

Sherrie Hart: We All Have a Story

My parents were born & raised in small Louisiana towns but moved to California in the mid 50's where, as a black couple, they would have a "better chance to be hired for professional jobs." I was born in the 60's and grew up in Oakland, California. I always loved school and was thirsty to learn. I first considered becoming a teacher in elementary school because I deeply admired all my elementary school teachers. They were kind, encouraging & seemed to know everything! My mother was a teacher, and I admired her most. She was revered by students, fellow teachers, custodians and her principal. By my 5th grade year, my mother became a principal. Around that time, I became more aware of the black civil rights struggles. The multicultural community I lived in had not shown me this side of life, but television began to do so. My teachers, friends, family friends were every race you could imagine. Our black family friends and church members were doctors, lawyers, female scientists, politicians – I never felt like I was limited in a career choice. I was appalled at what was happening in America and couldn't wait to show the world what this black girl could do. In 6th grade, mother mentioned they moved from Louisiana because the only two professional jobs for blacks there were "a teacher or a preacher." Indignant, I decided then that I would NEVER be either of those – I would become something "greater."

My 8th grade science teacher ignited my love for science. He had engaging hands on-activities in which we participated instead of just watching. I knew then that my career had to involve science. In college, I was on a pre-med track to be an obstetrician because childbirth fascinated me. Then I realized I really wanted a 9-5 kind of job because family life with a husband & kids was VERY important to me. I tried to figure out what science career would

check those boxes. I decided to go into pharmaceutical sales after graduation. My mother recommended I do some substitute science teaching to earn money while I was interviewing. I had been helping with the pre-teen ministry at church and liked it, so I agreed – and got hooked.

One of my first sub assignments was teaching biology in a school for pregnant teens that ensured high school graduation and job readiness. I saw it was crucial that these girls be empowered by knowledge. These students knew this now, though many shared they had not before. These students saw that education was going to allow them to provide for their baby, so they were eager. I compared their understanding with that of many students who felt school was primarily a social location for which they endured the education requirement. I remember thinking that somehow, we must help all students get engaged in school and see its advantage or we will lose great minds. Even if they don't see the advantage now, we must engage them enough to get the education, so they are ready to take advantage of it once they DO figure out the importance. That philosophy has driven me my entire career. At this time, I came to my belief that teaching was the GREATEST, most important calling ever!

Armed with my science knowledge, engaging hands-on lessons and determination, I thought if I held their attention in class, that they would excitedly go home, do their homework and study for their tests. I did not yet understand how students' home life, emotions, hormones, routines and so many other things affected their attention, motivation, and ultimately their ability to do well in class. I learned some students will not respond to teaching without a connection – a trust. EVERY child deserves my best, tireless effort, so I still spend a lot of time talking to kids & parents to come up with learning solutions that work for each one. I believe every child can

learn. I must dig to find what inspires them, share my confidence in them & let them know I'm here to help them make it happen.

I've been told I have a gift for reaching the hard-to-reach students. I'd taught in predominantly urban schools, with minority students in California, New Jersey & New York. When I moved to Gwinnett County, Georgia to the middle-class suburban Brookwood cluster, I really wanted to teach in the cluster where my 8-year daughter was going to attend school. I was offered a position at that middle school and two others that were more like the other schools at which I'd taught previously. I wanted to choose my community's school but felt guilty. Am I selling out? One wise administrator friend offered this insight. She told me to consider the impact on this school and community seeing an African American woman teaching chemistry & physics. Think of the African American students and girls who will consider new possibilities with you there. I accepted my current position in my community's school, but I better understood that input once I started working there – she was right!

Another recent challenge has been the increasing numbers of students that are emotionally fragile. Some will curse you out today and run to you for comfort tomorrow. I've had to learn to not take the mistreatment personally & remember the delicate state of middle schoolers. At the end of the school year, previous students visit from the high school. They thank me for believing in them and sticking by them no matter what. They share words I spoke to them that I was sure had not sunk in. These visits help me remember that we may never see the fruit of our efforts while we teach students. For many, our words sink in later. At my mother's funeral 8 adults showed up begging to share how she positively changed the path of their life – we let them share. I have seen proof that teachers change lives and therefore this world.