Nearly every school administrator can identify a mentor who helped steer the path to school leadership. However, my mentor was very different than most.

Bill was a lean, wiry, mountain-man type who, as school custodian, had ruled his kingdom at a rural elementary school for many years. As a newly hired principal with no previous experience and, even worse, from out-of-state, I heard tales about Bill well before I met him. In fact, the first anecdote I heard was that Bill had announced throughout the school community that he “wasn’t gonna work for no damn woman.” I later found out that there were several wagers made as to who would survive that first year—Bill or me!

My first face-to-face meeting occurred when the assistant superintendent insisted on the two of us dropping by Bill’s house—unannounced. I couldn’t have been more nervous if I had been meeting the governor. I might have been green as a principal, but I already realized that winning Bill’s approval was going to be essential to my success. As Bill and I eyed each other warily, his wonderful wife Hazel invited me to sit down and we began to discuss gardening—a mutual love. The visit was short but, as we were leaving, Hazel sternly admonished her husband, “Bill, you take care of this little girl!” Hazel had established herself as my protector and I was safe, at least for a little while.

Thus began my education a la Bill. At least once a day—and frequently more often—Bill would stop by my office to give me my instructions. Sometimes it was about getting teachers to clean up their rooms.

“Do you know how many bugs could live in that old couch in Wagerman’s room?” (Bill hated the upholstered furniture that some teachers brought from home.)

“Mrs. Smith has desks in the hall—fire marshal won’t like that.” (Bill hated any obstruction in the halls.)

“The fifth-grade boys are wasting toilet paper—you need to crack down.” (Bill hated any kind of waste.)

Bill had ongoing feuds with a couple of staff members and wasn’t above using his position to make a point. When his nemesis, a kindergarten teacher, complained that her room hadn’t been vacuumed to her standards, Bill began to run the vacuum during her prep period, which she invariably spent in her room doing paperwork. When she complained, Bill innocently explained that this was the time that worked best for his schedule. (This was the same teacher who just happened to have the lawn mowed outside her window as she worked after school.)

“It’s the Gospel Truth!”

Bill was noted for emphasizing his points with the phrase, “It’s the gospel truth!” and I quickly learned that this phrase was an indicator that Bill was expecting my full attention, especially in the all-too-frequent occasions when Bill began by saying, “Well, it isn’t my place to tell you how to run the school.” That sentence meant he was going to give me another lesson that I probably wouldn’t want to hear, ranging from which school board members had the most clout (something I needed to know) to which evening custodian was taking shortcuts (something that was really Bill’s responsibility).

Bill had lived in the community for years and knew everyone. When I would work on placing students in classes for the upcoming year, Bill
would occasionally look over my shoulder and point out potential problems: “You better not put that Johnny kid in with Susie. Her grandmother ran off with his great-uncle, who left his wife to raise a bunch of kids. The families haven’t spoken in 40 years.” Keeping in mind that this was a very small community and I was educating the fifth generation of some of the families, this kind of history mattered.

Vandals Beware

Bill was intensely loyal to the school and considered any attempt at vandalism a personal affront. My first Halloween as a principal, I was told that Bill always stayed in the building overnight to make sure that kids didn’t try any tricks. I was impressed and then alarmed to learn that Bill sat in the building with a loaded shotgun!

The school’s rural mailbox was a target for local teens cruising by and smashing it with a baseball bat. Bill found this intolerable and asked if he could get a buddy of his to make a new mailbox. I was pleased at this show of initiative, but surprised to see the result: a welded steel mailbox mounted on a concrete post. Bill chuckled while boasting that the first teen that hit that mailbox with a bat would have a broken arm. Fortunately, word traveled fast; there were no reported injuries and the mailbox remained in pristine condition.

When time came for Bill to retire, he wanted the celebration during the school day with his “kids.” As a result, the superintendent and many prominent community members altered their schedules so they could honor Bill. His gifts included a fishing rod and a gold watch, which he treasured. We all knew that Bill’s retirement meant the passing of an era, and there were few dry eyes in the gym.

As the years passed, I moved to a different school in the same district and Bill made a point of dropping by to “keep me straight.” He knew all the office staff and delighted in walking in and announcing in a loud voice, “I want to see that woman who is supposed to be running this place.”

Bill’s beloved Hazel died of cancer not many years after Bill retired, and much of Bill’s love of life died with her. As Bill lay in his hospital bed toward the end, his children generously allowed me to join them since, as his son said, “Daddy considered you another one of his kids.” Bill’s funeral was one of the saddest days of my life and the haunting sound of a guitar playing “The Old Rugged Cross” has stayed with me. Even now, 20 years later, not a week goes by that I don’t smile at recalling a “Bill story” and give thanks that I had the good fortune to be mentored by a truly great educator.

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