Naples, Florida, is known around the world for its warm, sunny beaches, high fashion, and yachts anchored in watery avenues behind spacious homes. But its greatest treasure is found not along the pristine shoreline or in the upscale shopping area, but on a quiet street on the west end of town: The Naples Adventist Christian School. In 2010, I spoke with Nancy Pinter, who was then the upper-grades teacher, who told me about the joys of teaching in a small school.

SD: Did you always want to become a teacher? Tell me a little bit about your background.

NP: I had a very troubled childhood. At the large public schools I attended, I felt invisible. I never thought the teachers cared or noticed the bad things happening in my life. Somehow, I found my way into Columbia Union College [now Washington Adventist University] and began studying to be a doctor. Through the love and support of some wonderful Christian people, God came to me in a very powerful way, and I began to wonder, “What do I do with all this? What do you want for my life, God?”

SD: Up to this point, you had never even thought about becoming a teacher?

NP: No. Never. But over spring break, I visited my sister, who was teaching school. Suddenly, I felt as if all of heaven was singing. It was almost like a giant light bulb was turned on above my head. I remember thinking, “So this is what it was all for.” I changed my major to education and have been teaching for many years. I can honestly say that I have never had a bad year of teaching. Even when I've been warned that I was going to have a bad class, it has never happened. I have loved every single teaching experience I have ever had. It’s just amazing. I still pinch myself and think, “I get paid for this? This is my job?”

SD: Wow! That’s incredible! You must truly love children.

NP: I thrive on the energy of kids. I have my best ideas when they are with me. I love to have kids after school with me. I can stay focused better with kids around. Their very presence stimulates me.
SD: And you feel that energy and connectedness more keenly when you are teaching in a small school?
NP: Most definitely. When I began teaching in Pennsylvania, I was offered a position at the local Adventist school teaching two grades. Instead, I chose to commute 60 miles each way with a 4-year-old and 7-year-old so my children could have a one-room school experience. My own kids are non-traditional, and I didn’t want them in a traditional environment. I’ve never regretted that decision. This was the absolute best thing I could have done for them. And in terms of my own career, I learned to love everything that a small school has to offer.

SD: Have you ever taught in a large school?
NP: Yes, and I quickly discovered it wasn’t for me. There’s this glamour thing about wanting to be in a big school. I fell prey to that like anybody else. I ended up with 75 6th graders, and I was dying under the workload. I taught reading, but I never had the chance to figure out most of their reading levels. With the departmentalized model, I was just moving kids in and out of the room all day. The schedule drove everything. I would plan all these things I wanted to do. But I could never do them. There were so many things happening every day that were out of my control. In a one-room school, I always feel like I am the one who is accountable. I know I will have these kids again next year. There is no putting off what they need.

SD: So the small school setting offers you the chance to run your own show, plan a flexible schedule that meets the needs of the kids?
NP: Yes, definitely. Let me tell you about a boy in my room this year. Before joining my 8th-grade class in January, Steve* spent the first semester in reform school, having faced suspension after suspension, and finally, arrest. He was stuck in a cycle, unable to break the patterns of his life. When he was released from reform school, his family asked if I would accept him into my classroom. From the day he came here, I could never even imagine that this kid was in any trouble. The small school setting allowed me the luxury of getting to know him; I was able to treat him like a person worthy of respect, and he returned the favor. I’ve discovered something. The kids who have never had goodness shown to them are the ones who treat you the best. It’s like they are basking in something they’ve never known before.

SD: The old patterns are gone?
NP: Yes. He had a parole officer here once a month to check on him. The boy was in 8th grade, and he didn’t know how to subtract. Where else but a place like this is he going to be able to stay after school and get help? He didn’t have to deal with what he had to deal with before. There was nobody to

Nancy’s Top 10 Reasons to Love Small Schools

1. I can begin a school year and not take three weeks getting to know my students’ math, reading, and writing levels.

2. Students learn to take care of themselves. I make it a rule to never do for them what they can do for themselves—and with only 10 students, tasks can get done in an efficient and timely manner.

3. Children are like gas molecules: They fill the “container” they are in. I am fascinated how a classroom of 10 can feel like a classroom of 25. In a small school, children can express themselves more freely. Those who sat in a corner and never asked questions in a large classroom often will chatter away about themselves in a small one.

4. I get to teach many subjects. Some people love to just teach one subject. Not me. By teaching science, math, literacy, Bible, and social studies, I stay fresh and interested.

5. I know the names of every one of my students’ parents, their dogs, cats, birds, siblings, and what they got for Christmas.

6. Students learn more “real-life” people skills. Do you only socialize with people who are your own age? In a small school, students learn to live with people older and younger than themselves.

7. Students learn to work out their differences. In a larger classroom when my students had “fights,” they just moved on to another group. In a small school, you don’t have another group to go to, so you work it out.

8. Students feel less of a need to be “cool.” After all, when there are only three 7th and 8th graders, who are you trying to impress? Many young people turn their lives around in a small school. It is a wonderful place to grow up slowly.

9. I can grade every math problem and read every sentence that my students write. In everything students do, there is a message: This is who I am, this is what I care about—I don’t miss any of those revelations.

10. You are not a slave to someone else’s schedule. If you and your class think math is better in the afternoon for that day, you can do it!

11. OK, I couldn’t stop at 10. “One-on-one” time has to be the greatest reason. Most teachers don’t teach because of curriculum and methods; they teach because of children. A small school is the best place to get to know, teach, mold, mentor, and love children.

http://jae.adventist.org
impress. It was a small school, and we were there for one another.

SD: That’s another thing you like about small schools? The lack of pressure to conform?
NP: That’s one of the things on my list! [See sidebar: Nancy’s Top 10 Reasons to Love Small Schools.]

SD: Do you think you’ll spend the rest of your career in the classroom?
NP: I’ve been encouraged to go into administration. I’m not interested. All I want to do is hang out with kids. I want to hear what they think. . . . Kids are always going to be kids. . . . I’m not naïve enough to think I can change that. I’ve scaled down my expectations. I used to think I would go out and change the world. That’s God’s thing. But you know what? I can change a kid’s day. I can provide an emotionally safe place for students. As an adult, I can take the time to hear what young people have to say. That is good enough for me.

*Sandra Doran, Ed.D., is Associate Superintendent of Education for the Florida Conference in Altamonte Springs, Florida. She has taught on every level from preschool through graduate school and provides training and resources for teachers around the country. Check out her Website: www.TheTeacherTrack.com and blog: www.TheTeacherTrack.WordPress.com.

*Nancy Pinter, B.S., is in her 30th year of teaching, and has taught every grade from kindergarten through high school. Teaching math to struggling students is her passion, and she has completed Master’s level courses in teaching algebraic principles to elementary students. In June 2014, she relocated from Naples, Florida, to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where she now teaches at the Harrisburg Adventist School.*

Small school teachers can change a child’s day by providing an emotionally safe place, and can take the time to hear what young people have to say.