

# *Making a Difference*

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I just bought my *August to August* calendar. That means a new school year is about to begin. Yellow school buses will soon rumble down our country roads. There's something exciting about school starting, a new beginning. I call it hope. For students, maybe it's a chance to have a great teacher who will make each day fun and filled with learning. Or it might mean the opportunity to make a new friend. If nothing else, for most, the beginning of a new school year means new notebooks, pencils or new shoes.

As a teacher I remember vividly the hope I held forth at the beginning of each school year. Our principal always had a new plan or procedure for us to work with, and we teachers grabbed onto it with vigor hoping this year, maybe we could break through to our middle-school students and make a difference.

Making a difference takes me back to my own school-age years. In reading over my first grade report card, (which miraculously my mother kept) I notice I was almost never absent and ranked satisfactory in arithmetic, reading, music, art, penmanship and citizenship which tells me I loved school from the start. My only negative comment was when Mrs. Ames checked, "whispers too much." Thank you Mrs. Ames, for making a difference in my life and for starting me on my path of writing to be heard.

Other teachers at the top of my list for making a difference include Mrs. Zemke, my seventh grade teacher who got me excited about reading great literature and encouraged me to enter a Southeastern Michigan Scholastic writing contest sponsored by the *The Detroit News*. I won a writing award, and a copy of Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. My poem was sent on to New York for national judging. Mrs. Christian, my choral teacher, instilled in me a love of singing which holds for me to this day.

Recently I asked one of my five grandsons, a bright eight-year old who is the best reader of the bunch, if he was reading chapter books yet. He looked at me like I was crazy. "No," he said, "I'm not reading, it's summer!" Though I'm all for kids taking a break over the summer, my hope is that something exciting they've learned (like reading) will carry over into a lifetime habit. I still have a booklet entitled "Books I Have Read" from the summer of 1952 listing over 15 books I read that summer.

I'm still reading, summers included, and still teaching. When it comes to teaching creative writing and memoir, what resonates with me is Beth Kephart's comment in her book, *Handling the Truth, On the Writing of Memoir*. She says teaching memoir is all about teaching questions: *Who are you? Where have you been? Where are you going? What do you believe in? What will you fight for? What is the sound of your voice?*

I invite all of us at this time of new beginnings to ask ourselves those questions and to consider which of our teachers made a difference. Maybe, it's not too late to let them know. One year, long after I'd moved on from a high school position in Michigan, I received a letter from a former student thanking me for helping him in my class. Notes like that are few and far between. But what a difference a simple thank-you note made in my life.

In today's chaotic world, school may be the only place left for kids to sink into, a place of rest or sanity, a place to grow and learn, make friends and have fun. Teachers hold the key, the future of our generations in their hands. As a teacher, parent and grandparent, I hold teachers in my heart to see to the safe passage of our children. It's a monumental task. In her book, Kephart refers to teaching as a privilege. I agree. It is a privilege. As a teacher, I honor that privilege and do my very best to bring about positive change in the classroom. I also agree with her final analysis: "Teaching, after all these years, is the marrow in your bones."