

The Heart of an Adventist Teacher

Her voice was soft, but firm. Her straight skirts and crisp blouses were always neat and perfectly draped over her petite frame. Her hair, always combed in the same style, never had a strand out of place.

When I walked into her classroom, I thought I was entering a beautiful garden. Mrs. Cantrell¹ taught grades 1 through 4 at the Sharon Seventh-day Adventist School in Inkster, Michigan.² Other teachers included Mrs. Shelton, who taught grades 5 through 8; and Mr. Striker, who taught grades 9 and 10. This was my first year in church school, and all my fears about being in school all day vanished when I walked into Mrs. Cantrell's classroom. At that time in Inkster, multigrade classrooms were limited to private schools. The public schools had single-grade classrooms with 25 to 30 students. Many believed that studying in multigrade classrooms would negatively affect student achievement. As I reflect on my first school year, I realize that time has proved this myth untrue.

Our day started with worship and a Bible story that corresponded to our workbooks. Although Mrs. Cantrell taught all four grades, each grade had its special time with her. Everyone was taught phonics, reading, science, English, math, spelling, and geography. Grades 1 through 4 students often picked up other skills from the older children as they studied their lessons. For example, 1st-grade students didn't have spelling words, but when the words were provided for grades 2 through 4, the 1st graders would often write them down and learn to spell them.

Mrs. Cantrell was a role model for me during the years I attended Sharon Adventist School. And, although I later attended public school, I never forgot the lessons of kindness and respect Mrs.

Cantrell taught us as young children. Even though my public school years were the most challenging years of my life, I treated my teachers there with the respect for those in authority instilled in me from grades 1 through 10.

I determined in 1st grade that I wanted to be a teacher—an Adventist teacher.

"Why would you want to teach in church school?" asked a concerned friend. "Do you want to be poor all your life?" I smiled at the response. Graduating from Wayne State University in 1982 with a B.A. in Education, I knew where my heart would take me.

Adventist schools with multigrade classrooms support children's academic growth. I realized this during my 11th-grade year when my public school teacher introduced the definition of nouns and verbs. Mrs. Cantrell and Mrs. Shelton had taught these concepts in grades 3 through 8. During my junior year, I won a medal from Inkster High School for earning the highest grade-point average in English.

Serving as an Adventist teacher for more than 30 years gave me the privilege of watching my students mature from 1st grade through 12th grade. My most rewarding honor was when my "old 1st graders," now grown-ups, brought their own children to 1st grade for me to educate. It reminded me of when I brought my son, Tyrone, to Peterson-Warren Academy for Mrs. Cantrell and Mrs. Shelton to educate. I

wanted my son to experience spiritual growth, character building, and academic achievement within a family atmosphere, along with learning leadership skills, just as I had experienced so many years before.

I have never regretted my choice to teach in Adventist schools. I was offered lucrative employment elsewhere, but I had made a covenant with God that I would work in His vineyard, and I was not going to go back on my word. Friends would ask me: "When are you retiring?" At the end of the school year, I would always say, "Just one more year." ✍



Shirley Fuquay retired in 2013 after 31 years of teaching. Twenty-four of those years were spent at Peterson-Warren Academy in Inkster, Michigan, where Mrs. Shelton hired her in 1982. Currently, Ms. Fuquay teaches part time at Wayne County Community College in Detroit, Michigan; and is pursuing a doctoral degree in teacher leadership online at Grand Canyon University, with an emphasis on technology for students with learning disabilities. She writes from Inkster, Michigan.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. These are their real names. Mrs. Cantrell and Mrs. Shelton are now deceased.

2. In 1964, the Sharon Seventh-day Adventist School in Inkster, Michigan, merged with the Berean School in Detroit, Michigan, to become Frank L. Peterson School. In 1978, the Frank L. Peterson School joined with the Clinton F. Warren Junior Academy in Detroit to become the Peterson-Warren Academy. For more information, read <http://www.lakeunionherald.org/101/10/39459.html>. Website accessed January 2015.

BY SHIRLEY FUQUAY