



Industrial Arts Teacher Leaves a Legacy

A Tribute to Mr. Gass

Though I've lived in Connecticut three quarters of my life I've always considered myself a transplanted New Yorker. There weren't many "New Yorkers" during my nearly 33-year teaching career at Helen Keller Middle School, not *real* New Yorkers. But when Ted Gass arrived on the scene, fagedaboutit, we instantly bonded. It was like the old days back on good ol' LonGuyland. He understood.



Ted Gass

In 1973, when I began teaching, it was extremely common for teachers to smoke and understandably so. Teaching middle/ junior high school had its list of challenges that

only a cigarette could quell. Growing up, schools and teachers reeked of cigarette smoke, but it didn't affect us. The scent of smoke was so prevalent we were numb to it. Some teachers smoked in the classroom (and there were even stories about those who drank) but most waited for a break and politely used the faculty room. While in high school I remember sneaking a puff or two. Between classes the heavily clouded bathroom was the place to go. Passed around was a steamed cigarette, half of it burning embers. No one cared about germs. Everyone smoked.

I prided myself in being a nonconformist and managed to quit during my first year of teaching at the age of 21. I simply did the math. Teacher = smoker was not the equation I fit into. I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but I remember on many occasions hanging outside the Helen Keller wood-shop's backdoor shooting the breeze with my New York buddy while he played catch up sucking down a cigarette or two. Questioning him about this need in an attempt to get him to recognize and confront the well-known evils, he referred to his smoking situation as an addiction, much different and more serious than of a habit. Not being addicted to anything I didn't quite get it. I tried.

Ted wasn't from around here. Along with his Queens, New York accent and dialect, Ted had a great way with kids. No one would dare mess with him and no one wanted to. Whenever I visited his shop — and it was often — everything and everyone was in proper working order. Kids listened and lined up to use power tools that could easily slice off any appendage.

Ted was like Santa watching carefully over his elves. His kids were made to understand the seriousness and complexities of working with power tools and worked diligently to complete their hand-crafted wooden projects so they could take them home to their

parents, especially during the holiday season. All of the projects from the Mr. Gass era were useful and never too complicated. They allowed hands-on success.



For most students it was the first time they'd ever seen a saw, hammer, screw or nail up close, nonetheless use one. Ted not only had his students build projects, he had them build self-esteem. I still have, cherish and use several of the shop items my son enjoyed creating while under Ted's tutelage. An all-time favorite is the Chile Pepper clock design Ted helped him cut out of some red acrylic sheeting.

When Ted recognized that schools, teaching and education were becoming more and more technological it became obvious that woodshop would soon go the way of home economics. He decided it was time to hang up his teaching hat. Though he left teaching and now the world, his projects will live on forever in the homes and in the minds of all of the students he was able to touch with his wisdom and mastery. Everyone liked Mr. Gass.

Rest in Peace, my dear friend, fellow educator and New Yorker.