

# Memories of Teaching

Shirley Polinger

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By Shirley Polinger

# Introduction and Acknowledgments

Wow, my first year of teaching was over 60 years ago! I taught Health and Physical Education and Civics. I never expected that I would also become a teacher of students who were deaf... and believe me those students taught me as well.

But after 42 years of teaching, I retired to a life of leisure: boating, playing Bridge, playing and singing in a ukulele group, skiing, doing art work, etc, etc.

I love retirement, but I absolutely loved teaching.

My biggest regret is that I didn't keep a diary of all of the wonderful, hysterical, and also incredibly sad things that happened during the years I taught.

But what follows are some of my most vivid recollections. They run through the gambit of emotions: scary, sad, maddening, and funny.

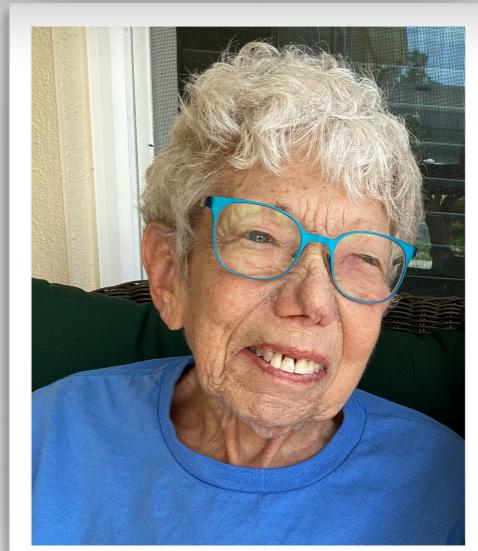
The student names have been changed.

Special thanks to Deb Bassett, Angie Kaufmann, Carol Nodgaard & Sally Meiser, Jan Joseph and Jordan Tardiff for their help with this project.



**SUMMER SIGN SEMINAR 1971**

Crotched Mountain School for the Deaf



## Day One

I started in 1960 as a Physical Education and Health teacher. My first class was sitting on the bleachers as I came into the gym. I began taking attendance when I heard a loud groan and looked up to see a girl falling into the space between the steps of the bleachers. I climbed up to where she had been sitting and saw she was having a full grand mal seizure. I sent a student to get the nurse and then asked the students if anyone had something to put in her mouth to prevent her from biting her tongue. The only thing we could come up with was a wallet which actually worked very well. I've since learned that you should not try to place anything in the mouth of someone having a seizure. It could result in a piece being swallowed, or even someone who's just trying to help possibly losing a finger! Just make sure that they are clear from objects nearby. (Turn them gently on their side with their mouth pointing down to help maintain an open airway). Mercifully, the nurse arrived and relieved me of my duty, for which I was incredibly grateful. The girl was finally taken to the infirmary and slept most of the rest of the day. This was her first seizure, mine too. I was totally traumatized as were the students in the class, and had nightmares for days. Things ran smoothly for several weeks and then one day the same girl fell to the floor and had another seizure. The other gym teacher immediately came over and I said to him that I couldn't handle this again. He took over, and I was very relieved. Welcome to teaching!

## DENNY AND KATIE

High school students Denny and Katie were living together. Some of Katie's teachers came to me and explained that she was falling asleep during class. We knew they were sexually active but also found out that Denny had told Katie that if she ever left him he would kill her father. Katie was losing sleep not only because of their romantic activities but also because she was worrying about Denny's threats to her father. I called Katie's father and made him aware of her issues at school. He asked me what to do. Katie was 18 and he was aware that legally she was an adult but I told him that if I were him I would immediately go get her and take her home. He did just that and Katie came to thank me a few days later.



## DANIEL'S PUNISHMENTS

No food, no furniture, no bed, no door on his bedroom... these were all punishments from Daniel's father for breaking the rules. But the punishments certainly did not fit the crime.

He was one of my favorite students and I tried to help him once I learned about the severity of his punishments. We used to send him to McDonald's and I would send him to the office every day to make sure he had food. The principal was a good guy and sent him food as well and gave him money for food. He came to me every day and I gave him five bucks for food.



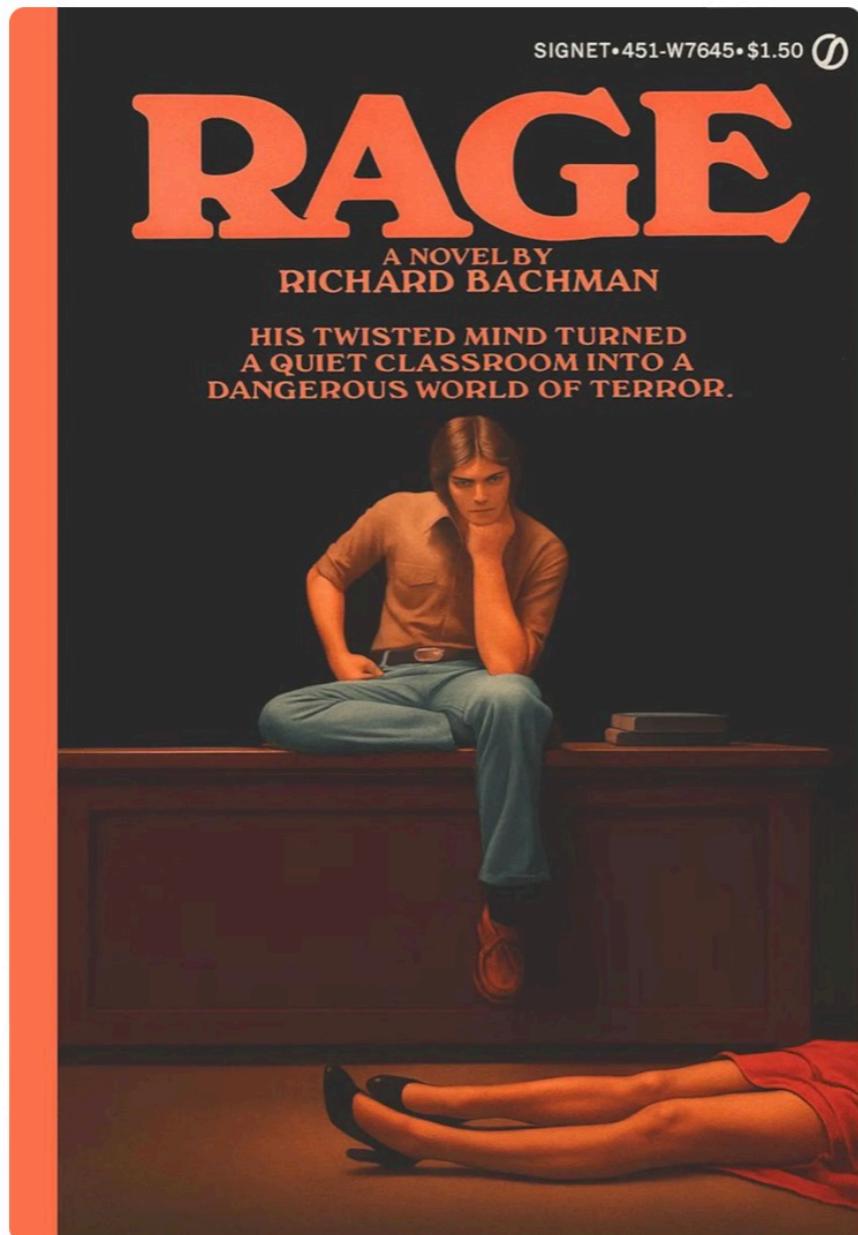
## Maggie

During my first year of teaching, I quickly learned that students were classified by the class they were in. 7-1 students meant Grade 7, mostly non-readers, and the lowest level of seventh graders. 7-2 were very poor readers. 7-3 were students who were able to read and write, and of average intelligence. 7-4, good readers and smart students. 7-5 were excellent readers and expected to achieve very high grades. First of all, the students understood the classification system and how little or how much was expected of them. As a teacher, I recommended they hire a reading specialist to teach 7-1 and 7-2 students to read and write. They hired one of the teachers to help our students double their reading skills and to help with writing. In fact, I also doubled my reading speed and learned to read a page from top to bottom, not horizontally. Unfortunately, students in 7-1 and 7-2 still struggled. I decided to start reading every test aloud to them. By being proactive by reading out loud, they actually began to pass their tests! One of the girls, Maggie, brought me a science test where she scored only 12 points out of 100. After working with her for a while, her test score went from 12 to 60! I went to her science teacher and asked if he would give her a D instead of F. To my dissatisfaction, he refused to change her grade. I also witnessed her frustration as she tried to write down the words to her favorite song, "This Magic Moment." She was unable to write fast enough to capture the lyrics which saddened and frustrated her. At the end of that school year I went to Israel, and when I returned a colleague came to my house to tell me that Maggie had become pregnant, had just shot herself in the abdomen and had died. I went to the viewing. Sadly, I was the only visitor for a student who was failed by the school and her parents.

## SIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

My second teaching assignment included teaching students who were deaf. The deaf students were the ones who initially taught me sign language! I also wanted the deaf students to teach their hearing classmates. So I devised a plan to have the deaf students teach the hearing students bad words! I would tell them I had to go to the office, then leave the room and put a deaf student in charge of the class. The hearing students would then ask the deaf students to teach them all the bad words! Every bad word you could think of! I could hear the kids laughing all the way down the hall. They were hysterical that they were learning all the filthy words. Then the room would suddenly quiet down when I returned. This made me very happy. The kids loved it and they would just keep it to themselves. It was my idea to let them learn those dirty words and they never told on me!





## RAGE

I read the book "Rage" by Stephen King. There's a part in Rage where a teenage boy took his class hostage and ended up shooting and killing his teacher. This book traumatized me. I thought to myself, "we're not safe anywhere in this world." Remembering that part of the book sent chills down my spine when I saw a young boy reading it in the cafeteria of my school.

In today's society, this is an actual reality of violence in schools and public places.

## STUDENT WINS THE GAME AND \$10

I assigned my students a set of trivia questions that I sent home as a contest and homework assignment. I had specifically sent along a request to the parents not to help their kids with this task. The student with the most correct answers would win \$10!

One particular student, who had academic challenges, clearly had help from a parent on this assignment. I gave her the \$10 anyway but then called her mother. I told her mother that I knew that she had been helped with this assignment. Most importantly, I specifically asked that the students do this work by themselves. The mother was indignant and said “Well, I'm sure all the other parents helped their kids too!” I said no they didn't and it wasn't fair that your daughter had this extra help and won this contest. The mother responded “Fine! You can have the f\*cking \$10!” and hung up on me. She did send the \$10 back though.



## POMONKEY

Pomonkey was the name of the school to which African American students were bussed. No joke, the name of the school was pronounced “Po Monkey.” They should have attended Memorial High School but instead they were bussed from all over town, right past the school where they should attend. This was the 1960’s and segregation.

A fellow teacher hatefully said “The day that a n\*gger comes to this school, is the day that I leave!” I couldn’t understand how can anyone could say such sick things?

Some teachers were also against other teachers who were in favor of integrating our school; one them even damaged my chair so I wouldn’t be able to sit in the lunchroom. It was horrible. The teacher who said she would leave, did in fact leave when our school became de-segregated. Good riddance!



## HOUSE BREAK-IN

We had a student who's nickname was Jumbo, because he was huge. His mother called him that too! I hired him to do odd jobs at my house. And he spent many hours in my house working for me doing beautiful dry wall work and being paid very well. He had great knowledge and access to where I kept money and expensive power tools. While I was away skiing, he broke into my house by smashing a window and ended up stealing a bunch of stuff... cameras, camcorders, power tools, pretty much anything of value. He also broke into my neighbor's home. We knew it was him because a bag of coins he stole ripped and left an incriminating trail. He didn't see it and being deaf, he didn't hear them as they fell. So we figured it was a deaf person. The police agreed, but couldn't arrest him for our robbery as they said he had my property sold before he even stole it. But they did ultimately catch him for a larger theft.



## PATTY ANDRUCHUK



Patty was a friend and teaching colleague of mine. She was informed that there was going to be a fight after school. One student owed another student money and he was warned that if he didn't pay up he was going to get the crap beat out of him at the end of the school day.

Sure enough, at the end of the day, the student who wanted his money was waiting for the student who owed him. Patty's classroom was right by the exit. She saw the student that owed the money walk by her classroom with an X-Acto knife that he had just stolen from the art room. As soon as he walked out the door he stabbed the student that was waiting to collect the debt. The blade of the X-Acto knife broke off in his lip. There was blood everywhere. Patty got immediately in between the two students and broke up the fight. I thought it was the bravest thing I've ever seen! They got the student who had been cut to the hospital. The school was going to punish the injured student, which I thought was terrible. What would be the purpose of punishing him since he was already cut up.

## DAVID AT THE MEETING

David was at an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) meeting with his mother. We were recommending that his mother learn sign language so that they could communicate better with each other. His mother said “Oh, I don't need to do that. He understands everything I say!” David turned to me and signed “What did she say?”





## **NO PRAYER, NO SEAT!**

There were also teachers who tried to force students to pray at lunchtime before their meal. The students who didn't pray were made to stand and eat their lunch rather than being able to sit.

It was horrible. It was f\*cked up. No prayer no seat!

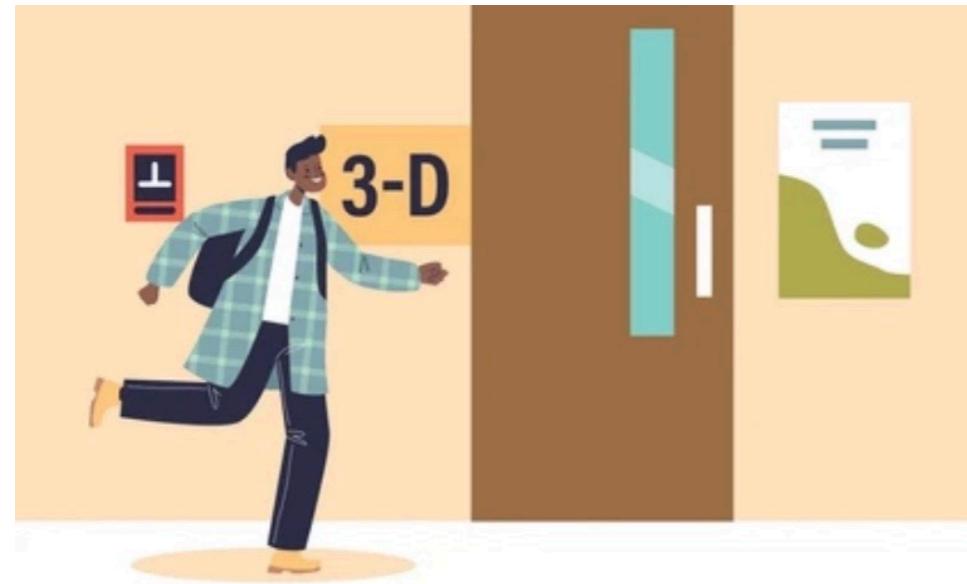
## MEMORIAL FIRES ALL CUSTODIANS

Anyone who has ever taught in a school knows that the secretaries and custodians are critical to the success and the day-to-day functioning of a school. They are like the backbone.

Unfortunately, Memorial High School decided that they were going to get rid of all the custodians and hire an outside agency. They thought it would save them money. I wrote a poem about it and put it in the teacher's lounge and sent a copy to every school board member hoping they would not follow through with their plan. However, they did it anyway and it was a disaster. They just couldn't do the job.

Teachers would rush to the staff bathroom and there would be no supplies for us. We couldn't even find toilet paper! It was terrible!





## A RUN IN

A boy ran out of his classroom, smack into me and kept going! He ran down the hall and disappeared. I looked for him the entire day and finally found him at the end of the school day in his counselor's room. I sent him to La La Land, aka the office!

## CHARLIE

Charlie suffered severe abuse by his brother. His brother would control him to the extent that if Charlie wanted something to eat, his brother would make him eat the food that had been scraped off plates into the sink. The parents were oblivious to any abuse. One day, Charlie was walking down the hall with me and said “I had sex with the dog.” You better believe I nearly puked. So I asked him “did you f\*ck the dog” and he said yes. The dog was injured and had to have surgery. This was one of the most vile things I've ever heard. His parents didn't know anything about this or that his brother had made him do these things.

We wanted to get him into therapy for sexually abused deaf people. It took meeting after meeting to get the state to approve sending him to a school for the deaf and to get therapy. They didn't want to do it but they finally did send him after all. I think I spent as many hours trying to get him the help he required as I did teaching. He received the therapy that was recommended. However, he was just so severely emotionally damaged. Nothing ever happened to his brother; his parents were in denial of the whole situation.

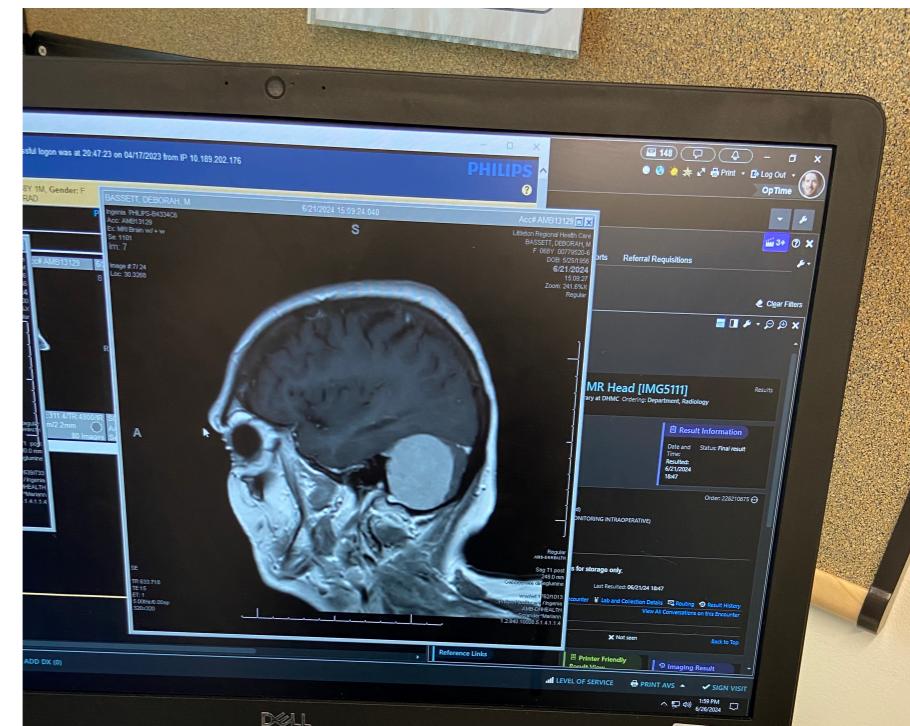


## **SAM AND THE FIRE TRUCK**

Sam had problems with enunciating and could not pronounce the “t” sound. One day during class he looked out the window and saw a firetruck and he excitedly pointed and yelled “fire f•ck, fire f•ck!” The class exploded with laughter!

## INOPERABLE TUMOR

I had just started teaching a tumbling class. There were two students in two different classes who happened to be sisters. I received a phone call from their mother and she told me that her older daughter had an inoperable brain tumor. At the time, the daughter did not know about the tumor or how severe it was. The mother wanted her to live as normal a life as possible. We found that doing activities such as headstands were causing severe headaches. Her mother consulted me about replacing those type of activities with something else. When school ended for the year, I resigned and went to Israel. Sadly, not long after my departure, I found that she had passed. Since then, I've become aware of medical advances that might have saved her had they been available at that time.



## **JACK'S FATHER**



Jack, a high school student, told me his father stopped hugging and kissing him when he was about eight years old. I asked him if he wanted me to call his mother and let her know that he was missing his father's affection. He agreed so I called his mother and I asked her if she thought her husband would be receptive to this information. Once Jack's dad learned of his son missing his affection, he immediately started showering him with it again. I think his dad thought he was doing the right thing to make him tough.

## **GIVE ME THE KNIFE**

As I drove into the school parking lot, I noticed two teenage boys having a heated discussion. I got out of my car and walked toward them. One of the boys pulled out a knife. Without thinking, I walked over to him, extended my hand and said, “Give me the knife.” He folded the knife and put it into my hand. That happened more than 50 years ago. Things have changed so much since then. Today, I would never ask a student to hand a weapon to me.





## **HENRY'S IMITATION OF HIS MOM**

During class, Henry told me that he could hear his parents having sex. I said no you can't, he said yes I can! He then proceeded to imitate his mother enjoying sex. He proceeded with all the sounds and words that went with it, "yes, yes!" the whole thing... and this was during the class with other students there. The class roared!

## **JONNY J**

Jonny J was a big, nasty, teenage boy. When I had to step out of the classroom for a minute, he took advantage of the situation, grabbed a girl and felt her up. Upon my return she immediately came to me and told me what happened. I sent him straight to the principal's office.

He thought he could just grab whatever girl he wanted ... (remind you of anyone?)

As he walked by me on his way to the office, he turned to me and said "you're dead!" and I could tell he meant it. I learned never to leave the classroom without putting someone I trusted in charge.



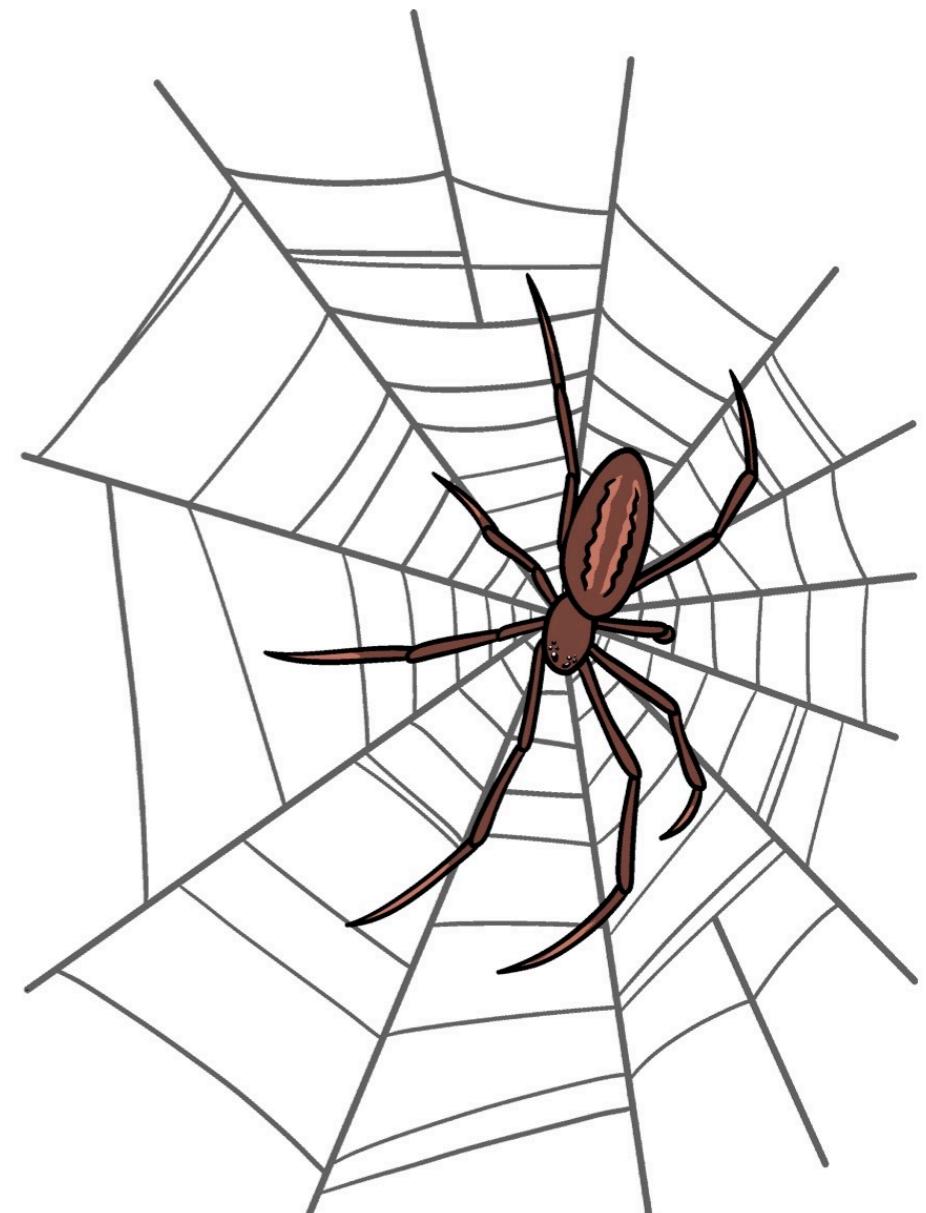
## I DECKED HIM



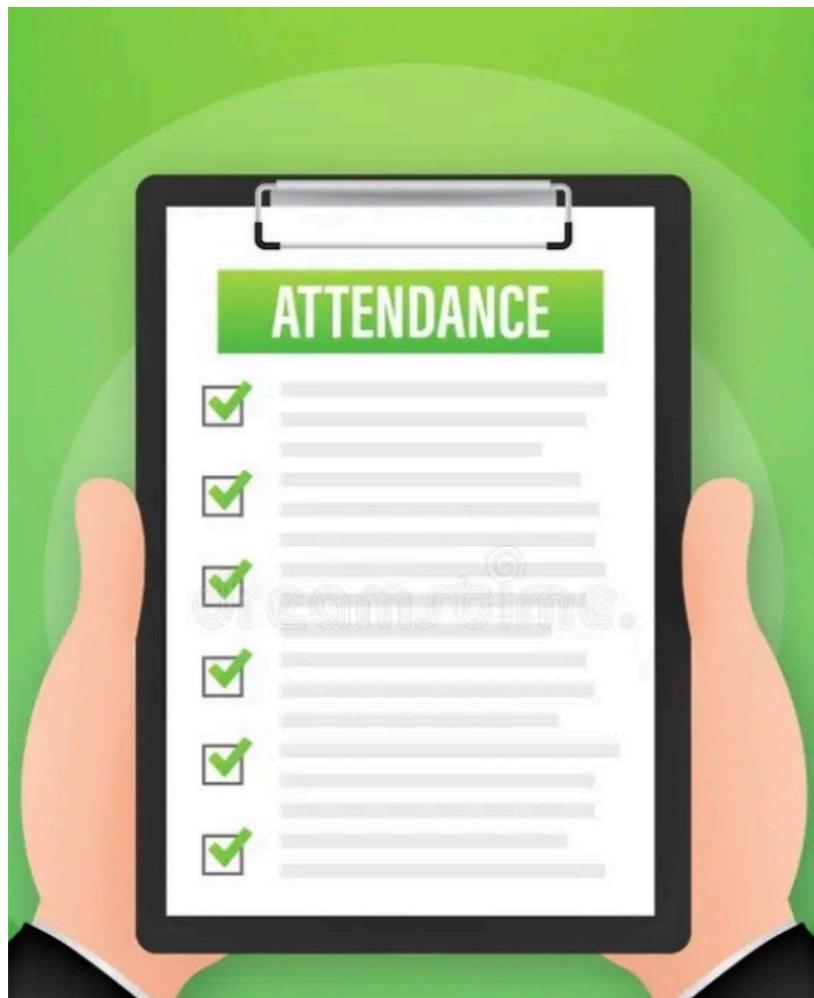
One day, I was in the hallway and saw one of the male gym teachers. His usual attire was sweat pants, a tee shirt and sneakers. However, this day he was dressed in a suit and tie and beautiful shoes. He looked very handsome. Of course I was dying to know where he was going so I asked him. He told me that a few weeks ago he was driving in his car and saw a man beating his dog without mercy. He said he went crazy and without a moment's thought, he pulled his car over, got out and knocked the man out cold. He was on his way to court for assaulting the man. The judge let him off. I was thrilled.

## SPIDERS

One afternoon, I had a student who was a young girl in Junior /Senior high school who didn't feel well. I sent her down to the nurse's office. I later went down to check on her and when I did, it startled and confused me as to what she was doing. It looked like she was trying to pull things off her face. The school nurse explained to me that the young girl was hallucinating that spiders and spiderwebs were on her face. The hallucinations were due to a reaction from a medication she was taking.



## THE NUMBERS RACKET



Before class, a 14-year old boy came to me and asked if I would show him the absentee list. I asked him why he wanted to see it and he said he wanted to know if his friend was in school so he wouldn't have to eat lunch alone. This sounded reasonable to me so I showed him the list. It only took him a second to see that his friend was in school that day and he would have someone to eat with. The next day, he asked to see the absentee list again so I let him see it again. As weeks passed, I just handed him the list everyday without much thought. He always smiled and thanked me and couldn't have been more polite. Months later, I walked into the gym to see a police officer and the principal waiting for me. They explained to me that the young man I was so impressed with, was running a numbers racket! The number of the day was the total number of students on the absentee list. The students would bet on how many students were absent that day. If they bet on the correct number they won the 'pot.'

My thoughts were racing:

OMG, I've been unknowingly aiding and abetting a felon.

How could I have been so naive and dumb?

The boy was amazingly creative and incredibly smart.

He was removed from my class and I never saw or heard anything about him again.

## THREE-LEGGED RACE

Occasionally, we would have a field day which included relay races, wheelbarrow races, track events and the ever-popular three-legged race. The three-legged race was where students got into groups of three, stood side by side and tied their inside legs together. The person in the middle is stuck there until the race is over. A very shy, young, teenage girl came over and it was quite obvious she had urinated during the race. I felt so sorry for her and I said anytime you have to go don't ask me, just go! She said "I couldn't I was tied between two people!" Needless to say, I felt terrible and never had a race like that again.





## **THE KITCHEN TABLE?**

During sex ed class one of the girls asked  
“Do they do it on the kitchen table?”

## MY PERIOD

One afternoon, just before sign language class, I got my period. I felt horrible but went to class anyway. As I walked in the door one of the boys said to me “What's the matter, Ms. Polinger? You're not your usual cheerful self.” “That's right,” I said, “and I'm gonna be this way once a month, so get used to it!” There was tons of laughter! One of the girls said “Can you believe she said that?” And sure enough, once a month, I gave them a picture of my depressing life as a woman!



## THE BIG VOLLEYBALL



My principal went to a principals' meeting somewhere in the country. They were selling new sports equipment at this meeting and after much deliberation, he decided to buy my fellow physical education teachers and me a present. He told us that it was the newest thing on the market and was bound to become a big hit. It was a giant volleyball that cost several hundred dollars. It was six feet in diameter. We were instructed to begin using it immediately. The game is played on a football field by two teams of any size. The object of the game is for each team to push the ball into the other team's goal. The problem is that the ball was so large the players couldn't see members of the opposite team! The game had no positions and there were no rules. The strongest team won but there were tons of injuries. So, one at a time we, the teachers, went to the principal and told him about the injuries. However, he wouldn't let us stop. Finally, we were able to convince him that we didn't care how much the ball cost, the game was too dangerous. That was in the 1960s. I think that's when scamming began.

## **YOU'LL HAVE TO WAIT**

I was teaching a sexual education class of all boys. I was trying to impress upon them that sex was never something you do in the spur of the moment and that sex is never an emergency. One of the boys leaned back in his chair, pointed to his crotch and said empathetically “You'll have to wait!” I don't know who was laughing more, me or the boys, but I think he got the point. That goes down as one of the funniest things I've ever heard a student say.



## **GIL AND THE FAKE FARTS**



We played a trick on one of our teachers, Gill. We told the kids to make a sign for smelly. We attached a fart machine under his desk that was controlled by a remote. The hearing students would set off the remote and signal by plugging their nose and the hearing impaired students followed along by making a sign that indicated fart! One of the interpreters even got up on a chair and said “Oh Gil!” as she made a sour expression and waived her hand in front of her face to mockingly wave away the odor! The whole class then made signs that they smelled it. It was the funniest thing I've ever seen! Poor Gil, he was so embarrassed and didn't find out until much later that he had been set up!

## **SMOKING IN THE GIRLS' ROOM**

I used to pride myself on catching kids smoking! I would stand on the seat in the girl's room stall and wait till I smelled smoke and then jump out and catch whoever was smoking. I thought it was great fun! I used to catch them all the time! But I could relate because I used to smoke in the girls' room when I was younger!



## THE RELIGIOUS RETREAT



One of the students told me she needed to take a week off from school to go on a religious retreat. When I asked why, she said so she could skip a week in purgatory.

So help me God, I thought that was disgusting and crazy!

## **YES VIRGINIA, THERE IS A SANTA CLAUS!**

It was nearing the Christmas break and one of my students came into class excitedly talking about Santa! The other kids laughed and told her that Santa Claus wasn't real. She was 16. She came to school the very next day and brought in a newspaper... the one with the famous story: "Yes, Virginia there is a Santa Claus" and placed it on my desk. She said "If it's in the newspaper, it must be true!"

The dangers of the media!





Dedicated to the memory of Shirley Polinger:  
Physical Education, Health, and Civics Teacher and Teacher of the Deaf.

She also taught by example. She was a loving and cherished friend and family member.

May her memory be a blessing.