



What Makes a Great Teacher?

He taught us social studies 50 years ago. But the bigger lessons keep coming.

By PHIL PRIMACK

At one point or another, beauty queens, political candidates, and college applicants get the question: Who has had a major influence on your life? All sorts of people get their due – Jesus, Princess Di, mothers – but my answer would be Dante Ippolito.

Mr. Ippolito was my seventh- and eighth-grade social studies teacher (despite his insistence, I have a hard time calling him “Dante”). We have not shared a classroom for 50 years, since I was at Haverhill’s Whittier School, and it’s taken nearly that long for me to fully understand why he made such an imprint on me.

Long before teaching to the test, Mr. Ippolito taught to comprehension. He insisted that we learn basic facts – he would drill us if he thought we weren’t paying attention – and made his teachings resonate by tying lessons about someone else’s ancient history to something familiar in our own young lives.

“He treated us as though we could think like rational adults,” explains Meredith Halks Miller, a grade-school classmate of mine who now lives in California. “He asked provocative questions. He had us figure things out rather than spoon-feeding us the answers. He tried to enlighten. He could see how the whole

puzzle fit together – how a push here resulted in a pull elsewhere – that we are all linked.”

And Mr. Ippolito always wanted us to believe we could do better. My papers came back from him heavily marked with corrections to historical facts and points of grammar, but always with some encouraging words about my writing and about me.

Mr. Ippolito’s career began in front of a music stand, not a blackboard. A music major at Boston University, he toured the country as a saxophonist with dance bands, backing up big-time acts like The Andrews Sisters. After a stint in the Army, he decided to settle down and start a

A gifted saxophonist, he knew when to let the class beat to its own measure.

family and took a job as band director at Newton High School. Jack Coffey, a former Newton student, says Mr. Ippolito “exemplified what was good in the music profession and the teaching profession – a commitment to his craft.”

Even after moving to Haverhill to teach social studies and English, Mr. Ippolito brought a musician’s sense of timing to his role as teacher. He could perform a solid solo to get his students’ attention, but he also knew when to let the classroom beat to its own measure.

And he could make the shyest among us feel confident enough to perform. Even today, when giving presentations at work, Sharon Shyavitz thinks back decades to Mr. Ippolito’s class. “While I would stand up there in front of the class consumed by nerves, he would sit there leaning back in his chair, relaxed, hands folded, giving me his full attention,” she recalls. “It was so encouraging. You knew at that moment he was interested in you and what you had to say.”

That’s because he took us all seriously. “He really did listen more, even then, to kids than his fellow teachers, which was unusual,” recalls Larry Tye, another Haverhill grade schooler (and former *Globe* staffer). “He was a radical in that era, especially in grammar schools, in seeing kids as fellow humans to be respected.”

Maybe that’s why past students often came back to visit Mr. Ippolito’s classroom. “How often does that happen?” asks Shyavitz. “It was a testament to him as a teacher.”

In the Norwell home he shares with Eleanor – they met in high school and have been married 68 years – Mr. Ippolito, now 89, recalled teachers who would disparage students in the sanctuary of the teacher’s room. “I never spoke ill about my students,” he says. “Too often teachers tend to be, you’re over there and I’m over here and never should the two meet. I never felt that way.”

Told about the praise flowing in from former students, Mr. Ippolito demurs. “I just tried to teach my students as well as I could. I always felt that it’s not the facts that remain with people. It’s how they think when they have the facts.”

Though long retired, Mr. Ippolito still has things to say, regularly writing letters to newspapers about issues of the day. His personal views are clearly liberal, but he never imposed them in the classroom. “Kids, when motivated, can absorb concepts far above their age or official grade,” he says. Curriculum “should serve only as a point of takeoff.”

A great teacher is a pilot for life.

Phil Primack draws upon Mr. Ippolito’s lessons when he teaches media law and ethics at Tufts University. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.