



Reflecting On My Educational History

from the portfolio of Wendy Stutzman Simmons

When I recall my intellectual "coming of age," I am pleased with the education that I received from the Somerset Area School District in Somerset, Pennsylvania. As my freshman year at Indiana University of Pennsylvania progressed, I realized I was well prepared for college. In many cases, I was far ahead of my fellow freshman in core subject knowledge. I believe this preparedness was due primarily to a varied and challenging curriculum, collegial principals, involved guidance counselors, and caring and knowledgeable teachers.

Throughout my education, I was considered an exceptional child. Due to a high scoring I.Q. test administered in the second grade, I was placed in what was known as the Somerset Area Gifted Education program. As a member of this group, I was required to attend a special class once a week in a classroom that was specially designed for the students of this program. Each student was required to follow a curriculum that was self-determined at the beginning of the year with the guidance of our mentor-teacher. Some of my projects included learning to type, learning Spanish, reading classic books, and creating a film strip version of the 1972 Newbery Award winning book, *A Shadow of a Bull* by Maya Wojciechowska, in which I illustrated and recorded myself reading the book along with a self-composed soundtrack of flute music. Perhaps the most memorable project was a fifth grade production of *Macbeth*. This was a class project; we made the scenery, memorized our lines, and designed our costumes. This was an important experience for me because it was my first encounter with Shakespeare, in both reading and performing. I was amazed to realize that I possessed an intuitive ability to understand Shakespeare's language. When my peers recognized this ability, I became an interpreter to my oft-baffled fellows. I loved to help people understand the play: the guilt, the ambition, and the

murders. It was in this context that a friend suggested that I become an English teacher. The seed was planted.

My Junior and Senior High school years were often challenging, but also a lot of fun. As a student in the college prep track, I was required to have a very diverse curriculum. I excelled in my language arts and music classes, but struggled with math. Although the core subjects were numerous, I still had some options. I chose as many English seminars as I could. Due to this, I had one study hall period for only one quarter during my whole Junior High and Senior High careers.

Our guidance counselors and principals assisted me in many ways. They were always ready to lend support and counseling to individuals as needed and to assist in many extra curricular service projects. These leaders were tough when they needed to be. They seemed to have a positive rapport with the teachers and staff as well as the student body. Perhaps their most impressive role was this; they always kept academics as a focus. In retrospect, this is an admirable feat considering the regional corporate worship of football.

I was privileged to have teachers that were well educated and truly cared about their profession. My classes were almost always interesting. I cannot recall an instance where I felt that the instructor wanted to be elsewhere. The teachers that made an impact on me were those who did not lecture during every class. I remember some bawdy small group discussions on Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and a Junior Achievement project that our Economics class participated in. The memorable lectures involved concrete examples. In American Literature, I clearly recall a discussion of metaphor and simile in which we discussed Robert Burns' "My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose" and Carl Sandburg's "Fog." As a whole, the faculty was very committed to seeing their students be successful. They were always willing to provide extra assistance if needed. Also, they were always excited to assist in our school activities such as the

prom, food and clothing drives, and yearbook projects. There was a great deal of school spirit in my high school. I believe that was mainly due to the attitude of the faculty and staff.

Perhaps an often-overlooked piece of a good education is the amount of community support for the school system. Generally speaking, my community believed that getting a good education was very important. The town council did not balk at a tax increase that would benefit the schools. There were programs in place that rewarded at risk students when they graduated through financial awards and job placement. New classroom technologies, like computers, were quickly purchased without much debate. In addition to a strong college preparatory track, the Vocational/Technical School was considered the best in the region. Teachers in my school district were (and still are) among the highest paid educators in the state of Pennsylvania. New facilities were built when it was necessary. It is important to mention that Somerset is not a particularly affluent town; simply stated, people held the next generation's education as a priority and spent their money accordingly.

As an apprentice teacher, it is refreshing to reminisce about my educational history. In a time when we hear so much of what is wrong with today's public school system, it is wonderful to have been a part of a school system where so much seems to have been done correctly. Without hesitation, I am proud to state that I am a graduate of Somerset Area High School.