to me. And I want them to know I love them.



ADAM PITLUK
Editor



OLD FRIENDS:

Adam with Mrs. Kocher (left) and Mrs. Barron at Brady Middle School in Pepper Pike, Ohio

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