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Defining Moments

HOW ONE WOMAN MAKES A DIFFERENCE



“HOW CAN WE TEACH CHILDREN TO BE CREATIVE IF THOSE WHO ARE TEACHING THEM ARE RIGID? HOW DO WE TEACH THEM TO STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE AND REACH HIGHER THAN EVER IF WE MAKE THEM AFRAID TO FAIL? HOW DO WE TEACH THEM TO BE GOOD, THOUGHTFUL CITIZENS IF WE DON'T MODEL RESPECTFUL CHARACTER OURSELVES?” BONNIE COTTER, HEADMASTER OF DAVIDSON DAY SCHOOL, ASKS THESE QUESTIONS RHETORICALLY, YET WITH PROFOUND THOUGHT, PASSION, AND CARE.

Born and raised in Buffalo, N.Y., Bonnie has traveled many roads to get where she is today. “I met my husband, Paul, in high school at age 16,” she said. “We ended up attending the same college, chose the same major, and got married after graduation. We are celebrating our 30th wedding anniversary this year.”

Bonnie's first career choice was journalism. She attended a small, private college that had a highly respected journalism program and was later selected to become the editor-in-chief of its nationally recognized newspaper. “While I had great success in college following my journalism dream,” Bonnie recalled, “I found that I was developing a number of new interests that were becoming more exciting to me than my passion for the next big story ... seems I really wanted to be making the news, not just reporting it.”

After graduation, with her journalism degree in hand, Bonnie was offered two jobs—a position at a newspaper and a position as a public relations assistant at Western New York's Regional Children's Hospital of Buffalo. “I took the PR job,” Bonnie said, “so I could portray the amazing stories of sick and injured children and the noble men and women who were dedicated to helping them.”

Bonnie moved up the ranks in the healthcare industry over the next few years gaining experience in marketing, fundraising, and financial operations. “By the time I was 27,” she said, “I was a vice president, part of a large healthcare system, and I was making a very good living ... I felt I had already reached the top of what I thought I could achieve, and I wasn't even 30 yet!”

Feeling less than satisfied in her career, Bonnie welcomed the advice from her husband. “Paul was so supportive and taught me that I didn't have to be on the ‘success track’ and make the next ‘expected’ move in advancing my career. He said if I wasn't excited about what I was doing anymore, then perhaps it was time to move on.”

Subsequently, Bonnie went back to school and earned her master's degree in business administration. She found she had a knack for organizational behavior, creative problem solving, hiring and developing staff, and strategic planning. Although still working full time in healthcare, Bonnie knew she was heading for a career change.

Whether it's a “Hi Mrs. Cotter,” a high-five or a hug in the hallway, the bond between Bonnie and her students is palpable. “I believe our job as educators is to bring out the genius in each and every child,” she said. “I want our kids to be confident, innovative thinkers, and to use their vast gifts for higher purposes. And I want them to know that the sky's the limit!”

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“Before I could figure out what my next career move would be,” Bonnie reflected, “Paul and I adopted our first child ... Ben arrived from Korea at 4 months old. Over the next 15 years, we would adopt our daughter, Jade, move to Pittsburgh, then move back to Buffalo and finally on to Charlotte. I worked in three different private schools before landing at Davidson Day ... it has been a perfect fit ever since!”

When Bonnie took over as headmaster, Davidson Day was housed in an old factory; there was no high school class, and the school had a mixed reputation among the community. However, for Bonnie, it was love at first sight. “I fell in love with it immediately,” she said. “You had to look past the tired bones of the facility and see how awesome the children were and how exceptional the faculty was ... I knew I had a tremendous opportunity to build something wonderful.”

And build she did! Bonnie spearheaded the growth of the school to a brand new \$13 million campus, and it's now Pre-K through 12th grade with 420 students this year and an expected enrollment of 500 in fall 2010. “In the four years I have been headmaster,” Bonnie said, “we have built and moved into our beautiful new building, added our arts and athletics center, doubled student enrollment, and graduated our first high school class.”



BONNIE COTTER

