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Oral Hisort of Wilena Peterson

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ORAL HISTORY OF WILENA PETERSON

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FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY
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CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH WILENA PETERSON

Wilena Peterson, 1995 *Educator of the Year in the Arts with Special Needs Students*, relied throughout her thirty-two year teaching career on a philosophical staple, "All students can learn and want to learn and it is up to educators to provide them with the right method and the right material to make sure they do learn."

Wilena was raised on a farm in a small town in South Dakota that taught her to be responsible and accountable. On her farm, everyone in the family, male and female, big or small, had responsibilities. At one point in her childhood, Wilena was the one responsible for milking fifteen cows in the morning before school and again after school. Wilena was never asked if the cows were milked. It was simply understood in Wilena's family that everyone had to be responsible for their part of the farming operation.

Wilena had two sisters, one older and one younger, and an older brother. Clifford, the older brother by two years, had a great impact on Wilena's life. In fact he was the individual most responsible for Wilena's desire to become a teacher of special education at the elementary level.

When Cliff was six years of age he was stricken with polio. He spent much of his early childhood in hospitals dependent on an iron lung or constrained by full body casts. When Cliff was finally released from the hospital, he was

ready for public school, but the public school system was not ready for him and his disability. Clifford had been told that due to the severity of his disease he would probably not see his eighteenth birthday. Determined to get the most out of his life, Cliff developed a philosophy that profoundly affected Wilena.

Cliff undertook the philosophy that if his life was to be short he wanted it to be full and he didn't want to be treated like an outsider. Moved by the strength and determination of her brother, Wilena subscribed to Cliff's philosophy in dealing with special needs students in her classroom. She believed that it was important to do what she could to make students' lives full and to not treat students with special needs like outsiders.

During her high school years in Tulare, South Dakota, Wilena became involved with another type of disability. She took on a part time job at the South Dakota State Hospital for mental retardation. There she became aware of and exposed to the special needs of the mentally retarded.

During high school, Wilena also gained experience working with younger children by teaching local Sunday school lessons. Wilena's mother was in charge of finding teachers for Sunday school, but when there was no one available, Wilena substituted.

Following her high school graduation in 1962, Wilena attended Northern State College at Aberdeen, South Dakota. During this time, Wilena married and started her own family giving birth to a baby girl during her sophomore year at Northern State. At that time a teaching certificate could be secured in two years, but upon advice from her college advisor, Wilena decided to spend an additional year at Northern State College collecting a newly developed special education degree. During her final year at Northern State College Wilena gave birth to a second daughter. With the responsibilities of her new family increasing, the decision to stay in school was not easy. Wilena's desire to provide special needs students with a fuller life, however, provided her the incentive to complete the course work needed for the special education certification.

Special education was in its infancy when Wilena targeted her first job assignment in 1964 and many schools had yet to even begin a special education program. Ironically, Wilena's first job assignment involved developing a new special education program.

Wilena's first teaching opportunity came in the fall of 1964 at Volga, South Dakota, as a special education instructor. The school had never before had a special education program, and Wilena was allowed the freedom and flexibility to set up the program the way she wanted. As a

first year teacher, Wilena had the distinct responsibility of setting up the department, developing the curriculum, and ordering materials. Wilena's newly established program consisted of seven children who ranged in age from six to fifteen years of age. After inspection by a state representative, Wilena's program was accepted and granted approval by the state of South Dakota.

Wilena was able to put together a special education program at a time when many people were naive and uninformed about the concept of special education. For this reason she was asked regularly to speak to various community groups and surrounding school boards.

When Wilena first accepted the job at Volga, she sensed there was relief among many of the teachers. Upon her arrival at Volga, it was Wilena's opinion that many of the teachers felt they were not going to have to deal with the special needs students. There was a misconception among many of her peer teachers that the special education students were simply going to be taken to a separate room away from the regular classroom instruction. Because her special education classroom was in an elementary setting and because she had special education students that were fifteen years old, Wilena was not in favor of the seclusionary idea. She felt strongly that special education students should continue to be involved as much as possible with their own

age group. This led Wilena to employ arrangements that allowed special education students and regular education students to share time together. In essence, Wilena had embarked upon the concept of mainstreaming before it was officially recognized as a concept.

Wilena took on a tremendous challenge her first year out of college. Her passion for special needs students, coupled with a solid philosophical belief, allowed her to successfully meet the challenge.

Following her successful teaching debut at Volga, Wilena moved and took a job at Brainerd, Minnesota, where she again was called upon to develop a new special education program. With the exception of the bitterly cold temperatures, Wilena enjoyed her three year experience at Brainerd Elementary because it involved six and seven year olds. While working with the younger children, Wilena discovered the importance of being creative and flexible in dealing with children. One particular experience she had involved a hygiene problem that a couple of her students were having. After confronting the issue, Wilena learned the students were unable to bathe in the springtime because their father used the bathtub to keep frogs and leaches alive for his occupational livelihood. Realizing she needed to be accepting of the children's situation, Wilena and the gym teacher arranged for the poorly bathed students to wash

gym balls each morning. Unknown to the students, the activity, was a creative way Wilena could use the educational system to provide a needed service for the children.

After her teaching experience at Brainerd, Minnesota, Wilena applied for and was offered a special education position in the Fort Larned, Kansas, school district. In August of 1969, Wilena began a 27 year teaching experience at Garfield Elementary School. Although Wilena's major assignment at Garfield was a self-contained classroom, she made every effort to integrate her students with regular students, mainstreaming them into regular programs and subject areas when possible.

In 1980, Wilena became director of the Garfield summer school program which included the assistance of several teachers and paraprofessionals. Her summer school program averaged 15 students and ran seven to eight weeks.

In the Spring of 1994, Wilena began developing a total inclusion program for her level one students in regular kindergarten through third grade classes. The inclusion model involved considerable planning between herself and teachers involved, as well as assigned paraprofessionals. Again, Wilena's expertise in planning, organizing, and implementing a special education program was quite evident

as the program unfolded into a stimulating experience for both students and staff at the Garfield school.

It was at Garfield that Wilena was nominated for the Accessible Art's *Educator of the Year* award. While Accessible Arts Incorporated originally dealt strictly with the development of special needs students, in 1992 the organization's vision expanded to include regular education students. In developing a nationwide curriculum for using arts in the classroom, the Accessible Arts organization used Wilena's classroom at Garfield Elementary as a model. A video tape of Garfield's special education classes was produced to illustrate the various teaching strategies Wilena employed using the arts. In order that young educators could be better prepared to educate students using the arts, the curriculum and video of Wilena's teaching strategies were issued to colleges across the nation. Wilena believed the use of arts in the classroom was very productive in education and was proud that her work at Garfield Elementary School contributed to the development of the Accessible Arts curriculum.

Wilena's efforts in special education not only assisted students in her classroom but they affected the lives of her own children. Wilena raised seven children and throughout the process they were continually exposed to Wilena's world of special education. Wilena believed the exposure

benefited her children by allowing them to gain a unique understanding of special needs individuals. She also felt the increased awareness of special education allowed her children to have a better understanding of individual differences. Rather than focusing on the differences of individuals, Wilena expressed to her children that special needs individuals were more similar to other individuals than people thought. Her children consequently realized that everyone should have rights and they should be allowed to share in the same opportunities regardless of personal differences. In subscribing to a belief that all students could learn provided given the right method of instruction, Wilena believed it was important to be reminded about what was being taught. Many times she felt instructors slighted children by concentrating on teaching subjects rather than teaching children. The sensitivity and genuine feelings for children that Wilena possessed allowed her to continuously formulate empathy for her students by creating a learning climate.

While Wilena believed it was important for a teacher to be well organized and well prepared, she learned from her first year of teaching that it was important to have teaching flexibility. Wilena felt to have the proper balance between organization and flexibility was essential to effective instruction. She understood that too many

times educators missed the opportunity of educating students for fear of getting off task.

Wilena's experiences in education generated an opinion that students have changed in regard to the severity of some student exceptionalities. Wilena also felt that not only are there more severe disorders but that types of exceptionalities have changed. A significant majority of all disorders used to be of the learning disability nature. Wilena pointed out that behavioral disorders have increased to make up a considerably larger share of the disorder pie. Wilena believed it would be increasingly important and necessary for students with special needs to be identified and understood in order for quality education to be provided. Contributions to the severity of student disorders, according to Wilena, included drug use, alcohol dependency, television and an overall decline in family unity within society.

While the role of education and specifically teachers continues to be controversial, Wilena saw change in the roles of teachers and education as a result of increased responsibilities. Responsibilities for morality, feeding, cleaning, and basic care, formerly regarded as responsibilities of the family have become responsibilities of the school. As a result, Wilena saw the changes force a

much larger scope of responsibility on the educator, many times at the expense of a student's quality of education.

One of the aspects of working with the Accessible Arts organization that appealed to Wilena was the preliminary training provided to the Garfield school staff before any intervention by the Accessible Arts artists. Wilena agreed that as the necessity to identify student exceptionalities increased, training in the area of student observation would become a priority. Based on her recent efforts spent assisting her son with his undergraduate work in elementary education, Wilena was confident the training prospective educators were receiving at the college level was appropriate. While pursuit of improved student observation methods should continue, Wilena was impressed with her son's observation training at Southwestern College.

After thirty-two years of experience, Wilena developed a keen understanding of what was effective in the education of children. Wilena did not consider her philosophy on education to be one of special education. She believed there were certain teacher characteristics and teacher behaviors that worked in all areas of education.

One feature of teaching Wilena believed to be particularly effective in reaching students and in captivating their attention was creativity. Wilena's summer school classroom provided evidence of her creativeness. The

walls were splashed with bright colors and filled with various student decor, posters, and signs. Ornaments relating to classroom activities hung from the ceiling and gazed over desktop decorations that were used to promote communication between home and school. Wilena noted that she had once been told by someone, "a teacher who has taught for twenty years should have twenty years of experience not one year twenty times." While creativity takes time and involves continuous effort, it was apparent that Wilena invested plenty of both in maintaining creativity in her classroom.

In addition to being creative in preparing for a teaching lesson, Wilena believed proper planning and promptness also were essential ingredients to an effective classroom environment. One favorite teaching method of Wilena's was shadow teaching. Following an explanation of goals and expectations of a lesson to her class, Wilena or the assisting instructor in a team teaching arrangement would explain segments of the lesson. The other teacher then followed with an illustration or demonstration of the previous explanation. Considerable creativity could be employed to the demonstration phase of the methodology which is what made it unique and entertaining to students. While Wilena tried to use various methods of instruction she enjoyed using the shadow teaching technique.

Wilena believed classroom management was another aspect of teaching that was important to productive classroom environments. She noted that she and other staff members in her building had considerable success using voice inflection, body movements, and other non-verbal cues to curb misbehavior. Wilena, however, felt that getting class started promptly and with preparedness was as significant as anything in preventing negative classroom conduct. In addition Wilena felt she controlled her class by providing students with consistent expectations and a firm understanding of what was acceptable in the classroom. At Garfield, Wilena used a ten category assessment system to provide students with feedback, both positive and negative, about classroom behavior. When Wilena provided feedback it was one on one with the student, with care taken not to embarrass or humiliate. Through the use of some effective classroom control strategies, Wilena was able to create classroom environments conducive for learning.

Even though teachers may manipulate the external learning conditions involving students, effective educators such as Wilena also possess the ability to motivate students. Wilena believed the best way to motivate youngsters was to allow them to realize success. Of course, this was easier said than done because students' egos, confidences, and basic personalities were sometimes fragile.

Before the motivation process could actually take place, Wilena believed it was critical to know where students were in terms of abilities and performance levels so that appropriate challenges could be provided. The challenges needed to be big enough to encourage confidence and self worth, when achieved but not so big that confidence and self esteem would be destroyed should the student realize failure. Wilena also indicated that care needed to be taken when providing tasks among peer groups. Many times tasks that were simple to the peer group but challenging to a specific student were humiliating to self esteem and confidence. Humiliation or embarrassment also had the potential to evoke improper behavior which had the potential to spill over and disrupt the control of the class.

More over, Wilena believed student motivation was enhanced when lessons could be instructed in a way that made the material relevant to the students. Wilena believed her students were much more willing to attempt the challenge of a task when they understood how it related to their particular lives.

Communication and the ability to communicate were additional ingredients that Wilena believed critical to the success of an educational system. Wilena believed one of the significant reasons for the success of her full inclusion program was due to the open communication lines

that existed within the model. Wilena also felt that communication was critical for issues of parental involvement, mainstreaming, administration and staff relationships, and student and teacher relationships. Wilena and the staff at Garfield provided an excellent model for the type of success a learning center can experience when lines of communication are open and used. Garfield Elementary improved its parent teacher relations through the use of some creative and effective communication strategies which resulted in increased parental involvement and awareness of their child's activities in the school setting. Wilena felt the two-way communication with parents benefited not only special education students but also the students in the regular education classes.

After thirty-two years of experience with young special education children, Wilena was saddened by the fact that the future role of special education and her involvement within it may be relegated to consultant type work rather than hands-on. It was Wilena's belief that the role of education to a large degree would depend on the philosophy of respective school districts. In any event, it was obvious that after thirty-two years of teaching, Wilena continued to have a very deep affection for educating children. As an example of the commitment Wilena held for her philosophical belief, "all students can and want to learn and it's the

responsibility of the educator to provide them with the right method and right material so they do learn", she made personal sacrifices assisting students to return to the regular classroom. In one particular instance, it had been decided that a little boy could return full-time to second grade. After a couple weeks into the class the boy, however, was curious as to when the class would be going to the wood shop for instruction. He was devastated when he learned from the second grade instructor that the class did not ever intend to go to the wood shop to hold class. Shortly thereafter, the young boy's behavior in the class began to deteriorate. After a conference was held between Wilena and the classroom teacher about the situation involving the young boy, Wilena took on the responsibility of planning and teaching an extra industrial arts class that provided for both regular and special education students.

Special education instructors like Wilena are unique in their abilities and unconditional love for children. Wilena mentioned she did not have a recipe for educating all children. It was quite apparent however, that her distinct passion for teaching children along with her sincere interest in their progress and development as young people propelled her to heights of teaching achievement only few know. Wilena's successful recipe for educating all children

is a model that could be utilized by educators at all levels to improve their effectiveness.