



One Teacher Made a Difference

by Lori Hartwell



We have all had an experience with a person that has significantly influenced our life. Our interpersonal relationship with this

individual, whether permanent or fleeting, caused a significant change in the way we perceive or lived our lives. They are individuals whom we admire and revere, whose noble qualities make them our own personal heroes.

If we take a moment and reflect, we can often see a clear picture of our personal heroes. For me, there is one woman who comes immediately to mind. When I was ten years old, my Mom and I moved from California to Florida. While moving initially seemed exciting, my health deteriorated rapidly. My sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Rincones, was also new to the area and became concerned because of my continued absences. During the inevitable parent-teacher conference that resulted, my mom confided in my teacher that I was getting sicker by the minute. The problem was compounded by the fact that there was not a pediatric kidney specialist in the area, and the best solution was to move back to California where doctors who were familiar with my case could care for me. Unfortunately, we did not have the financial resources to make the move possible, and my mom was fearful that I would not survive.

Mrs. Rincones immediately said, "Well, we just need to raise the money to get your little girl back to the doctors who can care for her," and she went to work trying to figure out how to accomplish this goal.

I often think it would have been easy for her to say, "I am too



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busy," "I have kids of my own," or "I have my own problems." But no! Mrs. Rincones wanted to help a child in need, and I just happened to be that lucky child. With the help of her friends, Mrs. Rincones raised the money for me to receive my lifesaving care.

My mom packed our gold Oldsmobile and my cherished black poodle and we made a five-day trek back to the care I desperately needed. And just in time! By the time we arrived to Los Angeles I was in congestive heart failure and needed emergency dialysis.

Over the years I often thought about Mrs. Rincones and her generosity of spirit. I lost contact with her after the move back to California, and I wondered if she was happy, healthy, and enjoying life. She deserved the best that life had to offer.

When I was sitting at my computer one day I decided to see if I could find her on the Internet. Through the wonders of Google, it took me less than ten minutes to

find her phone number. I nervously dialed the phone, wondering if she would remember me. She immediately picked up and I asked, "Is this Mrs. Rincones who taught sixth grade in Ft. Pierce, Florida?" When she replied yes, I asked if she remembered a little girl named Lori James whom she had helped get the medical care she needed in 1978.

I could feel her tears well up over the phone. "Oh my! Is it really you, Lori? I often wondered what happened to you, if you lived."

Time stood still for a second as I became a little girl again and I thanked her for helping save my life.

She then responded, "That event changed the course of my life." The sequence of events she then described provided background information that I had never known on how she had raised the money to fund my lifesaving return to California. As she stated: "When I learned a young girl was sick and needed help, I immediately went to the church to ask for their assistance. Their response was shocking. The church said they would help only if I could answer one question affirmatively: 'Is the little girl white?'"

Living in a predominantly black demographic of Florida, being white was not a very high probability. But Mrs. Rincones refused to dignify the church's question with an answer. She found another way to raise money by putting jars in bars and diners alongside the cash register, asking people to donate their extra change. By pounding the pavement and asking hundreds of people to help out, she was able to raise enough money for me to return to California for the care I desperately needed.

"Lori, that event changed my life and I never was the same

Continued on page 4

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One Teacher Made a Difference

Continued from page 3

afterwards,” she told me. “My goal in life became to share the fact that all children are important, no matter what color they are.”

In the south in the late 1970s, prejudice was rampant and to think that the color of my skin could have been the deciding factor of whether I lived or died is shocking. Luckily, I had such an extraordinary teacher who cared deeply about all of the people in her community.

I subsequently visited Mrs. Rincones when I was in Florida, and we had a wonderful lunch. She still teaches—both in the classroom setting and helping people in her community. I am sure that hundreds of children and adults still are inspired to live up to her standards and model their lives by her example. She is a hero and a great role model for all.

It is always helpful to think about our personal heroes. Ask yourself: Who has made a difference in my life? Have I thanked them? [It is likely that they did not expect your thanks (although it is always appreciated).] More importantly, have you reciprocated the favor by trying to help others like someone once helped you?

At different points in our lives we are all students or teachers. I encourage you to embrace both roles, and strive to positively influence the lives of others. ✎



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