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Pay It Forward

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At our university about 40% of the full-time faculty members are 55 years of age or older, which led me to consider what a difference they could make in this world if, upon retirement, they used their knowledge, skills, and talents to benefit others. Four dimensions that can serve to differentiate effective from ineffective educators and people were used as the framework to profile three individuals and the work they are doing to benefit others. These dimensions include building community, opportunity, and relationships, and developing people as good citizens. For this discussion, I chose to profile individuals who are not being paid for the work they are doing to benefit others.

At our university about 40% of the full-time faculty members are 55 years of age or older, which led me to consider what a difference they could make in this world if, upon retirement, they used their knowledge, skills, and talents to benefit others. I have spent my professional life teaching educators and studying the impact of educators' beliefs, values, and attitudes on their effectiveness. Mark Wasicsko (2007), in his research on educator dispositions (i.e., beliefs, values, and attitudes), drew upon the work of Arthur W. Combs to define four dimensions that can serve to differentiate effective from ineffective educators and, I believe, people. Persons strong in the *perceptions of self* dimension are able to identify with and feel compassion for all persons, regardless of race, creed, or national origin. It's all about community. Persons strong in the *perceptions of others* dimension see others as able, which promotes positive growth and development. It's all about opportunity. Persons strong in the *frame of reference* dimension are concerned with the welfare of people in contrast to things. It's all about relationships. Persons strong in the *perceptions of purpose* dimension view their work in the larger context, concerned with the development of people as good citizens. I believe I have found three people who exemplify the dimensions and can provide us with some concrete ways to make the world a better place. For this discussion, I chose to profile people who are not being paid for the work they are doing to benefit others.

It's all about community. Mary Petersen is a former teacher with 17 years of experience at both public and private schools and a community college in the Omaha metropolitan area, where she taught English, Spanish, and American Government. Mary received her doctorate in education in 2005. Her dissertation study focused on culturally responsive teaching. With the knowledge and skills gained from teaching, travel to Mexico, and

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her dissertation work, Mary started the Language & Culture School of Omaha in May of 2006. Mary's work at the School began with culturally responsive teaching workshops for teachers and has grown to teaching English to adult native Spanish speakers and conducting workshops to help Latinas assimilate into the midlands. Mary leases office space in the community where her students live. Her students come from countries, such as Peru, Columbia, and Mexico. She donates her time and resources to teach English classes at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels. She works with her students in small groups of 5–7 students, helping them build their English vocabulary and teaching them about the structure of the English language along with American history lessons. Mary moves seamlessly from speaking English to Spanish and Spanish to English. Her school continues to grow by word of mouth because the need is great for her students to learn English so that they may be successful in the United States.

Mary credits a childhood experience with giving her the desire to help those from different cultures adjust to life in a new country. Mary was born with an eye deformity known as "lazy eye." As a young child she had to wear an eye patch to strengthen her eye muscle and later underwent surgery to bring partial function to her eye. Those years spent wearing the eye patch made Mary feel different and contributed to her compassion for persons who may feel different when they arrive in a new culture. She has deep admiration and respect for her students who study and try very hard to learn English. Mary believes in helping one person at a time adjust to a new culture.

It's all about opportunity. Mike Jackson is a 1994 graduate of Yale University and currently a portfolio manager in New York City. He grew up in the New York City area where he attended inner-city public elementary and middle schools. At the age of 14, Mike was selected to attend Williston Northampton School, a private college preparatory boarding school in Easthampton, MA. This opportunity changed his life. At Williston, Mike was introduced to the concept of academic excellence for the first time, which helped set the stage for his positive growth and development.

Mike views himself as one of an infinite number of students from his un-

derprivileged neighborhood who deserved the opportunity to attend Williston. As a result of his experiences at Williston, Mike became inspired to give back by ensuring that students like him would have the opportunity to attend a school where excellence abounds. He is one of the founders of the Bronx Academy of Letters, a small public high school in the South Bronx that opened in September of 2003. The focus of the Bronx Academy of Letters is the written word, which is enriched by the arts culture of New York City. At the school, students who typically enter at below grade level receive an outstanding college preparatory academic program with unique opportunities, including community partnerships, extracurricular arts and athletic programs, and travel around the world. Along with the other founders, teachers, and staff, Mike has helped create a school that students are eager to attend and where they want to learn. Last year 1,400 students applied for 75 openings at the school. Mike serves as the school's Advisory Board Chair, where he raises outside funds for the school and coordinates the work of several committees, such as the Development and Benefits committees. His work at the school is his passion. Mike does not view this work as a responsibility, but rather as his way of life. With the first class of seniors from the Bronx Academy of Letters having graduated in June of 2007, there is still much to do to ensure that the students have the opportunities to succeed in life.

It's all about relationships. Dave Schulte is a former business owner in the Omaha metropolitan area. In 1983 he founded a wholesale distributing company, which became very successful because of his focus on building a network of personal and professional relationships. Dave started the company with five employees. At the time of the company's sale in 2007, Dave employed 55 people, many of whom had worked at the company for more than 10 years. Dave's first and most loyal customers owned businesses in the poorest income area of Omaha. Upon his retirement, Dave decided to give back by tutoring elementary students at a school that is located in the area of his first customers.

In much the same way that Dave developed his business, he began his work at the school by forming a network of relationships with the students, teachers, and staff. On a typical tutor day, Dave arrives before school begins and works with several of the fifth grade students on their math skills after breakfast is served. He creates math reviews by focusing on the skills the students need to master, such as math facts, fractions, percentages, and algebra. The students are eager to learn, and the number of students wanting to join the "Breakfast Bunch" continues to grow. During the school day, Dave tutors the third, fourth, and fifth grade students on reading, math, and life skills. He works with the students one-on-one or in small groups. To help the students with reading comprehension, he finds interesting informational stories about great inventors, amazing kids, and fascinating machines. Through the stories he tries to instill in the students a belief that they can reach their dreams. Most recently, he has begun to tutor the kindergartners. He created a T-ball game to work with them on the alphabet, letter

sounds, and word families. Dave has a passion for his work with the students. He plans to develop a network of tutors. Dave has great respect and admiration for the teachers, staff, and administrators at our schools who have devoted their lives to working with students in order to help them reach their potential.

The impact that these three individuals are having on people may not be seen immediately, but must be viewed in the larger context. The purpose they all are concerned with is the development of people as good citizens. They serve as great examples of what our world could be if more of us paid it forward by making it our purpose to build community, opportunity, and relationships one person at a time.

Reference

Wasicsko, M. (2007). *Defining, measuring and applying dispositions in teacher preparation programs*. Sixth Annual Symposium on Educator Dispositions, Cincinnati, OH.