

The Butterfly Effect: Remembering Mrs. Pesa

It's a tradition at St. Joan of Arc School in Aberdeen for the faculty to attend liturgy together on our first day back from summer vacation. It's a way for us to unite spiritually and celebrate the beginning of each new year. (After all, very few professions offer their constituents the chance to hit a reset button after a long and restful break.)

Every year, during our back-to-school liturgies, I scan the pews and say a prayer of gratitude and a petition for a successful school year for each of my colleagues. This year my task was more difficult because as I scanned the congregation, I was forced to recognize that one of us wasn't there and never would be again.

This time last year, middle school science teacher and STEM coordinator Tracey Tokarski, was looking for the same person; Heidi Donnelly-Pesa, our beloved kindergarten teacher. She and Tracey had collaborated on a buzz-worthy bee-themed STEM project and other cross-curricular activities in the past. Tracey had a new idea for a Monarch butterfly garden and wanted kindergarten to be a part of it. Unfortunately, Heidi had been in poor health after complications from surgery, and we knew that she wasn't healthy enough to come back. We had a new kindergarten teacher, who seemed very sweet, but would she be willing to participate in the Monarch butterfly garden?

Heidi was in favor of anything she thought would enrich her students' and colleagues' lives and would go out of her way to make it happen. She wrote thank you notes for every gift anyone gave her and any favor anyone did for her. She was my first friend at St. Joan of Arc and I was blessed enough to be her "prayer partner" during my first year. I found a large unsweetened iced tea waiting for me on my desk on many dreary Monday mornings. There were always little gifts for holidays or no reason at all. For St. Patrick's Day (my favorite holiday), she gave me a beautiful Irish angel. It still sits on my desk. And on my kitchen wall hangs a spoon doll Collin made for me in her class. She went out of her way to buy curly auburn yarn to match my hair.

Heidi gave and gave. It would be impossible to trace how many positive things must have happened in the world all because someone got a little trinket or Hallmark card from Heidi. But when I stop to think about that “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” poster and consider how many students she taught in her career – my head spins!

The greatest gift she gave me was in teaching me how to be a better early childhood educator. I had never taught children so young before, despite my own five-year-old, Collin, being in her class. She helped me turn my classroom into centers and was a one-stop-shop for classroom management techniques, like the “quiet sign” (2 fingers in the air) and “marshmallows”, in the mouth and on their feet while traveling down the hall. You would have to watch out for Heidi and her class – they snuck up on you pretty easily.

The most magical thing about Heidi was her voice, which was barely above a whisper. When she was talking, I had to put my own thoughts on pause so that I could focus entirely on what she was saying. And it was usually something meaningful. The students understood that, too. I have never seen a teacher quiet a roomful of excited children like Heidi could, and she wasn’t even five feet tall.

Heidi also had a gift for working with students who struggled with learning and behavior. I wanted so badly for my Frank to have the chance to be her student. And she felt the same way about him. But when he started kindergarten in 2017, we had discovered that his autism diagnosis meant that he needed more help than our little school could provide. Heidi had been out for months and her prognosis was uncertain.

A new teacher, Melissa Siglar, stepped in and picked right up where Heidi left off. She has the same sunny spirit and saint-like patience. Just like Heidi, I have never seen Melissa flustered (if they have, it was well-hidden!). And like Heidi, Melissa is willing to try any projects that will benefit her students, no matter how overwhelming it may seem – like a Monarch butterfly garden.

Melissa’s kindergarten class, Tracey’s middle school students, and a majority of the school spent the time over the course of the year researching, designing, planting, and caring for our Monarch butterfly garden. They even painted signs to mark off

the Black-eyed Susans, lavender, milkweed, and other species of plants designed to draw the iconic gold and black beauties. It was the kind of multi-dimensional thinking and intricate planning that Heidi would have loved. Unfortunately, she would never get to see it in person.

On April 24, 2018, our beloved Heidi left this Earth. Anyone who knew her knows that she has earned herself a spot in heaven. I walked past her room on my way out last week and accepted the fact that I would never peek in and see her in her rocking chair, reading a book to an enthralled class of kindergarteners, but as I walked to my car, I saw a burst of color out of the corner of my eye. I put down my bags and followed the rainbow to our butterfly garden. I stood beside the sign which dedicates the garden to Heidi and drank in its perfume as I prayed, "Thank you God for giving us Heidi. Thank you for the short, but wonderful time we had together. And thank you for giving us this place to come to when we want to be near her." A butterfly grazed my hand as I turned to leave. It must have been her.

*Today would have been Heidi Pesa's 38th birthday. Her absence is felt by all who knew her, most of all her husband Mike. He is currently raising money for Chiari, the disorder that led to her complicated surgery. You may make a donation in her honor **here**.*