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One True Thing

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

As my oldest child was about to enter Booker T. Washington Middle School on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, a friend warned me, "Whatever you do, you don't want Chaka Ann as your teacher." Chaka, the friend said, was tough, overbearing, too demanding. I could believe it, just by the sound of her name.

Chaka Ann turned out to be a petite former Peace Corps worker with tremendous energy, a zany sense of humor and boundless enthusiasm for her subject (humanities) and her students. Her real name was Ann Puddu, but she had grown tired of being called Mrs. Purdue Chickens or Miss P.U. and reinvented herself as Chaka, loosely based, she says, on an African word meaning teacher, warrior, leader. She told parents of sixth graders that she was going to get their children ready for college, and boy, did she mean it.

"Write more," she used to scribble at the bottom of my daughter's homework papers. And writing more meant thinking more. My son taught himself "Greensleeves" on the guitar to accompany the class in a raucous performance of "Romeo and Juliet," in which every student had a role. Many will remember their lines for the rest of their lives.

I'm sure she shaped the educational future of my children -- and many others -- for years to come.

As an education reporter for seven years, I would often talk to people about teachers I have known. Policy makers and politicians invariably reacted cynically to stories of Chaka Ann and teachers like her -- surely one teacher cannot make that much difference, they would say. Besides, there aren't that many brilliant teachers out there. And how do you replicate them?

Instead, fixing public education seems to involve a constant quest for the one true thing, the magic bullet, what experts call systemic reform -- higher standards, proven curriculums, small schools, large schools, even uniform dress codes. Yet the one true thing never appears.

But many children and their parents think they have found the one true thing. They remember a great teacher and, if they are lucky, more than one. It is the teacher who made them understand algebra for the first time, or love literature, or feel as if they would grow up to be somebody worthwhile. Ask any parent how school is going this year, and if they're happy, the first thing they say is that their child has a great teacher. No one remembers a great school system or a great chancellor, a great textbook, or a great curriculum that came straight out of the can, with little room for deviation or idiosyncrasy.

Ideally, the measurable outcomes of teaching, like test scores or graduation rates or college entrance rates, would correlate somehow with the teachers people remember. How to measure the impact of a teacher is a tricky question, though experts are trying. Ronald F. Ferguson, an economist who does research in education at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, correlated teachers' test

scores with the test scores of their students, and found that teacher expertise accounts for more difference in student performance -- 40 percent -- than any other factor.

Through surveys and interviews in six states, Dr. Ferguson has mapped out a constellation of factors that characterize good teachers, all falling into the categories of subject knowledge, pedagogy and the relationship between students and teachers. He views relationships as one of the most important elements of what happens in the classroom. Some academics regard that "as touchy-feely stuff with no clear evidence that it makes any difference," he says. But, he adds, "We're trying to really test the proposition."

In general, Dr. Ferguson has found that effective teachers not only know their subjects but also have high expectations, do whatever it takes to help children understand the material and don't let them give up.

Douglas E. Wood, executive director of the National Academy for Excellent Teaching, which operates under the aegis of Teachers College at Columbia University, has this view: "It goes back to what kind of kid you want to produce. If you want kids to achieve on standardized tests and that's all you want, then you can be very clear about what makes an effective teacher. If you also want them to be able to think in creative ways about solving problems, that's not necessarily measured by a test. Then that changes the definition of what constitutes an effective teacher."

Further eluding science is that extra spark, what educational researchers call "value added." In teaching, as in many creative endeavors, effectiveness depends to some degree on personal chemistry in the classroom.

But can you teach someone to be the kind of teacher who makes a difference?

Jay Mathews thinks so. Mr. Mathews, a Washington Post columnist, wrote an inspirational book about Jaime Escalante, the maverick math teacher at Garfield High in East Los Angeles who served as the basis of the film "Stand and Deliver." He tells how a struggling teacher named Ben Jimenez went to Jaime Escalante for help, and Mr. Escalante was able to turn him into a strong teacher, though not a clone of his own showbiz personality. "You can't teach the sort of natural effervescence and humor of Jaime Escalante," Mr. Mathews says. "But you can certainly teach how to organize a class, how to care about kids, how to set goals and stick to them, and that's the essence of a great teacher."

Migdalia Pagan
Orange County Public Schools
Orlando, Fla.

The worst day of Migdalia Pagan's life came in fourth grade at Public School 61 on the Lower East Side of New York. She was 9 or 10 years old, in a class for Spanish-speaking children struggling with English, and her teacher, Sam Horowitz, held her back.

"I was furious about that, because I loved my teacher and I trusted him, and when he held me back it was such a letdown for me," says Ms. Pagan, who is known as Maggie. "I felt like I was a failure, and my dream was to be a teacher." Ms. Pagan realizes now that her teacher probably felt as bad, and as helpless, as she did. Looking back, she also realizes that he changed her life. He pushed her to do well and, in the end, she fulfilled her dream of becoming a teacher.

Mr. Horowitz was not the only teacher to influence the young Maggie. He sent her to a reading clinic,

where her teacher was Mabel Christie Dennison, who later helped found a small private school called the First Street School. (Mrs. Dennison's husband, George, wrote a 1969 best seller, "The Lives of Children," about the school.)

"On the first day, Mabel Dennison wrote me a little message on a colored index card: 'I can't wait to start reading and sharing books with you,'" Ms. Pagan recalls. She carried that card with her for years.

Mrs. Dennison took Maggie to the library for her first library card. Every Wednesday, instead of going to religious instruction, she would sneak off to the library and take out six books. One time, she forgot to return a book, and nobody seemed to notice. After that, she would check out six books a week, hide one under her bed, and return the other five. It was only when her mother received notice of a huge library fine that Maggie realized that her large collection of pilfered books had not magically become hers.

Despite opposition from her parents, who, she says, thought the role of a good Puerto Rican daughter was to get married and raise children, Ms. Pagan went on to college. There, too, she had help: Mr. Horowitz pushed her to fill out the application, and Mrs. Dennison helped her find work as a nanny.

Mrs. Dennison died in 2001. Ms. Pagan has not seen Mr. Horowitz in 30 years. "I have thought of her so often," says Mr. Horowitz, 72 and now retired. "She had guts. She had the horrible experience of having me as a first-year teacher. But whatever I lacked in ability, I made up for because the kids knew I wanted them to learn."

Ms. Pagan went on to teach elementary school in New York and then in Orlando, where she taught for 19 years. Echoing her childhood experience, she has stressed teaching English and reading skills to Spanish-speaking children. Now 54, she travels around the country as a literacy consultant. Among her awards is "teacher of the year" from Aloma Elementary School in Orlando. But it matters less to her than bumping into her former students, now grown, and having them tell her how she made them love learning.

Jane Andrias
Public School 28, Wright Brothers School
New York City

A great teacher can spring up like the wind-blown seed of a rare flower in the barren soil of an otherwise inhospitable school. That was the case with Jane Andrias, who began teaching at P.S. 28 in Harlem in 1969, when schools were at the center of the cultural and political battles of the 1960's. Community activists in black and Hispanic neighborhoods were fighting the teachers' union and the mayor's office for control of schools. Amid the political turmoil, Miss Andrias was trying to change the culture of the classroom, putting children at tables instead of desks, urging them to write poetry instead of reading textbooks.

She remembers 1970, when she was 23 and in her second year of teaching, as the most stressful and embattled of her career. "We were clearly outsiders," she says today.

Yet it was also the year that a boy named Robin D.G. Kelley, now a professor of anthropology at Columbia, began staying after school in her third-grade class, to clap erasers, clean the blackboard and bask in her presence. "Here's this young teacher standing there in her stylish short skirt, having to deal with, basically, a tornado," Mr. Kelley says now. He describes the class: "Basically poor, extremely poor. They were mostly African-American and Puerto Rican children in a period of time when heroin

was ravaging the neighborhood. People just look rough."

Miss Andrias (the children called her "Miss," even though she was married) was different from Mrs. Klein, who had put Mr. Kelley in a class for slow learners, or another teacher who humiliated the children. Robin was a shy child who did not speak up much in class. But after school, Miss Andrias "would ask about my mother, tell me a story about her family, introduce me to a new book or poet or artist, ask me questions about class, or work alongside me in silence," Mr. Kelley wrote in an essay called "First Crush," included in a 2003 book called "In Praise of Our Teachers."

Miss Andrias says she always tried to connect with children, even going to court with one of her students when he was in trouble. The alternative -- being a teacher at a remove -- was frightening. "I realized that I have this terrible power that I can do great damage with," she says.

Although he did not see his teacher again for 20 years, Mr. Kelley acknowledged her in every book he wrote. Like many teachers, Miss Andrias was unaware of her impact on one small boy. Until they met as adults, she says, "I had no idea how he felt about me."

Harry Cisler and Victor Motta
Renaissance Charter School
New York City

Every year for the past 12 years, Harry Cisler has posted these questions on the board in front of his high-school humanities class: "Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? How do I get there?"

"I know they're the basic questions that make people happy," he says, "and Aristotle says that happiness is the goal of life -- not just doing what makes you happy, but what you should do, virtue."

They are questions that Celeste Howard, an unhappy teenager caught in an ugly tug of war between her parents, took to heart. When she was 13, her mother and father separated and fought for custody of her. Celeste chose to live with her mother. Her father felt rejected and angry, and the tension showed at school, where her grades plummeted.

Eight years later, Ms. Howard credits two teachers -- Mr. Cisler, funny and full of showmanship, and her more retiring math teacher, Victor Motta -- with reviving her interest in school, convincing her that she was capable of doing well and ensuring that she graduated. (Her three older sisters never finished high school.) Both are the kinds of creative teachers that the Renaissance School in Queens nurtures. Mr. Cisler, who at 61 will retire this year after 40 years, credits his ability to empathize with children's fears and vulnerabilities. "If a teacher is attuned to that, if a teacher has suffered a little bit and gone through disappointments, he will be more sensitive to the students," he says. "They've all been hurt somehow or other, so they get that. They know I'm talking from someplace that's real. That makes a magic moment."

Ms. Howard says that Mr. Cisler, a former Marist monk, taught philosophy and psychology at a high level yet never doubted that she could understand it. "He taught us Freud, Plato, Aristotle, stuff that we really had to sit down and think about," says Ms. Howard, now 21.He was really prepping us for college." But Mr. Cisler did not pester students about homework. Whether they did it was up to them. They were in charge of their own destinies.

With Mr. Motta, she understood algebra for the first time, and qualified for an advanced chemistry course. "He gave everybody in class, not just me, individual attention," she says. When she tried to

sneak out after school, Mr. Motta's teaching assistant would grab her by the elbow and drag her back into an after-school homework-help program.

Ms. Howard graduated in 2002 and took a test to become a special officer in a city homeless shelter. She scored 86 of 100 and began training this fall. Mr. Cisler and Mr. Motta, she says, "gave me a sense of myself." She has also reconciled with her father.

T.S. Grant
New Era Academy
Baltimore, Md.

Carlise Addison didn't like her history teacher very much when she entered ninth grade last year at New Era. But then, the whole school rubbed her the wrong way. She had to wear a uniform. If she didn't do her homework or arrived late, she was given detention. "Here they enforce the rules," she says. T.S. Grant was one of the enforcers.

Ms. Addison, 15, nearly failed history. Mr. Grant expected his students to remember dates, names and places, and she wasn't accustomed to memorization. She was not alone, and at the end of the year Mr. Grant offered an extra-credit assignment to students who wanted to pass. They had to write about the Vietnam War after reading material from "A People's History of the United States," by Howard Zinn. Many of her classmates balked; they had to buy the book or check it out of the library. But Ms. Addison spent $19 on it, and she passed. She considered it money well spent.

By then, Mr. Grant had won her over because he seemed to understand what it was like to be her. Ms. Addison's mother was murdered when she was 9; an aunt has reared her. Mr. Grant, 34, grew up in a New Haven housing project and was put in a school for developmentally disabled children when he was 9. He was arrested for breaking into a Woolworth's when he was 11. He managed to graduate from high school; he joined the Air Force, worked as a minister and comedian (he had been class clown) and finally, in 1998, entered City University of New York. This year, Mr. Grant became assistant principal. Looking back, he credits one of his own teachers, Barbara Carpenter, with helping him overcome the stigma of being labeled a behavior problem. "She took me to restaurants and let me know I was O.K.," he says. "She wasn't patronizing."

He also says that his father, though brusque and difficult, instilled the values of hard work and independence in him. When Mr. Grant wanted pocket money, his father handed him a shoeshine kit and told him to go out and shine shoes. Mr. Grant did, and once earned a $50 tip.

As for Ms. Addison, she was elected student government president this year.

Anemona Hartocollis is a Times reporter and the author of "Seven Days of Possibilities: One Teacher, 24 Kids and the Music That Changed Their Lives Forever" (PublicAffairs).

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