Biography: Mrs. Toni Hatten

Sunset Elementary School

It was not my life intention to become a teacher. However, after many years of dabbling in various fields of employment and self-employment, it was during my years as a paraeducator that I was encouraged to become a teacher due to several people in the field of education who thought it was something I should pursue with great sincerity.

I contemplated this idea deeply because by that time I was near forty years of age. I knew that as a paraeducator I enjoyed working one-to-one with a variety of students with varying degrees of abilities and found it very rewarding. I also watched the teachers that I was embed with and wondered if it was something I could do. At the time, it looked relatively manageable and doable, but there was my age to consider. I had an associate degree in the field of human services, but it had been many years since then and I knew that most of my credits wouldn’t be accepted. It would be like starting over, and then there was the fact that I’d be almost forty-five by the time I’d graduate. Would it be worth it?

I decided it was. My biggest concern at the time was would I be able to actually accomplish such a monumental task. You see, I quit high school when I was in my sophomore year as a teen mother, and prior to that, I had major truancy and many juvenile delinquent behaviors. I was that high-risk student who didn’t look like I had much of a future, let alone someday become a teacher.

I did, however, decide to go. College was extremely hard. I had a son who I was still raising while my husband was out earning a living driving truck across the country. I was also so far removed from academic knowledge that I had to take a remedial, non-credited math class before I could get started. I struggled with many of the basic classes because I missed so much in high school. I had to make notecards on basic mathematical terms, meet with professor’s assistants and study groups to survive a science course, and struggled with writing at a collegiate level. In times of tears and doubt, I’d question whether or not I had it in me to accomplish such a goal, but somewhere inside me I’d find the ability to persevere and keep moving forward until I eventually completed all that was required to graduate. It was a remarkable moment in time as I reflected upon my life that was filled with trauma, challenges, and indeed, some influential people and experiences that helped shape me as a person, and now a teacher.

My gift as a teacher is my ability to connect with my students. All my personal experiences are resources for me to help my students achieve not only academic growth but personal growth. In my classroom, growth mindset ideas and perseverance are the centerpieces. I want my students to embrace their strengths, know how to self-manage when learning gets hard, and have an understanding that accomplishments don’t always have to be measured with grades, but true effort and a sense of improving. These beliefs and practices are woven throughout my lesson and activities in a safe and welcoming environment. I know it’s effective because I hear them using these ideas for themselves or encouraging their fellow classmates about the power of their thoughts and actions.

On the other hand, teaching is an evolving skill that I have to exert time, energy, and thought into. It does not come naturally, but I think I have created and provided a unique learning environment that includes a wealth of experiences that involve hands-on activities, creative and critical thinking projects, a personal approach to academic needs and interests, and engaging learning opportunities that will be memorable for years to come.

In retrospect, I’ve learned very quickly that I underestimated teaching way back when. It is exceptionally difficult to meet all of its challenges, but is overwhelmingly rewarding. It turns out that it was the best choice. I never imagined I’d love it so much.