

An Ode to Debbie Kolberg

My name is Tricia Wisniewski, and I had the pleasure of having Mrs. Kolberg for English from 5th-8th grade. I am not a fan of poor grammar, and that is solely due to her mad skills in language arts. I still refer to her as “Mrs. Kolberg” because I have so much respect for her, it’s hard for me to call her “Debbie”. I’ll work on it.

In addition to helping her students master the English language, she touched our hearts. She was ALWAYS smiling. Even when she was obviously frazzled by our class (and we knew she was frazzled), she kept smiling. When I think of Mrs. Kolberg today, I think of that smiling face first, and then I think of how hard she worked to make me feel special.

I came from a large family with very little money. Luckily, it was not hard to fit in at St. John’s school because our class sizes were small enough for everyone to be friends. I made many great friends here, and some of them were my teachers.

Mrs. Kolberg was someone who never mentioned that she could see your struggles, but she definitely knew what they were. She could see that I was a little bit lost in the shuffle of my large family, and that I was shy and unsure of myself. She ALWAYS made a point to tell me when I had done a “good job” on something, and there was one time in 8th grade that she took it upon herself to enter a piece of my writing in the “Snowbound Writer’s Contest”. I had no idea she had done that until I got a phone call from the Grand Haven Tribune, announcing that I had won first place in my age group. First place was a \$50 prize! The only catch was that I had to read my work aloud at the community center. I was terrified, and I remember approaching Mrs. Kolberg to find out if she knew how I had won the prize when I didn’t recall entering the contest. She looked me right in the eyes and said that she had entered it on my behalf because she thought it was so good, and didn’t think I would do it myself. For a second, I was stunned, and then I was so thankful to her. She was right. There was no way I would have entered my work into a contest on my own. And now, because of her, I won \$50....and had to read in front of the community!

I did read it in front of the community that February, and I used the \$50 to buy my 8th grade graduation dress. Because of Mrs. Kolberg, I have had the confidence to enter my work – both writing and artwork – into other contests, winning a couple of prizes along the way, and because of her, I got to wear a brand new dress that I picked out myself instead of a hand-me-down to my 8th grade graduation.

A few years ago, my grandmother passed away, and her funeral was here at St. John’s. Mrs. Kolberg took a break from her classroom to come see me before the funeral. This was one of the saddest times in my life, and yet, I smiled when I saw her, and I was so incredibly grateful that she was still thinking of me after all these years. She knew how special my grandma was to me, and so, she came to offer her condolences and her warm smile.

I’m 42 now. Throughout my life, I have happily run into Mrs. Kolberg here and there in town, and she’s still smiling. I will always cherish her for the strength she inspired in me, and for her kindness as a human being.