

Mr. Toussaint: ALWAYS a class act

I don't remember the titles of all the books I read or how many essays I penned while I was in Steve Toussaint's English class at Ballston Spa High School 30 years ago.

What I do recollect was that Mr. Toussaint instilled in me a desire to devour classic and contemporary literary works and helped me sharpen my analytical skills through challenging assignments that often required putting in overtime in the homework department.

While other students may have breezed through his thought-provoking questions about why Thoreau went to the woods or what constituted a Catch 22, I frequently resembled Winnie-the-Pooh, tapping my forehead while muttering "Think, think, think!"

It wasn't that Mr. Toussaint would piously pounce on errors or otherwise embarrass a student who failed to make the grade on a given day. That wasn't his style.

Smiling broadly as he entered the classroom, Mr. Toussaint actually seemed eager not only to present the required lesson, but to *be* present. (You can pretend to be happy, but you can't fake a twinkle in your eye!) He deserved to be presented with our best efforts and, with rare exceptions, he got them.

Worth noting here is that despite his remarkably relaxed demeanor ("cool" we called him in those days), Mr. Toussaint upheld high standards of learning — and conduct.

In the process, he earned our respect as well as our admiration.

And so it was with some sadness that I read in the newspapers earlier this year of Mr. Toussaint's plans to take an early retirement.



Stephen Toussaint has spent the better part of a lifetime planting seeds of one kind or another. Seen here working the flower beds outside his home, Mr. Toussaint recalls that his first job (at age 11) was working as a gardener for his neighbors. "It was there," he says, "that I learned to love manicured and weedless lawns, gardens and flowerbeds." He later spent three school vacations in the 1950s as a bellhop and groundskeeper at the Grand Union Hotel on South Broadway. Picture at right was taken for yearbook in 1970. PHOTOS BY ANTONIO BUCCA



He was, by all accounts, scoring straight "A's" as principal of the Ballston Spa Middle School as well as enjoying excellent health. Why, I wondered, would such a class act in education want to (pardon the pun) change courses?

Since Mr. Toussaint's English classes had helped influence my decision to pursue a career in journalism, I thought it appropriate to call my former instructor for a special interview. As a full three decades had passed since our last face-to-face encounter, I was both excited and apprehensive. There was, after all, the very real danger that a dangling participle might slip out in between sips of coffee at JeRon's Restaurant in Ballston Spa.

No, I decided. That wasn't it. The reunion scenario I feared most was, well . . . it was that the twinkle in Mr. Toussaint's eye would be gone. Its absence would signify that

this extraordinary educator had "burned out" prematurely.

And so it was my heart did a hip-hop when I discovered that even 30 years of giving his all to students, parents, teachers, support staff, school boards and administrators had failed to dim, much less extinguish, the light that so brilliantly reflected the mirror of his soul. What a relief to discover that like Henry David Thoreau, Stephen Robert Toussaint had merely reached a point in his life when he felt a need to "go to the woods."

Instead of Walden's Pond near Concord, Mr. Toussaint wanted to "go trolling" in Upstate New York -- not necessarily reeling anything in on his line, but reflecting upon his life and pondering the possibilities that await him in the new millennium.

"I guess you could say I've done some fishing in my life, but I've never really trolled," says Mr. Toussaint, who learned his earliest socialization and survival skills in a Saratoga household of seven children back in the late 1940s and early '50s. "I always had very clear goals and was fortunate that some excellent opportunities came my way at a relatively early age so that I didn't really have to do much soul-searching in terms of my career."

Indeed, his years at St. Clement's Regional Catholic School and St. Peter's Academy (now Saratoga Central Catholic) laid a solid foundation for his later learning and leadership experiences at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Within months of earning his degree in

RICHARD J. RYAN

Funeral Home, Inc.

Traditional • Cremation • Prearrangements



Richard J. Ryan, FUNERAL DIRECTOR

Sacandaga Road,
Galway, New York 12074

Tel: 518-882-1271

1966, Mr. Toussaint (then just 22 years old!) found himself teaching English for Grade 11 and 12 students in Uxbridge, MA, where he served as Senior Class Advisor. He also founded and worked as adviser of a weekly school newspaper.

By 1968, Mr. Toussaint had returned to his Saratoga County roots, teaching Grade 10, 11 and 12 English classes at Ballston Spa High School. He also served as Junior Class Advisor and directed the annual school musical "The Sound of Music."

Shortly after celebrating his 26th birthday in 1970, Mr. Toussaint was named the high school's assistant principal, a role he capably filled until 1975 when, at age 31, he was promoted to principal of Malta Avenue Elementary School.

"It was there that I learned *how* children learn as opposed to *what* they learn. I discovered there were a million different avenues to get into their heads . . . that good teachers reach young minds in multiple ways. I also learned that kids don't care what you know unless they know that you care."

Calling the Malta Avenue years "a turning point" in his career, Mr. Toussaint tackled his assignment as principal of the Ballston Spa Middle School with a passion in 1977. For the next 22 years, he thrived on "planting seeds" in the minds of students, parents, faculty and staff — then watching people and things blossom around him.

"I can honestly say I never regretted a day of it," he says, adding: "The real reward in education is not in the money, although the pay is decent, but in seeing people flower — or bloom. The vast majority of young students literally grow before your eyes into productive citizens who end up heading in positive directions."

It is noteworthy that throughout most of his 30-plus years as a role model for youngsters in the community, Mr. Toussaint and his wife, Suzanne (nee Bolster) were also busy raising 10 children of their own. The result, says the

newly retired educator, was that his 55th birthday earlier this year became a time of serious self-evaluation.

"It was a milestone and it got me to thinking about things I still wanted to do that I hadn't done — or wished I had time to do while I'm still able — like gardening, traveling . . . and trolling. The fact that we're on the brink of a new millennium was also a factor in the sense that I felt the community would benefit from new leadership and a fresh perspective."

When reminded that vast experience and the insights they bring are nothing to sneeze at, Mr. Toussaint all but blushes. "That's always good to hear, but I still feel the time is right to step back and give someone else a chance to plant some seeds."

For every thing, he philosophizes, there is a season — and this is his season to change.

"I loved teaching English when I started out sporting mutton chops on my face in the 60s, and I like to think that I brought a sense of humor and a little heart into those lessons, but there came a time when I felt I could do more outside the walls of a classroom than inside of them."

While not yet sure exactly which new path he'll be blazing in the coming months and years, Mr. Toussaint is sure it will have

Students weren't only kids in principal's life!

Blessed with 10 children in the course of their marriage, Mr. Toussaint and registered nurse wife Suzanne insist the rewards of having many offspring far outweighed the sacrifices.

Among the greatest joys has been observing the close bond that exists between Renee Lorient, Marcelle Aimee, Collette Marquier, Allisse Rachele, Stephen Robert, Jr., Brigitte Loire, Ginelle Dore, William Richard, Neil Aaron, and Suzanne Jemais.

"We've just completed 130 years of public education," laughs their father joking that he plans to wear a sign as he seeks educational consulting work that reads: "Work for kids' college tuition."

something to do with helping people — most likely as an educational consultant specializing in safety and security issues.

He also expects to continue in his service as president of the board of directors of the Saratoga Springs Prevention Council. The organization provides school districts with alcohol and substance abuse prevention and intervention services. Council offshoots include WAVE (Working Against Violence Everywhere) and SAP (Student Assistance Programs).

"We need to reach students in the early elementary grades to teach tolerance and breakdown isolation. Perhaps more than ever before, we need to teach individuals to care for their neighbors," asserts Mr. Toussaint.

As he speaks with the fire that left such an impression during my high school years, I am reminded of Thoreau's words: "*If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away.*"

On a selfish note, let's hope Mr. Toussaint's drum beat never takes him too far away from the trails he has worked so hard to blaze here in Saratoga County.

-- Ann Hauprich

It's been rewarding, says their father, to witness the development of each child's unique personality traits, ranging from facial expressions and sensitivities to individual senses of humor.

Mr. Toussaint disagrees with those who contend parents must give children equal amounts of one-on-one time every single day in order to achieve closeness.

"As a parent, you 'read' their eyes. We have both been available and approachable. Anyone could have a quiet time to talk with Mom or Dad in the late evening. There was, and is, constant interaction, discussion, and presence among all."

City lights. Country sights.

If you really want to live in the city but really like the country, live where you can have both. At Lakeside at Riley's. A city neighborhood. With backyards, front porches, sidewalks, street lamps, and trees. But just a stroll away from nature. Only minutes from Saratoga and Exit 14.



For more information, please call Sam Stephens at 587-4113, pager number 229-5512.

A Saratoga streetscape overlooking Lake Lonely. We also have lakeside homes in the Great Camp style at this site.



WITT CONSTRUCTION, INC.
National Award Winner

