

## **I am an Armonk boomerang.**

My family moved to Armonk in the 1960s. Myself, my wife and our younger children moved back to Armonk in the 1990s. If one makes enough left hand turns, planned or otherwise, you end up in the same spot. I have ended up, once more, in the hamlet of Armonk.

Boomerang-like, I was a student at Byram Hills High School (BHHS) in the 1970s. After more decades than I readily admit to, I am parent of BHHS students for the past several years. I have that dual vantage, a historical and a contemporary vision.

Teachers are important; great instructors are life changing. Even as a pained taxpayer one can see that, and even as a youth that had thought they had seen it all, it is true. BHHS has long had a selection of certain teachers that rose above their peers and were superb. I tend to not compliment others too often as humans are easily spoiled I find.

It was a Czech author, I believe it was Kundera that had written a short story about a remarkable teacher and a student that realized too long afterwards just how wonderful. I read it in my college days in a city where the enemy baseball team played. The story spurred me to photocopy it and write an accompanying letter to three teachers that had a substantial impact on me even as a jaded, terribly old beyond his twenty years of youth Armonkonian (a species commonly found in a certain small town).

From my current, more suitably ancient perch, I'll tell you about those three superb BHHS teachers. Some of you may know one or more of them. Three towering teachers that insistently mentored, armed with vibrant personalities, which touched many of us with their passion for learning and wonder at newly found knowledge.

One passed away not that long ago. One is retired. One still teaches at BHHS.

I.] LITERATURE, HOME BAKING AND NON-STOP SMILES – ALL for \$1 a YEAR:

She was an odd sort, if you were a charitable kid. She smiled too much. She smiled more sweetly than Edith Bunker (“All in the Family”) and perkier than Mary Richards (“The Mary Tyler Moore Show”). An early morning class made it harder to believe she was sincere. The smiles, we loudly argued, had to be fake. We were being set up for the kill. This English teacher was new to the school, but she somehow had found out about our scurrilous reputations of smart but sassy kids. She was quirky, if you used the PG-13 term. She mixed Shakespeare and Harper Lee with her home baked brownies, which she frequently brought to class. Assuredly, she was different, even if the brownies smacked of blatant chocolate bribery. Good brownies. That lowered many students’ ingrained built-in shields, such as eye rolling and snickering were big back then, against the well-intended adult trying too hard. She smiled and chatted about the well-thumbed books we were studying as though she personally knew the author. Her style was well-to-do bohemian with a frizzy, rampant hairdo like Harpo Marx or the early Michael Jackson ‘fro. Her smile regularly beamed to one and all. It made some of us quite nervous. How could anyone be so cheery and joyful non-stop barely after breakfast for crying out loud, we whispered to each other that she had

something bad planned for us. It wasn't fair. Even while discussing tragic novels and sad dramas, she never could thoroughly tamp down her life spark. Maybe it was her brownies, maybe some magical or pharmaceutical ingredient.

But then I accidentally discovered an item that finally, fully explained why she taught and smiled. It was for love and \$1 a year.

Another teacher, a few years later on a ski trip to Switzerland (and post multiple hot-toddies or tequila shots) mentioned three teachers at BHHS that were wealthy and had volunteered to take only \$1 annual salary. She was one of those rare creatures. If one factored in the cost and time involved to produce her frequent brownies for her classes, she actually taught at a financial loss. But, we now knew her secret. She taught for the love of literature and her love for her students, her veritable children exploring novels and plays that brought alive the delightful aspects of life beyond the four walls of our classroom, far outside of the Armonk village.

Ethel Levy passed away recently. Yet that was only her physical life up on her beloved Cape Cod a couple of years back. Mrs. Levy still resides, beaming her smile, cherished in our memories and revered by the voracious readers she made of many of us. Really good brownies, too, don't forget her brownies.

II.] H el ene's HEAVING BOSOM vs. DULL NAPOLEON as EXPLAINED BY PETER O'TOOLE:

He spoke of what we all knew was a viciously long, boring Russian novel, which would begin our year of torture. We were doomed. Most of us measured the distance to the room's two doors and mentally calculated our potential sprinting speed when he might look through the pages of Tolstoy's masterpiece. A masterpiece that was also notoriously and unfortunately a good substitute for a heavy doorstop. But then he spoke of Princess Helene's heaving bosom. One quickly suspected that "War and Peace", being simultaneously shown on PBS that season, was not likely to be as dry and dreadfully long as we feared. This was AP English for seniors in a small seminar room off of the library. Smirks and quasi-intelligent wisecracks were normally done by us, and behind the back of the teacher, not by the teacher. Instead, here was this elfin, bespectacled teacher breaking off his lecture and seemingly making Tolstoy into Leo the engaging storyteller. He was of somewhat normal height, if one was slightly taller than a hobbit. He had a habit of bow ties. His invigorating philosophy was that we might be young adults, trapped students, but our minds were full-grown, or should be.

His faithful vision was that the giants of literature from the 1600s and 1900s told the most magnificent stories, tall tales awash with heroic humans and villainous vermin. Tales that might spring from the annals of grand history or materialize from everyday life, that was what this teacher made sure we would find greatly expansive, not merely the let's expose the kids to "great literature" and hope it was contagious. He challenged our comfortable beliefs. He prodded our suburban misconceptions. He laughed with us when we stumbled across the humorous situations even in bulky Russian novels.

Eventually, one realized that Dickens and Tolstoy were the forerunners of contemporary storytellers more familiar to us like Coppola, Lucas, and Spielberg. English, History and Science had entertaining stories and illuminating lessons, if the teacher knew how to weave words and cast emotions craftily into the classroom. Textbooks were not just grist to be recycled on tests on mimeographed quizzes, if one had the right teacher. When I look back, it was no surprise that he was likely asked and wrote more college recommendation letters than anyone else. That was back in the prehistoric days before the quick and dirty “copy and paste”. Thus, he never shirked what for him was gladly but still a laborious task. Yet, it came freely from his fondness for most of us and the lessons well learned by us from his lively classroom of imagination and characters galore.

Mr. J. Alan Pryor lives in the same carriage house across the Armonk-CT border he lived in back then. The smirking eyes and bemused grin have not lost the elfin charm. He seems to have never forgotten a single former BHHS student of his and enjoys cavorting, albeit in a distinguished Chairman Emeritus of the English Department manner, at endless BHHS class reunions. Some of us declare with conviction he is BHHS’ Mr Chips (think the Peter O’Toole version) or its John Keating (recall Robin Williams in “Dead Poets Society”).

I think the best of both of those legendary teachers would be a most fitting combination to describe him. Princess Helene would probably agree with her coquettish glances and tightly cosseted bosom heaving with passion, as described by J. Alan, of her flirtatious dance across the 1880s ballroom and in our minds.

### III.] FOREVER YOUNG & DO WE GET FREQUENT-TEACHER MILES WITH THE 2<sup>nd</sup> GENERATION:

She looked awful young, but wielded an assertive voice. Which was useful back then in those portable classrooms that impersonated a meat locker in winter months and a sauna once summer descended. The subject was Social Studies. Which was that decade’s educational euphemism for History with a dash of this and a dose of that, I even seem to recall the Homeric saga tossed in for good measure. Once we students, garbed in multiple sweaters, had dashed from the back door of the main BHHS building to the middle portable classroom, we entered her kingdom. Like all new teachers, she was tested by some of the more boisterous pupils (OK, recently-released felons by Armonk’s lighter standards). I do recall she possessed one of the better “dead-eye” stare-downs long popularized in movies and TV shows by cowboy sheriffs and veteran cops that take no crap. However, unlike Det. Sipowitz in “NYPD Blue”, I don’t think she ever cracked me across the head with a thick phone book. No doubt she was sorely tempted. She looked capable of it despite her short stature. Mother Teresa with an attitude. The occasional machine-gun tapping of her shoes, while her patience was whittled down further by one’s temporary mischievousness, indicated the best course would be to cut it out. She was young, but she wasn’t to be fooled with we found out, when she was on her mission.

What separated her from the average skilled BHHS teacher was her vivacious spirit. She was a warrior for knowledge. Learning was crucial and it was fun. Her voice never shifted into that monotone gear that too many teachers fall prey to after too many years and too little energy. The past was alive to her. You just had to open your eyes and mind. This teacher

was among the first wave of the many young teachers that initially came to BHHS, just a few years into the very young high school's life, once IBM liberated our town's youth from having to go to Pleasantville High School. But even the young ones grow old. They grow tired of the daily educational wear-and-tear, most of them. Must be that 80,000 miles' warranty they award with a degree at teaching school that simply runs out. However, when I return to BHHS for my umpteenth consecutive Parents' Night, she is still teaching students in what looks like the very same desks we wriggled and slumped in back then. Sadly, she is the only one remaining from that first generation of early BHHS teachers. She taught so many of us so much back then, always with enthusiasm bursting out of her short frame invariably reaching for her lofty goal of awakening us.

So whenever I start down the back hallways, now as a veteran BHHS parent, towards her classroom it is as though I am 14 years all over again. She hasn't seemingly changed much, perhaps forever young like the Bob Dylan song, recharged by her next batch of students.

Sandra Abt, better known these days as Dr. Abt, can still stare me down into the desk seat with the best of them. Except now when I enter her classroom she knows she's already transformed this wayward, lazy student from decades past into a successful, educated gentleman she can talk about. Before switching to bragging about my more accomplished, smarter daughters she also has admirably instructed so they could be leading History students, or whatever the subject is called these days. Two of my children have been well taught by her, privileged like I to have her, but I assume they were better behaved, never having to withstand her stare-down. Thus, she moves forward onto new challenges, new generations to bring them insights of her vast store of historical and cultural knowledge.

Sometimes, one can be immensely lucky and get to sit in Dr. Abt's classroom. Or better yet, your children could be fortunate to sit and listen to her gift of the power of what newly gained learning can be like, when we were all young. Thankfully, your children would no longer have to wear two sweaters or a Michelin-man parka in those old portable classrooms out back. Thankfully though, they would have the similar and rare chance to experience that same young, fierce warrior of the classroom.

One great teacher gone, but Mrs. Levy is not forgotten. Another great teacher retired, yet Mr. Pryor still delights in letters and over repasts. The other great teacher instructs still, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation presented for inevitable success under her tutelage.

Yes, sometimes you get real lucky, as was I to meet them, know them, and be bettered by them.

P.S. – I imagine BHHS students and parents from different decades or a different set of BHHS teachers have their favourite teachers or stories. Why not send them in? I'd like to read of your Byram Hills' best teachers, whether from years gone by or from today's classrooms, labs, and athletic fields.