

The American Moms: The teacher I never got to thank

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Can I tell you something? I *hated* high school. Like really, really hated it.

Some people thrive and blossom in high school and remember it as the best years of their life. But it was not that time or place for me.

Let's just say I was a work in progress. I was shy and self-conscious with a lot of learning about myself to do, and high school isn't exactly a time of life I look back on fondly.

So when a brief thought popped into my head recently that I should reach out to my former high school yearbook teacher, I kinda didn't pay it much attention.

It would have been so easy.

"Look her up. Send a note," the thought persisted.

As with most things related to high school, I pushed the thought aside, despite the fact that my yearbook teacher had been a bright spot in my high school career.

"Look her up. Send a note." *So easy. I'll get it to it, I promised myself. Later.*

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But later never came.

Can you guess where this is going?

I found out shortly afterward that my dear, sweet yearbook teacher from Hillcrest High School, Marie Halpin, had just passed away from brain cancer.

Do I need to hash out all the feelings of regret that coursed through me? I thought of nothing else except that in her last few weeks filled with pain, maybe she had needed to hear some words of encouragement from a former student. Perhaps she had needed a bright thought in a time of unbearable pain.

I had failed her.

My husband came home from work for lunch the day I found out she had passed away and the second I saw him I burst into tears.

"I hated high school. But I loved my teacher. She's the one that planted the seed in me that got me thinking about journalism," I explained to him. "She was the one who got me down that path. Who made me believe I could do it. And now she'll never know," I choked out in between sobs.

"She knows. Trust me. She knows," were his consoling words to his blubbering wife.

And maybe she *does* know. Maybe upon arriving in heaven, you are treated to an angelic montage of all the ways you lived a good life and helped other people — the behind-the-scenes you never get to see on Earth. But the fact is, I should have thanked her myself while she was still here.

Most of us have at least one special teacher who believed in us, who inspired us, who pushed us to be something more. We should all reach out to that person who made a difference in our lives and say thank you.

There's no question that teachers have a hard, underappreciated role in our society. As children, it seemed we often took them for granted. They're there for us every day but we generally think nothing of it. We expect it. As adults, we expect them to be there for our kids and we get upset when we think they're slacking their responsibilities.

We hold them to such a high standard.

The truth is, some teachers are better than others. Some see it as a life calling and a privilege and some see it as a job, a way to make a paycheck. The ones who see it as the privilege are usually the ones who make the difference.

Teachers have the power to change our world. Let's not leave them hanging when it comes to showing our appreciation.

For me, high school was a place of dread. Most days I just wanted to get through the day so I could get home where I felt like myself. Kids like that need the perfect environment where they can feel comfortable enough to be themselves, to shine. They need a teacher who pushes them and encourages them to be their best and to even know what that best is.

My yearbook teacher, Ms. Halpin, was that teacher for me. She created an environment I could thrive in and look forward to each day.

It was the bright spot of each day, of my whole high school experience, in fact.

She believed in me. Taught me the basics of journalism, and gave an extremely introverted girl the confidence to believe I could do anything. She was a light, always had a smile on her face, knew how to effectively discipline, motivated us to work harder and better and knew how to make us all laugh.

That teacher believed in me during a time I really needed a confidence boost. Despite only knowing me a few days, she made me one of the yearbook editors my senior year.

I was a bookworm. *Majorly*. Most bookworms can write well solely because they read so much that they learn to recognize what good writing looks like. So, I knew I had a knack for it but never thought to transfer it into a career.

She planted that seed in me. I think of all that would have been lost in my life had she not. It changed my world. *She* changed my world.

"Avoid cliches!" She used to drill into us. "Avoid those overused phrases! If you're interviewing someone and they use the phrase 'hard work and dedication' change it to something better," she'd tell us. My ears still cringe when I hear that phrase, "hard work and dedication."

Have you ever stopped to think about the various people who had a hand in getting you to where you are now? Most of us didn't become who we are purely by chance. I strongly believe that God places people in our paths for a reason.

My point is, don't wait to thank whoever that someone is. Do it today. Right now. Whether it was a teacher, a friend, a neighbor, a relative, who made that difference in your life, don't wait.

There is always later. But we don't always know what "later" holds. Pick up the phone, send an email, send a real letter, send a message on social media. Just do something to show your appreciation. But don't wait.

Teach your children to do the same. Teach them to not overlook the small things. Teach them to appreciate those people who are trying to make a difference in their lives. One teacher might change their whole world for the better.

Just like mine did.

Brittany Candrian Richman served President George W. Bush in the Office of Presidential Speechwriting at the White House. She was also a Congressional liaison for former House Majority Leader Eric Cantor.
