

Remembering Mr. Sonderman

by Sam Seabright

Reflections on a person who gave gifts of the spirit not only at Christmas but always.

'Way back when, I attended North Benwood grade school in West Virginia. Mrs. Jessie Rider taught grades 1-4 and principal Harry Sonderman taught 5-8. If we misbehaved, we were sent upstairs to see Mr. Sonderman. If we were really bad, he would open his desk drawer and pull out Fritzi.

We were all afraid of Fritzi.

Fritzi was a leather strap, about four inches wide and three feet long, probably part of an old machinery drive belt. He folded it in half so it would make a loud *slap* when used; it was more embarrassing than painful. Whatever we did wrong, we never did it again after a whack on the butt.

Sonderman was a tough old German who lived in McMechen a few miles away and drove a black 1940 Ford coupe. He was an infantry Major in WWII, and I think he fought with Patton, chasing Rommel across North Africa.

He had us memorize poems, the Gettysburg Address, and many other writings. We pledged allegiance and read from the Bible to begin each day. He was strict on English, history and math, and even got us into algebra. A superb disciplinarian, he really prepared us not only for high school, but for life.

Tony

Tony lived up the creek, and went to Boggs Run Grade School. When my North Benwood school closed in 1954, I transferred to Boggs Run in the eighth grade. That's where I got to know Tony.

Sonderman also transferred to Boggs Run to teach eighth grade and act as principal. That's where I finally learned that tough and gruff old man really had a good heart.

Tony was a smart guy. However, he could speak English but could neither read nor write it—not even his own name—in the eighth grade. His family spoke only Italian, putting Tony at a real disadvantage in school. I suppose all his previous teachers just wrote him off as a lost cause. But Sonderman saw something else.

Sonderman would spend an hour a day sitting with Tony and privately tutoring him, while the rest of us did our reading or some homework at our desks. We (or at least, I) saw this with mixed emotions: We were happy to get a break from the sometimes-intense class work; also, we thought Tony was finally getting the attention he deserved; or perhaps some of us were jealous that Tony was monopolizing our teacher. It seemed there was no way that Tony could keep up with us, but at least he was getting something out of his time at school.

I think that one great thing he got from Sonderman was confidence. Tony realized that finally here was a teacher who really cared, cared enough to spend personal time and effort with him, and cared about his future as a contributing member of society.

Years later, as we all went our separate ways and I moved to Michigan, I learned what happened to Tony. He became a Regional Manager for Archway cookies. Quite a success, once given a chance by a very special teacher—Mr. Sonderman. ▼