

Teachers and their mentors: following the journey from students to colleagues

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Do you remember your favorite teacher?

Many of us can look back fondly on our school years and think of a teacher or two who stood out. Maybe they had a unique teaching style or took a special interest in us. Maybe they told us we could set goals we never thought possible. Or maybe they had us wanting to be just like them.

Whatever the case, men and women who were once students in Archdiocese of Baltimore schools have returned to educate the next generation – in part because of the influence of their former teachers.

The best part? In many instances, those mentors are still teaching, and most willing to offer advice and share ideas — many from just a classroom away.

The Catholic Review launches a new series on mentors with three such stories.

Mary Cutter and Sister of Mercy Jean Marie Hobbs St. Thomas Aquinas School and Holy Angels School

Mary Cutter (nee Burnham) was an eighth-grader at Shrine of the Sacred Heart School in Mount Washington when she first met Religious Sister of Mercy Jean Marie Hobbs. Sister Jean Marie had just started teaching second grade at the school, and Cutter's younger brother Jimmy was in her class.

"I remember washing her teacup one afternoon and she asked if I would like to help grade and stamp classwork papers," Cutter said. "Anything to get out of going outside for recess was considered when you were an eighth-grader."

After graduating, Cutter moved on to Mercy High School, but she would still visit Sister Jean Marie on her days off and at Christmas time.

"As I was nearing senior year at Mercy, Sister would often say, 'Mary Agnes, you would be a good teacher, especially with all your brothers,' " said Cutter, the oldest of four siblings but the only female.

She started out as a nursing major at Towson State, but after several "not so successful" science classes, switched to elementary education. Sister Jean Marie was thrilled.

"I always knew she would be a leader in elementary education. I do remember telling Mary Agnes, when she told me she wanted to be a teacher of little children, that she would love it," said Sister Jean Marie, who has been teaching for 44 years and taught both of Cutter's children at Shrine of the Sacred Heart, Mount Washington. "It is hard work, but it is also fun work making all kinds of teaching materials to make learning fun."

Cutter recalls that Sister Jean Marie used to make all of her classroom decorations by hand. "I always loved her

room – it was so cozy and full of colors,” she said.

Cutter is now assistant principal and first-grade teacher at St. Thomas Aquinas School in Hampden, where she has spent her entire 31-year career. She credits Sister Jean Marie, who now teaches kindergarten at Holy Angels School, with giving her the tools to do her best every day.

“Sister Jean Marie is a dedicated teacher and loves each of her students and sees the face of God in each one of them,” Cutter said. “She was so kind, patient and loving toward the children in her class. I know I am a better teacher because of her help, encouragement and example.”

She will never forget the time Sister Jean Marie visited her first-grade classroom.

“She told me that I had a wonderful learning environment and she knew that parents must love having their children in my class,” Cutter said. “I was so proud and touched that my mentor, the woman I admired for years and wanted to be like, gave me the highest compliment. That moment has stayed with me and keeps me humble.”

Jason Ader and Greg McDivitt Mount St. Joseph High School

When Jason Ader was a senior at Mount St. Joseph High School in 2003, it seemed like everyone in his class knew something he didn’t: He was voted “Most Likely to Return as a Teacher.”

Ader, who didn’t give much thought to teaching, headed to Dickinson College in Pennsylvania to major in biology, and after graduation took a biomedical research job at Johns Hopkins. He worked there for a year until a number of circumstances in his life changed, including being offered a teaching position in the science department at Mount St. Joseph. He calls it “divine providence.”

Ader had enjoyed his job in research, and spent a week struggling with what to do. He reached out to his former biology teacher and fellow Mount St. Joseph graduate, Greg McDivitt, ‘86, who has been teaching at the school for more than two decades, for some guidance.

“I gave him advice about teaching that I think he already knew intuitively, even back then,” said McDivitt, who taught Ader in ninth and 12th grades. “To be a good teacher, you need to have an infectious zeal for your subject matter. But in equal measure, you need to have a love for your students.

“At its heart, teaching is about making connections, person to person, mind to mind. Jason understands this, and I am so proud to witness that teaching has become his vocation, as it is mine.”

Ader, 26, is in his fourth year teaching chemistry, honors chemistry and honors biology at Mount St. Joseph.

“It’s awesome to be able to teach with my mentor,” he said. “The faculty doesn’t turn over very often, so many of the teachers I had while at school here are still teaching.”

What he remembers most about his time in McDivitt’s classroom is that “he always made the lessons tangible to students.” For example, in order to teach the complex concepts of DNA, McDivitt made a movie of himself as a clone, and Ader still remembers that.

"It's the kind of lesson that everyone remembers," he said. "Greg has a lot of those. ... Teaching is a lot about delivery, and not just about what you know."

Ader takes a cue from McDivitt by weaving modern music and references into his lessons to make them more relatable.

"I have taught long enough to understand that I can never fully know what kind of influence I am having on my students," McDivitt said. "I have to leave a lot up to trust. Jason - my student, my colleague, my friend - is the exception to this rule."

Jessica Vitrano Randisi and Nancy Burkhart Maryvale Preparatory School

When Jessica Vitrano Randisi graduated from Maryvale Preparatory School in 2001, she never envisioned that she would return as an English teacher and assistant theatre director.

As a senior nursing major at Salisbury University, however, she decided that nursing was not what she wanted to do.

"Yes, probably a bad time to make that decision," she reflects, "but better late than never. My mother and father gave me good advice and said to do what I love. So, I thought about one of my favorite pastimes and immediately thought of my high school, Maryvale."

"I loved playing sports, participating in the plays and student council. So, I realized I could do this for a living. At the time, I decided I wanted to be Mrs. Burkhart."

That would be Nancy Burkhart, her former teacher and the school's director of music and drama.

"She taught all day and then directed the school shows after school," Randisi said. "That was going to be my dream job."

After Salisbury, Randisi went on to the College of Notre Dame of Maryland and got her master's in teaching English and theatre. She spent her first three years teaching at Seton Keough, as well as coaching lacrosse and acting as theatre director - just like Burkhart.

"She talked me through my first year of directing and I loved it. After three years at Seton Keough, a spot opened at Maryvale, and now I get to teach at my high school while helping out Nancy - I can call her that now - with the plays and coaching lacrosse," said Randisi, 28, now in her third year at Maryvale.

"I was not surprised that Jessica wanted to teach and direct, even though she started out to be a nurse," said Burkhart, who has been teaching since 1978 and at Maryvale since 1993. "The theatre bug had bitten her badly. It's wonderful yet somewhat surreal to work alongside Jessica. Sometimes I forget she's my assistant and not the student stage manager, because she was so reliable as a student."

Randisi's career choice reinforced what Burkhart already knew.

"As to being Jessica's 'major influence,' that's a bit overwhelming," Burkhart said. "You always hope that what you do, what you love doing makes some difference in your students' lives, but when that is so tangible, it makes you really stop and think 'Wow, I made a difference!' It has caused me to be even more aware of the role that I play in my current students' lives and to try to always be kind and to try to live up to their expectations."