



Student teaching in autumn 1999 at School 17.



Reflections of a River Rat:

From newsroom to classroom

By Jim Holleran

The biggest transition of my professional life occurred on Dec. 7, 1999. It was the 58th anniversary of Pearl Harbor Day; it was my personal day of infamy – the day I began warping young minds at School 42 in Rochester.

I had worked for newspapers since high school when I covered local basketball games. I had been editor of my college newspaper at Buffalo State, where in a pinch we would ride on the hood of my friend's sub-compact car and drop the papers at dorms, classroom buildings and the student union, then rush to the pub to settle all the issues of the day. I had worked at small dailies in Bellevue, Ohio, where we posted the soybean prices each day, and Lake County in suburban

Cleveland, where homeowners seemingly worried more about protecting real estate prices and property than the news of the day.

Now I was in Rochester, after 16 years at the Democrat and Chronicle, with a career going nowhere and with three children whom I saw for about 10 minutes a weekday. About the time they stepped off the school bus, I would rush downtown to put together the sports section until 1 a.m. By the time I rose the next morning, it was 10 a.m. The lines at the bank were short, but my parenting skill had reached Homer Simpson depths. So it was time for a change.

My father had been a phys ed teacher, my brother was a history teacher, my sister was an art teacher, and now I would become an elementary school teacher. No more nights and weekends and holidays.

This was going to be a renaissance. I thought I was going from storytelling to elementary education. I did teach well enough, not a superstar, but I unwittingly walked into the most fertile valley of storytelling you could imagine.

In my first day at 42, I walked into a sixth-grade room whose teacher had been reassigned for lack of classroom management skills. I stood before only 17 students because the principal had already farmed out a few troublemakers to more veteran teachers. I had one boy who did nothing because he was about to undergo back surgery and a 12-year-old girl who thumbed through magazines for expectant moms because she announced she “didn’t need education,” she just wanted to have a baby. The students had been running this asylum and it was my job to wrest control and restore learning. I did, but the challenges occurred daily through June.

You don’t remember too often about the great students like a Billy Jenny, who worked hard, treated his teachers and classmates with great respect and now teaches a bilingual class at School No. 9.

Nope, as an old storyteller, you remember the bizarre ones.

Dominic’s father had played freshman football at Tennessee. Dom brought this Southern twang to our school, and I laughed when my colleague would stir him up, asking him to rate Peyton Manning as a college quarterback. “He was terrible,” Dom blustered. “He couldn’t beat Florida. He couldn’t beat ‘Bama. He

couldn't beat ... " He was counting Manning's flops on his fingers. We had to stop him to end recess on time. I thought he was Irish – short story made long.

Gordon was bizarre too. As a fifth-grader, he was already obese, for two reasons – he abhorred exercise but mostly because of his diet. He would eat sugary, junk foods at breakfast, and couldn't control his bowels. Often, his classmates could smell him by midmorning. A couple of times, he committed the cardinal sin at his desk. The more his classmates complained, the more he denied it. I felt sorry for his teacher who had to deal with this crap (pun intended), but the students didn't miss a beat – they nicknamed him Captain Underpants.

The teaching staff was once described by a colleague as the "Peyton Place" of the Rochester City School District. We had a couple on the staff that taught together, then married, and bragged that they had baptized several of the rooms around the building. We had the special educator who slipped out to his car at least once a day for a few hits of odorless vodka. The music teacher kept her instruments under lock and key because she didn't want the students to inflict any wear and tear.

To borrow from the on-ice hockey announcer at the Montreal Forum, la premiere etoile was the teacher who outlined her grandiose yet unrealistic plans to become a principal. She had a tendency to exaggerate so much that she seemed a mild version of Jon Lovitz's pathological liar from Saturday Night Live.

My special educator, a lovely woman with an endearing Swiss accent, had warned me about the pathological liar during my first week. Her accent seemed to disappear when she cautioned: "Be careful of that one – she's a Maneater."

Translated, that meant she had an affair within the building, and she was as manipulative as the day was long.

One day, the interim music teacher was blasting a song in his classroom after school. The students had left and the building had relaxed. The Maneater strolled across the hall and asked how much he liked the song.

"I love this song," Tom said of "I Hope You Dance" by Lee Ann Womack.

The Maneater couldn't resist. "I'm glad you like it because I wrote that song."

Tom was incredulous. "Really? You wrote this?"

“Yeah,” said The Maneater. “I wrote that, but I needed the money to pay for a divorce so I sold it.”

Tom remained incredulous, but he moved to his desk and pulled out the sheet music.

“Would you autograph it for me?”

The Maneater couldn’t resist. She put pen to sheet music.

When we reached the local watering hole that day, my friend and I had barely settled onto our stools when the music teacher arrived and told of the exchange. We were staggered. We were falling down drunk, but without the effects of alcohol.

The next day, the teachers gathered in the library for a staff meeting. Before we got into serious matters, it was announced that so-and-so had a birthday coming up, and the staff began to sing Happy Birthday.

About halfway through, I elbowed my friend and whispered, “I wrote that song.”

He laughed so hard he had to leave the meeting. It was The Maneater’s day of infamy.

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