

# Goodbye Smitty

The Life of a Teacher



By M. Hattman, K. Frank, S. Frank  
and others who were touched by his life

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Thanks to T&L for funding this and many other projects for Parkersburg Catholic Schools.

## **Dedicated To “Smitty”**

In the field of education, most books contain statistics, techniques, and mass produced lesson plans designed to improve teachers. The purpose of this memorial book is to honor the memory of John T. Smith, a simple man and a quality teacher by examining the many letters, emails, notes, and eulogies that teachers, classmates, parents, and friends wrote about “Smitty.” In looking at his life and methods, most of which one would not find in standard educational documents, perhaps an enhanced understanding of what makes one a quality teacher will emerge and can be applied by those who want to better their teaching styles.

### **Foreword**

Short! Balding! Loud! Energetic! Enthusiastic! Honest! Caring! Irish! Funny! What do these words have in common? They all describe our beloved friend, John. On April 30, 2002, John Smith, 40, died unexpectedly. The night after John died, we, the faculty and staff, met in John’s classroom to deal with our emotions and prepare ourselves to help our students through the grieving process. As we went around the room, each person expressed a thought or two about John. The order was random and emotional for each of us. One of our young coaches, Jan, who is studying to be a teacher, made a comment that spurred the writing of this memorial book not only as a tribute to John, but also as a mentorship program for teachers.

Two years ago, Jan had visited my office and said she wanted to attend college to become a teacher. I knew she had the academic abilities, but I believe that teaching is more than subject knowledge, and I wanted her to do some observations before picking education as a major. Knowing that Smitty was always open to visitors, I assigned her to his class. After two days of observation, she was even more convinced that teaching was for her. She wanted to be a teacher like Smitty. What did she see in John’s classes that convinced her to choose education?

The second reason for this publication stems from the day of his wake. Expecting a large crowd, the family decided to have the visitation in St. Xavier’s Church. For ten solid hours, a line formed with hundreds waiting to pay their respects to this everyday classroom teacher. As I looked at the composition of the mourners, I realized that Smitty was a special teacher. When a teacher dies in a small school, one expects that his students would come to pay their respects. But this outpouring of love and sadness included not only our current students, but also their parents, alumni from the past seventeen years, friends, colleagues, and, of course, family. In talking with the students and alumni, listening to their stories, and watching their tears, I realized that this was far beyond the idea of obligation. They were there to show their respect for a friend and a teacher who had influenced their lives. The words in this book capture their thoughts and feelings much better than any author could.

The variety of alumni who attended the wake and the funeral indicates that Smitty touched the lives of all his students—a single mother still trying to finish college standing beside a medical school graduate; an all-state football player waiting beside the captain of the quiz team; a former student with a story about an incident in seventh grade; one with a senior problem; one who had been recognized for writing by Smitty; and one who was grateful for extra credit work that enabled him to pass a course and graduate. He touched them all in a special way—he was able to relate to all levels from those at risk to those who excelled. Even the parents knew stories about Smitty that their children had shared with them.

The final reason for this publication continues some projects that several members of our faculty (including Smitty) have published to help mentor new teachers. Therefore, this memorial is to preserve the greatness of Smitty and use the lessons learned from his life to inspire others to become quality teachers.

I have included my own interpretation of what people have said, and I hope I have expanded their thoughts, tempered with my eleven years as principal of Parkersburg Catholic. I was in his room at least three to five times every week. Not only did he include the students in conversation, but he welcomed the principal to contribute as well. Many times he suggested that I drop in and comment on a topic that he had up for discussion so that the students could benefit from hearing the “official” side of the issue. I have examined my evaluations of John, his yearly goal setting process, his video tapes, and my observations as a guide for my interpretation of the quotes and comments of parents, peers, and students. I hope that I have captured and preserved the essence that was John.

This book is written as a tribute to a special teacher, his family, and his students. There could be no greater tribute to him than to know that his work made better people of his students, and that the methods he used were replicated by other teachers in their desire to make better people of their students.

I dedicate this book to the millions of ordinary, simple classroom teachers who touch the hearts of their students everyday. As I considered what to include, I also looked closely at the other teachers in our building. Many of them are equal to John. If they passed away, the letters might be in different forms and from different students, but the basics would be the same.

To the new teacher fresh from methods classes, I hope the human compassion evident in this story motivates you to incorporate these ideas into your teaching. To the veteran teachers, hopefully, this simple story will remind you to celebrate your great moments and success stories by reading about how much these students appreciated what John had done for them.

For those experienced teachers who are suffering from “burn-out,” perhaps this book will inspire you to reflect on your own careers—have you strayed away from the basics? Can you rebuild in the middle of your career? How can you finish on the top of the game?

Obviously, this book is written for mentors; all experienced teachers must be mentors for the new or inexperienced teachers in our building.

For parents, this memorial should help you to understand the beauty of the profession of teaching, and the many non-instructional problems that teachers help your children resolve during a time when your children are distancing themselves from you.

This book should be read before every bond levy, so that the community can understand the tremendous gift they receive at minimal cost.

*“Smitty” is the fourth in a series of books written to enhance the understanding of the practical aspect of teaching. If you have a Smitty story or wish to write about any special teacher in your life, please forward your thoughts, along with permission to publish, to one of the addresses below. We will review your contribution for use in our next work and convention presentations. —MRH*

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## Introduction

*They came. On a day when they should have felt relaxed, they felt saddened, troubled by their loss. Filing in slowly, they came to pay their respects to a man they loved.*

*They came alone, silently weeping. In groups, wiping runny noses and teary eyes, clinging to each other. They came crying for the loss of a husband, a father, a teacher, a colleague, but mostly, a friend.*

*For many, the loss of Mr. John Smith was their first “real” experience with death. Never before had they felt the emptiness, the aloneness, the tear-filled suffering of losing someone who meant so much to them.*

*For others, his death was just one more pain in a world of hurt. They grieved, some more quickly than others, but they knew that they would miss him more than others they could think of.*

*They didn’t know why, though. They didn’t know why it happened to him, to their favorite, to the all-around great guy. They didn’t know why it hurt them so—they, who weren’t really related to him, but they knew that their pain was intense. They knew that it hurt more than any other pain they had felt.*

*Maybe it was his humor, his ability to make even the very worst situation better by bringing laughter, joy, and a relaxed attitude. He could make anyone feel happy—his sheer joy of life rubbed off on everyone around him.*

*Maybe it was the energetic way in which he taught his classes. His pure love of teaching made his classes more fun than others in the building. Ten minutes in any one of his classes would show that he loved what he did. He taught nouns, verbs, poetry, and short stories, but he also taught life. Social justice and concern for others were integral parts of his lesson plans.*

*He welcomed conversation with his students, offering advice when he needed to, yet he never let anyone leave feeling sorry for themselves. He made sure that no matter how dismal things may have seemed, his students knew they were better off than most.*

*Maybe it was his support for his students. He led by example—cheering at games so others’ spirits would soar, or beginning class with prayer so his students would ground themselves in a relationship with God. He volunteered, so his students would see that through giving, they would receive. He personified the statement by Mother Teresa, “Preach the Gospel in all you do. Use words when necessary.” It wasn’t always what he said, it was what he did.*

*March 30, 2002 will live in the minds of many as one of the saddest days of their lives. However, we are extremely lucky, and grateful for the time we did have with Mr. Smith. He touched our lives, changing us into smarter, more compassionate, loving people. We were blessed by his presence, and we are better people just for having known him.*

*Allison Barney, PCHS Class of 2002*

On March 30, 2002, Parkersburg Catholic High teacher John “Smitty” Smith, Jr, died of a heart attack at the age of forty. The above passage and the letters that follow were written by John’s students, peers, and friends in remembrance of one of the greatest humans we have ever known. One of John’s favorite sayings was, “when life gives me lemons, I make lemonade.” Hopefully, this book will serve as lemonade for the soul. Through our memories of John and his teachings, we hope that his example will serve as a mentoring guide for other teachers and for other people to follow. That is what we are trying to do by putting these letters and thoughts together. They could be used by teachers in all stages of their careers for reflection, celebration, and improvement.

This book is not only the opinion of students. It contains the words of students, parents and peers. As one peer says, “it is difficult for students to be objective or have the skills to evaluate,” but they are honest, and as the letters show, there are common trends expressed by all who contributed to this writing. By looking closely at what they say, I believe we can explain and show some great guidelines for teachers.

Looking at the simple traits evinced in John's life and philosophy is not the way our society usually does things. It is not a part of educational theory. We try to find the big plan with notebooks, in-services, and books by known experts. Maybe it's easier that way. These simple actions of Smitty take a tremendous amount of time and energy. Teachers are not well trained in the basics and are not given the time to learn them. In fact, the world of test scores encourages going in the opposite direction. If this writing does anything, we hope that it will cause an examination of the relationships necessary to teach. What a thought! Does it scare us away because we might have to apply relationship thinking to other areas of our lives?

The scandalous idea of the teacher as your friend is not normally taught in education classes. Depending on your sequence of reading, you will notice that this term is used frequently by those students writing about John. In many teacher instruction programs, this is a red flag word, and teachers are warned to avoid friendship with students. To me it is the ultimate compliment. Yes, if students called him friend using the term the same way as they did their peers, it would indeed be a dangerous situation. There is always a line in every situation that must establish a difference between teacher or friend. Those are obvious and John shows he could draw that line when necessary as shown in Letter Seven from Jason Knight.

What we often forget is that those teachers who are involved in more than just classroom teaching can be friends with kids. They can listen when asked, share funny times through prom building or driving the school van to games. They can be godparents as John was to so many students. A teacher who is a friend can get phone calls or emails from students when they are hurting. They are the people who are there when a student wants to come into the classroom and vent about a topic knowing that it will go no further. They can be asked about advice on issues or decisions about to be made. If you are this teacher, they will call you *friend*.

You don't have to compromise anything professional to be called friend. You just have to constantly and consistently establish the limits and know that most of the friend things are not associated with classroom instruction. The greatest compliment I have received in education is from a recent graduate who called me his friend, and the father he never had. Records indicate he was suspended numerous times from the school. Our association did not hurt my professional stature. In fact, it enhanced it by helping me better understand difficult students. When we went to lunch at the local diner, he was my friend, my son. When we were in school, and he had been sent to the office, he was a student. I think we lose a lot by not making friends with our students. It is difficult and one must be very careful with situations, but to run from being called friend is wrong.

To be called friend was a compliment to this fine man and his professional stature. Smitty worked very hard to build friendships with students and knew where to draw the line. Mentors should work with this idea as they mentor new teachers. Please don't ignore it because of some of the potential dangers. We cannot destroy relationships out of fear. Instead, we must learn the right way to build them.

Why do so many letters refer to humor? So many books tell us that students at this age wear their feelings on their sleeves and are extra sensitive to cuts and humor. Yet humor was one of John's greatest ways to communicate with students. It might be that everyone in education needs to reevaluate the use of humor in the classroom.

There are several references to John being a simple person and his being able to notice the simple things that students achieve. Another side of the simple idea is that most learning happens in simple situations. John's classes were so interesting because he worked at making the simple tasks interesting. One need only walk into his room on the required vocabulary day to see the language come alive. It wasn't enough to know how to use the word in a sentence, you had to use it with emotion to show you really understood the meaning. If

you couldn't, Smitty would wait until you got the concept. We all give attention to the big ticket items, but a little reflection on the simple activities and how to make them come alive might be factors in improving our success as an educator.

Remember that many of the letters in this book are from teenagers . What would they know about how to teach young people? They haven't been to college and learned how to teach. Perhaps they know better than the modern teaching theorists who spend a lot of time on examining the processes, technology, curriculum, and text. John had a mastery of all these, but it was the human side of him that made him one of the best. Yes, we need to continue to develop scientific ways of professional development, but let us use these moments to remember the importance of the human elements by reading about John.

## Letter One:

Dear Mr. Hattman,

*Hello this is Andrew Borkowski. I wish I was emailing you under different circumstances but I felt like I needed to remember the most important teacher in my life.*

*Although there are many other people more qualified to speak about Mr. Smith I feel the way he impacted my life and helped me through some difficult times gives me the responsibility to express my thoughts about a wonderful man. As you are well aware I wasn't the best student during my days at PCHS. Yet I look back on these days as the most important in my life. I went from an immature kid to someone with a better outlook on life and the realization that education is important. As I sit here one month from graduation I can't help but think about the people who got me here. I consider what Mr. Smith did for me, during my years at PCHS, the single biggest reason why I made it to college graduation. I know I brought most of my problems upon myself during Junior High/High School. I never had good relationships with teachers or authority figures. Mr. Smith was the first person (in this capacity) who I felt I could trust. In class he made everyone feel equal and important. So often, through my own ignorance, I felt like I was singled out and different from my class mates. Mr. Smith was able to see through this and he became a friend to me. He took the bad and with the good and treated me like anyone else (Of course I had plenty of time alone with him through D-Hall). As we all know he was a great English teacher, but this isn't why I feel so hurt over his passing. He taught me lessons about life that will have far greater importance to me throughout my time on earth. He was a teacher, a friend, and a motivator. Mr. Smith probably wouldn't want me to share this with you but he let us get away with a few things other teachers wouldn't. Although this doesn't sound like a good quality, it was the lessons he taught after we did something wrong that will have such a lasting impression on me. I'm sure over the next couple of weeks many people will have stories to share about Mr. Smith, probably with more passion and emotion than I can express in a simple email. Yet I hope everyone realizes how important he is to me.*

*As I mentioned before I'm getting ready to graduate from Methodist College this May with a Business and Marketing degree. Over the years, since High School graduation, I've had several moments to reflect upon how much Mr. Smith meant to me. One of these moments occurred after my first semester at Methodist College. I sent him a copy of my grades. I was so proud of myself for getting above a 3.0 GPA. I felt like it was important to let Mr. Smith know how I was doing and hopefully by this he would realize he deserved some of the credit for my accomplishment. With graduation coming up I had planned on doing something special for him (even though I hadn't spoken to him in a couple of years). Now I will never get the chance to tell him how much he meant to me. There is a sense of guilt and frustration in my mind that I never had the chance to THANK him for all he did for me. After all the lessons he taught me maybe the most important, which I'm just now coming to grips with*

*is, "LIFE IS PRECIOUS AND LIVE EACH DAY TO THE FULLEST." I'll never be able to get over the fact that I wasn't able to share these words with him. If I had one last conversation with him I would tell him I LOVE YOU AND THANKS for all you did for me. As I sit here in tears I would also like to say, "THANK YOU" to you (Mr. Hattman) and all the teachers at PCHS, because as I'm beginning to realize you don't always get a chance to say goodbye. I wish I could be there today and tomorrow to remember my friend Mr. Smith. Since I'm stuck in North Carolina I would ask you to pass along my sincere and heart felt condolences to his family. I hope this email adds to the countless other reasons why everyone who had the chance to meet him will miss Mr. Smith.*

*P.S.*

*Feel free to share this email with family and fiends of Mr. Smith and anyone at PCHS*

*Sincerely,*

*Andrew Borkowski, PCHS Class Of 97*

#### **Notes:**

I don't think there was a teacher who thought that Andrew would not make it, but in his most difficult times, only John was able to communicate his faith in him. If you ask yourself more than once "am I the only one who is reaching this kid," do not behave as if the answer is yes in every case. You may be wrong.

Though Andrew believes that John lets students get away with things other teachers would not, what he and the other students did not know that John and I (as the principal) communicated on all those things they thought he kept from me. John was a team player and had a clear realization that the principal needed to know what was going on in his school when it was important. John and I had a relationship of mutual trust. He would let me know the matters that counted but trusted that I would use the information in ways that kept his trust with the students. He realized the order and discipline of the school was a critical matter. Sometimes he had to take actions that protected the students from themselves. Also remember that Andrew speaks of the lessons that John taught afterwards. Many times I would let John handle a situation because I knew he would ensure that the students learned from their mistakes.

Andrew realizes that John made everyone feel equal and important. John talked to his students. He attended their events. He wrote comments on their papers, listening to and respecting their stance on any idea. He never set himself up in the position that he was better than anyone, but made it clear he believed that we are all people trying to make it in the world. He had equal respect for students, peers, parents, principal and custodian.

He took the good with the bad. He wasn't afraid to punish or try to change the bad in any kid but he always found a way to remember the good in the same kid. We had many conferences that ended with John reminding me of something good about the kid I was about to discipline.

As a principal, when I evaluate teachers I spend much of my time watching the students. What the teacher has planned or is doing is of little consequence if the students are not learning. John motivated with interest: he loved his subject and shared the love with his students. He motivated through energy: he was loud and you never found him in the same place twice during a class. He motivated through surprise: the students never knew what to expect other than he would be prepared and exciting. He motivated through

concern for his students: he was interested in them. Look at the pictures of his room. His classroom walls themselves were motivators.

As an English teacher, John was required to teach the mechanics of language and the canon of western and world literature. This he did in a professional and personal manner. He realized the importance of language to communication and worked at making it interesting. In teaching literature, he did not merely teach stories, plays, novels, essays, and poems, he taught lessons about life. In doing so he realized the potential of his chosen field to teach about the human elements that exist in our lives—the passions and joys, the heartbreak and sorrows, failures and challenges.

Many teachers merely fulfill the basic requirements of teaching vocabulary, composition and literature, and students pass their course without ever understanding the human issues behind the material. Not in John Smith. I never saw an actual list of what he thought should be taught “about life,” but I bet that if everyone touched by John’s life were to write up a list of what they thought was on his list, the results would be pretty much the same:

- The importance of God in your life
- A man’s family is his priority
- Hard work is a reward in itself.
- Reading is one of life’s greatest pleasures.
- Treat others as you would wish to be treated.
- Never kick a man when he is down.
- Find out who you are and enjoy being that person no matter what others say.
- Make lemonade when life gives you lemons.
- Look for the simple pleasures of life.
- Kids are enjoyable people.
- You are responsible for your own actions.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Look at your student list: who are those who you make feel equal and important? The other night while attending a meeting in a grade school classroom, I saw lists of the task students were allowed to perform for the teacher. These tasks make elementary students feel important. When we reach the junior and senior high school level, we need to find new ways to make students feel important.

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2. He was a motivator. Look at the faces of your students. Look at their work. Are you motivating them? What might you do to connect their lives to the material you teach?

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3. We might improve our teaching and student interest by listing what we believe to be our top ten lessons in life. Can you find ways to include them in your teaching if allowed by your school system?

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4. Andrew never got to thank John for his work. Set aside time everyday to let one of your peers know that they are doing a great job. John was our resident cheerleader and never missed an opportunity to let another know they were doing a great job. Turn the tables. Are there things you might want to tell your students in case one of them isn't there the next day?

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## Letter Two:

This letter is from a parent of two students. (Unfortunately, one of his sons tragically died.) Though his kids have been out of our school for seven years, he felt compelled to write. Because of his loss, he believed he might have an important insight into what high school students need.

*Dear Principal Bob Hattman,  
I am writing this letter for the graduating class of PCHS, 2002. As anyone who knew him, Mr. John Smith had one idea in mind, to help all his students realize their potential and develop their ideas. I personally do not know of any time that he had any other thought in mind, as he did his best to help his students learn. He was always the first to praise and the last to criticize any attempt at developing the best in his students. His idea was to, awaken the interest of those he taught, and to allow the freedom for the exploration of that interest. Many times in our life we will encounter individuals or events that will make lasting impressions upon our own belief and ideals. Mr. Smith was one of those individuals that provide a benchmark for further growth.*

*Respectfully, Mike Spainhour  
05/18/02*

### Notes:

This letter highlights some of the most important facets of John's teaching. "All," "the first to praise and the last to criticize," "awaken interests," and "he did his best" were the invisible mottos that he lived by both in and out of the classroom.

One must be aware of the number of times the word *all* is used in reference to Smitty. He was an inspiration to every type of student at every age level. Many have the ability to relate to those who are like them. It takes a great deal of dedication and effort to reach out to those who think and act differently from you. John was one of those people who reached out to everyone.

The statement "first to praise and the last to criticize" is a compliment in two ways. John was a motivator of students through the use of positive methods, yet he was not all fluff. When a student or their work needed to be called to task, John was able to use critical evaluation. Because he consistently and honestly used praise and criticism, the students knew that the praise was real. Furthermore, they accepted the criticism because the positives had preceded the negative.

Awaken interests: Do we know the interests of our students? Do we try to relate the material to their interests in any fashion? John tried to relate all material to student lives. Through open-ended assignments, John allowed students to combine their interests with the curriculum in a flexible manner. Although he couldn't make every student interested every day, on any given topic there was more than enough to promote lively discussion and spark creative thought.

"He did his best." If every teacher could leave the building with this accomplishment every day, schools would not be in need of reform. And what was John's best improved, changed, and adapted from year to year. Always involved in professional development through school and private initiatives, John was a life-long learner, and he taught his students life-long learning through example. His students knew what books he was reading, and he asked several students to help him learn more about technology. Days before his death he was planning to accept an increased role in his church.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Do you have invisible mottos which guide your life and your teaching style? What are they?

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2. Do you know the interests of your students? How might you connect their interests to the subjects you teach?

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3. What professional and personal initiatives might you find to help you always do your best, now and in the future?

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**Letter Three (John Smith Memorial Service—  
Parkersburg Catholic High School— April 8, 2002):**

*How many of you remember what Mr. Smith called me? (Expected response—Mom) No, I'm not really his mom, but I would have been proud to have him as a son. I asked to speak to you today because, like you, I am grieving for a loved one. All of us here today have lost a man who greatly influenced our lives. We are grieving for a husband, a father, a brother-in-law, a mentor, a teacher, an advisor, a colleague, and a friend.*

*Mr. Smith, or Harv as we called him in 1974, and I came to Catholic together. He was my student in English, drama and speech classes for six years. I was his class advisor, his drama coach, his quiz team coach, and later his friend and colleague. During his years in college we kept in touch, and I was thrilled when he joined our faculty in 1985. I was privileged to watch him grow from an immature seventh grader into a wonderful husband, father, teacher, role model and friend. I could tell you funny stories—such as the huge water fight that we had during a rehearsal of Bye Bye Birdie—or the 50 pumpkins that mysteriously grew on the PCHS roof every day one Halloween season—or the hundreds of pages of science fiction that he wrote and brought to me to read almost daily-- but we all know funny stories about Mr. Smith. His sense of humor was part of his charm.*

*His amazing energy and creativity also made up a large part of his personality—he could accomplish more than the average person-- from being an avid reader and writer to a motivator of students. Nothing was too much for him to undertake. He cared about all of us. Yet he was a simple man—his wants were small—give him a good book or movie and his day was complete.*

*A few weeks ago, Mr. Smith shared his faith with us. He told us that when life gives us lemons, make lemonade. That was not just a sermon for us—that was the way he lived his life. Every time he experienced something new, he would comment—“I had a blast.” I was there the first time he visited Washington, D.C, and saw the awe on his face as he came up the escalator from the subway to see the Washington Monument--the first time he read at a quiz team tournament—every time one of his favorite authors wrote a new book-- all of these simple pleasures he embraced with enthusiasm.*

*I urge you all to write your memories into the book by the main office so that his family will have permanent memories to keep. None of us will forget Mr. Smith. His joy in living, his dedication to God, his family, his friends, his classes, and to this school will remain with all of us who are better for having known him. Let's all carry him with us and honor his memory by enriching our lives the way that he did—with faith in God, love of family, and simple pleasures.*

*I will close with this simple prayer called “The Blessing of Memory.”*

*It is hard to sing of oneness when our world is not complete, when those who once brought wholeness to our life have gone, and nothing but*

*memory can fill the emptiness their passing leaves behind.*

*But memory can tell us only what we were, in company with those we loved; it cannot help us find what each of us, alone, must now become. Yet no one is really alone; those who live no more, echo still within our thoughts and words, and what they did is part of what we have become.*

*We do best homage to our dead when we live our lives most fully, even in the shadow of our loss. For each of our lives is worth the life of the whole world; in each one is the breath of the Ultimate One. In affirming God, we affirm the worth of each one whose life, now ended, brought us closer to the Source of life, in whose unity no one is alone and every life finds purpose.*

*Love,  
Stevie Frank “Mom”*

### **Notes:**

Why would a master teacher call another teacher mom? John knew that he wasn't perfect, and he needed a guide to help him keep the right path in teaching. Sometimes in this profession we try to keep it all inside, or get swept away in a current complaint in the teachers lounge. John knew that everyone needs that special peer – a mentor– to help keep their balance. Stevie was that person for John. John never took without giving something in return. He served as mentor for more than ten new teachers or long term subs. They were relaxed in his presence and could ask any type of question without fearing a condescending attitude. Though the idea of mentorship is seldom discussed in teacher preparation, the selection and use of a good mentor might be the most important choice in the career of a young teacher.

As John's friend and mentor states, he took joy in the simple things. He knew that most of the improvement in students is measured in small simple steps. How much would we improve the school environment by commenting on the simple improvements instead of waiting on the few master strokes of greatness that might occur in our students over the year? Some of our students of lesser ability may never have anything more than simple improvements. This was part of the reason John was able to relate to students of all levels– because he helped celebrate their simple improvements as they occurred.

Making lemonade from lemons was an automatic process for John. He always tried to make the best out of every situation. It didn't always work, but it was his starting point. If we were to start reflecting on our lemon situations at the end of the day to see how we could have improved, we might begin to develop the lemonade habit for difficult situations.

One thing that made John such a successful teacher and human is that he was never afraid to ask for help, not only from mentors but also from administration. He was a life-long learner in both subject matter and teaching methods/style. His pride in his work caused him to expect quality in himself. He always knew what he was trying to accomplish—his mission was education. He was willing to accept criticism and correction if it would help him achieve that mission. John accepted criticism; he was not always trying to be defensive when corrected. He actually listened and tried to grow from teacher/principal sessions.

I asked Stevie what she remembered from John's early years as a teacher. She replied: “In John's early teaching years, his enthusiasm for his subjects more than made up for his lack of experience. His classes were often raucous, but learning was taking place. At twenty-three, in many ways John was still a teen at heart. But as he grew in knowledge and experience, his classroom management skills grew with

him. He began a master’s program at Marietta. Mr. Bell, John and I all took a Shakespeare class together—just the three of us and the professor. As John would say, “it was a blast.” Meanwhile authors whom he had disliked in high school now made sense to him—authors such as Thoreau, Emerson, and Shakespeare. In addition to his enthusiasm, he possessed so much energy—at school by 6:00 A.M., phenomenal organizational skills, working on his novel, sending scathing “Letters to the Editor” on subjects ranging from patriotism to politics to Harry Potter, reading voraciously— he accomplished more than most of us in a month every week.”

### Discussion Questions:

1. John was happy at work more than most because he enjoyed the simple things, What would happen if we created a list of ten simple things to enjoy at school and enjoyed them? Some suggestions:

- The smell of coffee in the lounge
- The fact that we have a working copy machine
- The most creative student hair color of the day
- The best question of the day
- Your most profound statement to a student
- A hug or a smile from a student
- The number of days in a row without a sleeping student
- A moment of silence after the last student is gone.

What would be on your list?

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2. Stevie remembers some funny stories about John. Are there any funny stories in your teaching career? Does anyone still tell them? Are you making any new funny stories? Do your students have any funny stories on you. How would your react to them being told? Do you know any funny stories about your students? Do you tell them?

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3. Do you have a peer mentor? What advice do they give you? How have they helped you? What sorts of things do you ask their advice on?

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4. Have you been a mentor for another teacher? Would you like to be one? What kind of advice do/would you give them?

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5. How do you react when someone criticizes you? Do you seek out criticism and learn from it?

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#### Letter Four (Eulogy Spoken at John's Funeral):

*Good afternoon. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Adam Nedeff and I graduated from PC last year. I don't know why I felt the need to do this, but I am. I'm probably not the best person to do this. I wasn't Mister Smith's best friend, I certainly don't know a lot of details about his life, and I know I wasn't any closer to him than any other student he taught. I suppose the reason I'm doing this is because, like so many of you, I have a lot of things to say about Mister Smith that I somehow never got around to saying directly to him. Besides, his passing officially makes me the loudest living graduate of PCHS so I guess I should say something.*

*That's right, I started with a joke. When I decided I wanted to do this, I told a couple of friends how I felt it would be hard because it's the first time I've ever said something completely serious. Rocky Love said to me, "Smitty would be ticked off if you made it too serious." Hence the joke. And Rocky was right. Mister Smith isn't going to be remembered just for being a terrific teacher; we're all going to remember him for his great sense of humor. After it sank in that Mister Smith had died, I'll bet everyone here remembered some really funny thing that he said. I remembered an exchange we had at least once a week all through high school. I would pass Mister Smith in the hallway and say "How are you, Smitty?" and he'd answer, "Short! How about you?"*

*Mister Smith was a terrific guy and if I live to be 1,000, I can't forget him. He left such a striking impression on me for several reasons. First, he was the most in-touch teacher I ever knew. He watched MTV and wrestling, and he loved movies, so he always knew what you were talking about. That and he still talked like a teenager, so you felt like you had a rapport with him, and I always felt like I could talk to him about anything, and often I did. I really appreciated that too, because you hold your teachers up to a certain standard and you have a feeling like you can't reveal yourself to them, but Smitty made you feel like he wanted to hear you. I know there were probably nights I talked to him when Mister Smith wasn't so glad I felt that way about him, but I always appreciated having him there.*

*The second thing that struck me about Mister Smith was that he had a tremendous amount of respect for his students. I know, it's probably because he was just an overgrown teenager himself, but it always amazed me the way he showed so much respect for his students' intelligence. He didn't mince words; he didn't pick a "gentle" way of making a point about a sensitive topic; he was up-front about it. He didn't say to me, "Adam, this column you wrote is funny if you look at it from a certain point of view, but I'm not so sure how well it will translate when others read it, Mm-kay?" He said to me, "Adam this column isn't funny at all. Write about something else." As possibly the only humor-based columnist the Crusader Chronicle ever had, a major issue with my columns was that occasionally I would go off on a tangent with something that I sincerely meant, but it would get me expelled if it were published. So Mister Smith would actually make a point of calling me over to his desk and going over the problems he had. He could have just*

*clipped out the offense entirely, or he could have rewritten it to something soft and wimpy, and done it without telling me. Instead he respected me enough to sit me down and talk about it until we found something we both liked that wouldn't offend the vast majority of the human race. The third thing that struck me was that he was happier with his placement in life than most people I've met. Chances are most of you in here have one thing that you'd like to change about your life. If Mister Smith had something he wanted to change he never told me what it was. He seemed content living a life that was as ordinary as his name. He loved working at PCHS, and I don't think there was a job offer that could have pulled him away from that place. He was proud of it. He loved his geographical location. He didn't desire the action of a big city. He once told me he wouldn't trade life in a small town for anything in the world. He loved his family so very much. He loved the people surrounding him. He was confident in himself. I've never seen anyone embrace male—pattern baldness quite the way Mister Smith did. When we talked on IM, I'd ask "How are you doing?" He'd say, "No complaints." I believed him. It amazed me that someone who lived such an average way could be so happy with it, but I suppose that was because Mister Smith himself was unique. Unless you're talking about a telephone book or a hotel register, there will never be another John Smith. I guess I was lucky that Mister Smith had gotten along so well with my brother Aaron, because from the first day I walked into PCHS, he was there for me, no matter what I needed. He was there when I just needed to express how ticked off and miserable I was in 7th grade, and he was there when I needed a duet partner for the school musical senior year. And through it all I gradually stopped thinking of him as a teacher and more as a friend who also happened to be my teacher. And I know I'm just one of several hundred who felt that way about him. I can't believe Mister Smith is gone. But I don't mean that in a sorrowful, mournful way. I mean it because I've got so many memories of Mister Smith that it's hard to imagine them ever going away. Sometimes when I need a good cheering up I find myself flashing back to a good laugh we had or a sarcastic comment he made that I enjoyed. Now, as I move on, I begin to realize that if I ever go back to visit PCHS for a day, I won't have Mister Smith to visit and annoy during Journalism class. I'll never hear any of the phrases that turned into his trademarks while I was his student. "Adam... MOUTH!" "Adam, sit!" "Adam, you're losing points." "Adam, leave Krissy alone" "Adam, leave Mandy alone." "Adam, leave——" well, you get the idea. I'm having a hard time mourning his death. I haven't had a good cry yet, I haven't done anything that I'm "supposed" to do because Mister Smith is gone. It's because the way I see it, you can react to his untimely passing in one of two ways. You can be bitter because he was taken away so quickly, or you can be grateful because of the time you got to spend with him., I'm choosing the latter because frankly, thinking of Mister Smith and doing anything but smiling seems so unnatural. Goodbye, Smitty.*

## Notes:

Too many people think that you are irreverent to an institution if you use humor to any degree. Smitty used humor in all situations. Though there was never a man who was more serious about his job, students, family, community and church, humor was his way of breaking down barriers. He could dissolve tension with the same method. It was not a matter of irreverence, but a wonderful tool in the hands of this craftsman.

At John's wake (where this letter was originally read), the church was full of grief for the loss of a friend and at the same time full of laughter. Smitty would have been upset if we had not acted in the same way he would at our wake.

As Adam's letter reveals, it was not merely his sense of humor that made Smitty special. He took time to live in the teenagers' world. He knew their music, books, movies and clothing. He seemed interested. More than seemed, he was interested. John loved kids, and anything they did interested him. Though teaching tends to be a talking profession with little emphasis on listening, John could do both and that helped him gain the respect of the students

Adam speaks of not being John's closest student. Perhaps not, yet John was there for him in the seventh grade. In Adam's senior year, John sang a duet with him in the school musical. John could relate to our youngest and to our seniors. In a 7-12 school this is more difficult than most people realize. This care went beyond the school years. During the regular college breaks, after boot camp, or just passing through town, alumni stopped to see John, and he found time to talk to them. Though we have many visitors in our small school, he was the one students returned to see the most.

He loved his job, and students knew that. Not every day was perfect, and nobody loved snow days more than John, but being a classroom teacher was what he wanted to be in life, and he constantly told his students this. If we are here for anything less, teaching is a very difficult job. For a few years John accepted a second period administrative position. Then he asked to be put back into the classroom. He said that you couldn't draw any energy from administration; it was a constant drain. He would have been a good administrator, but it took him away from the kids.

John was always open to new ideas and methods, but he never allowed them to change him. Technology became part of his teaching, but he used e-mail to increase communications with students. There were more intelligent teachers, better speakers and those with more organizational skills. John admired these people but always stayed true to himself. Though he was open to change, he would never do anything that would take away from his being John. He knew himself as a teacher and was proud of what he saw.

This self-knowledge and confidence helped him respect the abilities of his students. Respect for their knowledge on a given topic was always considered in his classroom presentations. He did not assume that he as teacher held all knowledge. However, he was well aware that students were long on opinions and short on facts in many cases. While some teachers might use this to put down the students, John used their opinions and directed them to find facts to support them. One beauty of his respect was his ability to encourage, control, and direct conversations between students within the classroom. This method can lead to cuts on other students and teachers, but students knew that this was not within the rules, and it seldom happened. Student to student interaction is difficult to create and control, but it adds a dimension to learning that stimulates the class. John was aware that this could lead to difficult feelings between students and reacted to these situations in and after class. Students with little in common with each other could see that they often had bonds they never understood.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What is your teaching style? Do you use humor? Do you encourage interaction and discussion between students? What are your personal strengths, and how might you use them to create a teaching style?

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2. How well do you relate to the students in your classroom? What are some ways you can think of to learn more about them and to incorporate this new knowledge into lesson plans?

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3. Do you respect yourself and have confidence in your abilities? What motivations and mottos can you use to help instill that self-confidence?

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## Letter Five:

Smitty,

*Hey my Irish friend, how is the potato picking coming along? Things are going ok with your Italian Dago friend here. It doesn't look like I'm going to graduate in 4 years like I planned but let's hope that after 4-1/2 I'll be on my way.*

*Where do I start? Let me see, you were there the two times that I almost electrocuted myself The first in the weight room while I was standing in a puddle of water and flipped a shorted out light switch. The second when I brought down a power line in your front yard and almost electrocuted myself and your daughters. Which reminds me, am I allowed back to your house yet? Of course you never let me live that one down. What about the time I locked my keys in my car when it was running and had to call my mom to come get me? You never did let me live that one down either. Remember burying that dog? That was the worst smell I ever smelled in my life, but of course you told me to quit whining about it and keep digging. I always looked forward to one of the many Italian jokes to leave your mouth as soon as I walked through the door. And of course I could always count on your extremely loud voice screaming "LET'S GO STINKY!" at the football games.*

*You know when I was going through all my problems you went out of your way to see that I had a fair chance. You didn't have to and I'm not sure why you did, but I think it has something to do with the fact that although you always made fun of Italians, I know deep down you wish you were one. Remember when my first instinct was to blame the other person? Well you taught me that whether or not it was their fault, my fault, or anybody else's fault there was only one person that had to deal with it, and that was me. I didn't like this fact but you taught me it was something called life, and to deal with it.*

*I can't put into words how much you mean to me in my life. If it weren't for you then I wouldn't be where I am today. I never believed that I could do anything on my own, and I never believed that it would be possible for me to go out on my own and succeed. You showed me that no matter how much I thought the whole world was against me that you would always be there to pick me up and give me a kick and tell me to quit whining and keep pushing forward. You believed in me when I could not believe in myself And for that, you will always be my great friend.*

*Now you have left this place for a better one, but for me, you are still here, in my mind and in my heart. A friend of mine told me that if someone can go and live on in memories, then that person has never really left. So I will still talk to you about my problems, and I will still ask you for your advice, and I will still complain about everyone around, and you will still be there listening to me and calling me your favorite GuineaWop-Dago Italian.*

*I will truly miss you, my Irish potato-picking friend.*

*Your friend,  
Eric "Stinky" Jiles*

**Notes:**

This is obviously not a politically correct letter, yet anyone who knew Smitty and “Stinky” knew these two had the greatest respect for each other. Sometimes being politically correct does not assure anything in teaching but safety. There are those who see it as an answer to building relationships, but political correctness gets lost in systems and programs and in the translation forgets the dynamics of the people involved.

Look beyond the curtain of political correctness (or incorrectness) and see what the author is saying:

*You saw that I had a fair chance.* He doesn’t say that John solved his problem or took away the punishment. He only says “you saw that I got a fair chance.” At the very basic level, the philosophy of political correctness needs to ensure that every student is treated fairly. John did that.

*Went out of your way.* Students paint us into very small boxes. It doesn’t take much to establish a reputation as teachers who will go out of their way. It would be a great idea to interview “out of the way” teachers and their students and ask them what creates that reputation. Here are some suggestions:

- Bringing in some of your favorite food from home to share with students
- Commenting on their achievements in games, activities, or events
- Attending events, games, or activities
- Taking 10 to 15 minutes a week in class to discuss their thoughts
- Stopping to talk if they ask for your time

This letter should be read by anyone who is connected with education in any form..The value of a teacher cannot be measured only by test scores. As principal, I can assure you that Eric would not have made it without John. There were many other good people in his life but as far as school John was the key to this young man’s survival in some very difficult years. What John did may not be in a teacher’s job description and training, but *it is in our job and a lot more critical than test scores.* It is also good to note that the test scores did come later in college. Maybe we need to recognize the greatness of teachers who help kids develop the traits Eric describes in his letter.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. John and Eric had stories together. Are there stories and traditions that are told in your classroom? Do you find time to be involved in activities outside the classroom with students that allow for building stories?

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2. In what ways to you go out of your way to be there for the students? What are some things you can do in the future?

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3. Do you make sure every student has a fair chance? How do you do this? How can you improve this?

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## Letter Six:

*Dear PCHS Friends,*

*Like many of you I was saddened and shocked when I heard the news of John's passing. I remember how energetic and enthusiastic he was concerning his students and classroom, and that was just about everyday of the week!! During my 9+ years at PC, he always seemed to have the time for me whenever I needed to discuss something on a professional or personal level. He was often a shoulder for me to cry on. I regret that I probably never told this to John. So that I may not make that mistake again, please know that I cherish the years and experiences that I shared with all of you while I was at Catholic.*

*John was a man that truly lived. He was a wonderful person who had a passion and love for teaching. My thoughts and prayers are with each one of you and the entire PCHS community as you deal with this loss.*

*Cathy Whitehair*

### Notes:

John not only had time for his students; he had time for his peers for discussions on professional and personal matters. In this letter from a former teacher, the writer regrets not telling John how much he was appreciated. It is too late for John to hear how much he was appreciated, but it not too late to change your relationships with your peers. You will not embarrass yourself by telling someone that you appreciate their help or the things they do for students. Teachers spend a lot of time listening to students, parents, and administrators who seldom speak words of appreciation. We can't bring John back to thank him, but we can change the environment at our school by telling others we appreciate them. It wouldn't hurt to tell your peers or your students how much you appreciate them. By learning to feel and express your appreciation, you learn to live.

Some careers never give you the chance to truly live. There is no doubt that everyone in education will be presented with the opportunity to truly live. John seized the opportunity and lived. John had passion for every aspect of education, and this made him the special person we read about. Don't miss this benefit of teaching. Changing lives and touching the future is living.

### Discussion Questions:

1. "A passion for teaching." What does this statement mean? Is there any passion in your teaching? Was it there from the start, or did it build over the years? Have you lost your passion, and what has this done to your career? How could you get it back? Can you really teach without a passion? Who were the teachers with passion in your educational experience? Who are the teachers with passion in your school?

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2. "Every man dies. Not every man truly lives." *Braveheart*. How does this quote relate to the letter above? What can you do each day to ensure that you are truly living?

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3. What are some things your peers did recently that deserved appreciation? What are things your students did? Did you tell them how much you appreciated it?

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## Letter 7 Pictures of John:

The trophy case is an example of his love of country. Long before 9/11, John took time to honor America, veterans, and current soldiers. Veterans Day was celebrated in our school and students understood why they had a holiday. Also John's project was another example of knowing your students. He talked to them enough to know who had parents or grandparents who have served and who had brothers sisters or parents in the service. He kept in contact with many alumni but made a special effort to keep in contact with those who were active in the service or stationed overseas. Pride in country, pride in school, pride in community, pride in faith, pride in family, pride in self. To John they were all one in the same.



John's room pictures:

His classroom was his second home. He was comfortable in it and so were his students. Does your room speak to your comfort *and* that of students? Administrators must realize that all teachers have a different home that creates comfort for them and students. Sometimes comfort looks like an old shirt or pair of worn out shoes. A brilliantly decorated room that says "look, don't touch," may please the authorities but not create comfort. John's room created a high level of comfort for his students. They could walk into the room and instantly feel like they were home.

His library was an visual example to his students of his passion for reading. If role modeling is valuable, the book wall in his room was a clear statement of John's interest. A closer examination of the titles can give even more insight. There was no doubt that science fiction was his main passion but any student at any level could find a title in this library and know that John had a shared interest in their reading selections. Classics, dime store westerns, current youth fads, off the wall selections were all there for discussion or loan. John not only had a passion for reading, he had a passion to share reading with all students.





Each level of student needs a different type of teaching. John was able to pull this off. He moved freely from 7<sup>th</sup> grade to seniors. The titles in his library indicated that his lesson preparation were based on knowledge of how to reach each level.

John's library was also an informal archive for the school. In one way or another you could probably find something about any school topic or event over the past seventeen years. He had the stuff somewhere.

On his podium, John had a bumper sticker about pride in Catholic education. The purpose for commenting on this is not a plug for Catholic education but to stress that

John knew the mission of his school and incorporated it into every aspect of his teaching. Many teachers young and old have forgotten the mission of teaching, forgotten the special mission of their school and never written their own personal mission statement for education. They never have a clear answer to "why?" John knew "why?" His students knew his belief in his mission as a teacher.

Identification.... John had pictures, banners, remnants from proms, student works, and posters from current books and movies on his wall. You could not enter his room as a student and not identify with something. It made you feel at home. It challenged you to be active. His room was alive. You could not say it was decorated, that implies order and coordination. Life just hung on the wall for all to see. He did this over 17 years. As each group changed he kept current with their lives in 85.... 90.... 95 ..... and today.

Traditions.... Traditions can be a very positive force in a high school and John had a way of making a tradition out of everything. Just look at his room. Tradition says Smitty's class had the best prom, and the decorations stayed his room to prove this. *If you are old enough, you give blood* is a recent tradition he started, and the Interact banner still hangs in his room. Tradition said that his senior shirts were the standard for judgement. The tradition of telling time in star dates was used throughout the school. Excellence in *Wood Whispers* were part of his classroom traditions. The traditions called students to quality and influenced positive reactions by students.

Also, if you look around the room there were always parts of John's life: pictures of the children and wife; shots of John with hair; and shots from when he was a student. Students knew about him as a person, as an adult, and as a student. He was in their eyes believable. What items in your room tell the students about you as an adult and as a teen or child? What makes you believable?

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His room was cluttered: spiritually cluttered; academically cluttered; personally cluttered; activity cluttered; athletically cluttered; but the clutter was his and his students. Whatever points there are for creating a learning environment, he had them all. What kind of clutter is in your room? Does it look good or does it relate to the kids in your room or school?

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## Letter Eight:

*Youth empowers individuals with the deception of a non-existent wisdom. I was not immune to this feeling of arrogance when I began my employment with Parkersburg Catholic. Regardless of the situations I would encounter, I had confidence that I could solve any problem without the assistance of my fellow educators and their years of experience. However, after repeatedly failing in my attempts to create a constructive learning environment for my athletes, I turned to John Smith. John had a rapport with the students that even the most inexperienced of educators would envy.*

*John was more than willing to impart his wisdom and strategies, and, in the process, taught me to challenge and desire more from myself as well. I grew and developed as a coach, but John gave me a gift far greater than that. John sparked a desire within myself to work with students in a greater capacity, to attempt a noble, challenging and unsung profession--the desire to teach. Prior to embarking on this profession, I spent some time mentoring with John in the environment in which he shined the most--the classroom. John created an almost magical learning atmosphere where the students were captivated and learning was an enjoyment, not a drudgery. Entire teaching careers have been spent attempting to produce the classroom setting that came naturally within John's room.*

*John knew I had been out of school for some time and that pursuing a degree in higher education would be a challenge. Not only did he promise to assist whenever he could, he vowed to be patiently waiting at the end of my journey to guide me through my student teaching within the hallowed walls of his own classroom. It was flattering to know that I was supported by such a consummate and professional educator, and I was comforted in his willingness to assist in my challenge. Although God has taken John's knowledge, friendship and guidance from us, I know that his encouragement will live in my memory, and his influence will guide my classroom. Any attempt to emulate John would surely fall short; he was our shooting star--brilliant, beautiful and snatched from our view before we had completed admiring the splendor. Fortunately, with John's impact on our classrooms and our lives, his star will continue to shine.*

*Jan Rapp*

## Notes:

This is just one more example of his ordinary skills as a teacher. John was a quality mentor. In my years as principal, I relied on John to mentor many a new teacher. He never turned me down. Though not all of his projects were complete successes stories for education, being with him gave new teachers the best possible chance of becoming educators.

Since I worked closely with both individuals within the time described, I can comment on why John and Jan combined to work well in a mentorship program. When she arrived at our school, Jan had most of the skills and certainly the passion to work with kids. John just helped her develop the confidence to use her own

skills. John never thought of himself as a great teacher, thus he didn't try to make carbon copies of himself. He always tried in mentorship to help others find and use their own abilities.

John always learned from others as well, which is an often overlooked benefit of mentoring. On more than one occasion he commented on Jan's energy level being an example for all of us. Jan was attending college full time, playing in two college sports, maintaining a 4.0 average and was a head coach in two high school sports. Being a mentor was not seen as an energy drain. It was an opportunity to learn.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What do you consider your greatest strengths as a teacher to be? How can you use your strengths to help others find their own strengths?

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2. What have you learned from mentoring?

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## Letter Nine:

*May 1, 1987*

*Dear Mr. Smith:*

*Just a note of appreciation. If you hadn't been there so many times for Matt, I'm not sure he would be here today. You probably more than anyone are responsible for his graduation at this time.*

*Your constant caring, understanding and support made it possible for him to survive this very difficult year. -You have that special gift. You are the type of teacher that may come along once in a student's lifetime.*

*Thanks for being there and being the friend that Matt so desperately needed. Following graduation you and your wife are invited to our home to share in our celebration.*

*Sincerely and May God Bless*

*Dick & JoAnn Wildt*

### Notes:

Though the words in this letter are important, it is the date that is significant. John taught seventeen years, and most of the letters written are from students from the past eight to ten years. But this letter indicates that from the very start, the characteristics that made him special were in place. Those of us who knew him can assure you that he was constantly refining and improving these skills --*but those skills were there from the start.*

Teachers should come to the profession with knowledge of skills like John's. When they enter the classroom for the first time, they should have already been taught these skills, and as ongoing learning, mentored in them.

Ironically, the father of the young boy in this letter was the teacher hired to be the long term sub finishing the year after John's death. He could write you his own book on John's greatness. The way Dick explained it was this: "you would have thought he knew he was going to die, there were nine weeks left in the school year and he had just about everything done including the power point presentations, tests, student handouts and homework postings on the internet." Preparation is a key to being a quality teacher and John was always prepared.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Veteran teachers should ask, “Do I still have that enthusiasm that came with my initial desire to teach? Has time caused me to distance myself from students? My method may be different but do I still have the compassion and care? If I still have this, how do I share it with new teachers who might not have been shown its importance?”

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2. Not to take anything away from John– I am sure that his greatness would have developed in any school– but the school he was in allowed these traits to flourish. Its mission and the supportive faculty created a synergism that worked to make all in the building better educators . Are you in learning communities that help promote this type of educational thinking? If you are not what could you do to keep the Smitty challenges in front of us?

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3. How prepared are you? If you were temporarily disabled, would a substitute be able to step in and finish the lessons as you planned them?

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## Letter Ten:

*I was trying to contemplate something meaningful and inspiring about Mr. Smith last night, so I thought about the first time I met him, but that didn't seem right b/c all he did was make fun of me for being tall and him being short. Then I thought about my first class with him and well by God that didn't seem right either b/c I spilled water all over one of his Star Wars books... So then I thought, with some help from a friend, Smitty would be thrilled if I conjured up some quotes from Star Trek, so here I go*

*“Someone once told me that time was a predator that stalked us all our lives. I rather believe that time is a companion who goes with us on the journey and reminds us to cherish every moment, because it will never come again. What we leave behind is not as important as how we've lived. After all Number One, we're only mortal.”*

*Capt. Jean-Luc Picard      **STAR TREK: GENERATIONS***

*“We are gathered here today to pay final respects to our honored dead. But it should be noted that this death takes place in the shadow of new life, the sunrise of a new world; a world that our beloved comrade gave his life to protect and nourish. He did not feel this sacrifice a vain or empty one, and we will not debate his profound wisdom at these proceedings. Of my friend, I can only say this: of all the souls I have encountered in my travels, his was the most... human.”*

**STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN**

*Rocky Love, PCHS Class of 2004*

## Notes:

Everyone knew the passion of John's life was *Star Trek*. Most everyone knew why: it was not the characters and the travel; what John loved most about the series was its emphasis on social justice and sensitivity to diversity. Like *Star Trek*, John understood that everyone is different, and no one is perfect. As shown in the short-tall story told by the student, John could tease his students without hurting their feelings. He won their respect by being able to make fun of his own limitations.

John was not merely open about his own limitations. He was open about his loves and enthusiasms. Even if his students never met his family, they knew them. Even if his students had never seen a movie, they knew what *Star Trek* stood for in his life.

And John knew about his students' interests and passions as well. He asked questions; he showed an interest in his students. Some consider quality teaching the ability to know all their students' names. John knew their names. He knew their lives. He knew many things about each individual student that many other adults never knew because he asked real questions and listened, really listened to the answers.

Every student knew that “Smitty” was always available to talk. Whether in one on one conversations in the halls, at sporting events, in chance encounters at the shopping mall, John got to know his students, and they got to know him. He carried this knowledge into class connecting lecture and discussion topics to their lives. This doesn't mean John never had a bad day—of course he did; he was human, but even on the bad days, his focus was an interest in his subject, and more so in the lives and development of his students.

Of all souls we have met in our travels, John Smith was the most human. He was always able to communicate to the kids his own humanity. They knew he had emotions and feelings. They knew he had good days and bad days. Moreover, he made them aware that many of his emotions were directly connected to the success and failure of his students, not just in studies, but in any area of their lives, from sports to faith. He was not ashamed to let his students see how much he cared not only about them, but about his greatest pride, his family. By example, he taught them about caring: love yourselves, love your family, and love each other.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What do you care most about? Do your students know what it is? Do you know what each student cares most about? How might you connect the subject you teach to your students' lives?

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2. John was always available to talk to his students. How available are you? Do your students know how and when they can speak with you?

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## Letter Eleven:

*When Bob Hattman asked me to commit to paper an analysis of why John Smith was a great teacher, I responded with my usual equivocation. Teachers are probably the poorest analysts of their peers' special brilliance for the simple reason that we are so seldom exposed to the specific application of each other's talents. Education is, in many ways, a very independent and sometimes lonely profession. We meet as a faculty on a regular basis, have contact with each other in the halls and at the lunch table for idle conversation, and sometimes share personal philosophy while watching a sporting event, but when it comes to the time to teach, we each take whatever it is that we know best and trust most, close the classroom door, and do "our thing" in a way that no one else can fully comprehend. The people most directly exposed to the genius of each individual teacher are those least qualified to evaluate that genius objectively—the students. And so it is that the best educators must simply know in their hearts what to do and how best to do it ("best" meaning most effective for that particular teacher's style and personality), then proceed with full faith and confidence on the path that seems clear to them. Perhaps Bob was right when he said to me, "It's much more an Art than it is a Science*

*Be that as it may, I think it is possible to infer a great many things about what it means to be a quality teacher by careful observation of a good educator's thought process and actions. If a picture is indeed worth a thousand words, then a man's actions speak infinitely more eloquently about his beliefs and abilities than he could adequately put into words. John and I may have disagreed about the best approach to take in certain circumstances, or about the usefulness of "tools," but that should not diminish the respect I had for his ability to put his thought and belief in action. From the residue of his action, I believe I can discern some lessons that are valuable for any teacher in any situation.*

*John T. Smith, Jr. was a man of action. Not like a superhero, mind you, but far better, because he was real. Dave Cooper remarked to me at John's funeral how he had given a paper to John, requesting input about the construction and quality of the writing itself, so Dave could help his students not only write science better, but improve their writing skills in general. Even though he told John specifically not to rush on the response, John returned the paper to him by the end of the day. It was a simple part of John's philosophy to take care of any task that needed to be done as soon as he could possibly get to it. **Do it now!** may have been tattooed on the inside of his eyelids for all I know, and he may, in fact, have never actually slept. The reality is that John simply accomplished more than anyone else because he knew how to use all his time effectively. He had a natural talent for keeping track of every task that he needed to complete, and always having it done well before its deadline. I never saw him with a datebook or memo pad, yet he never seemed to forget anything that was requested of him, perhaps because he knew he would have the job done before he could forget to do it. As a result, I seldom saw him pressed for time and straining at deadlines the way most of us are when grades are due, or other tasks come up. He volunteered for incredible amounts of extra work (and consequently often took loads off the rest of us) because he had the organizational skills and work ethic to complete them more quickly and efficiently than anyone else could. He had a system for virtually every task and used it to produce a prodigious amount of work. Though it has become cultural jargon to label such people as "anal," the reality is that any less-talented person could accomplish, with a date book, sticky notes, and a bit of insight and self-discipline, every bit as much as John did.*

***Tired is a worn-out term.** It is also fashionable to excuse ourselves from developing our skills or achieving many of the necessary daily tasks of education by giving in to fatigue. Several people mentioned to me that John's list of activities was quite long and arduous, and some openly wondered if he simply did "too much." If he could have responded verbally at that moment, I'm certain he would have shouted, "No!" John knew, as I think all great teachers do, that you can draw energy and strength from working with and for that which you love, and John found a way to love almost everything and everyone. He simply never used the excuse that he was too tired to give any task his best effort, nor was he too exhausted to care about his students' concerns.*

*Though John was no sort of athlete, he could often be seen in attendance at spotting events in which our students competed. He knew it was important to **Be Involved** in various aspects of his students' lives.*

*Our students (and I'm sure those in other schools as well) frequently ask their teachers, "Are you coming to the game tonight?" Most of the time, this inquiry seems casual enough, but the underlying question is, "Do you care enough about me as a person to engage yourself in my life beyond your classroom?" John knew that children need us to play more than one role in their lives, and he willingly joined in the aspects that carried beyond English class. One need look no further than the amazingly long list of children for whom he served as godfather to realize how extensive his involvement was. The level of commitment this required was great, but John knew that his commitment would pay dividends in a multitude of ways. Teachers who are involved are actually investing their time, and they get repaid many times over.*

*John was enthusiastically open and honest with his opinions, and did not hedge when discussing the truth. His students knew they could trust him to tell them exactly how he felt about any issue (and why), even if they would not be happy about the results. Still, he also knew that it was important to **Be Loyal**. That meant that you could have his honest opinion on any subject or student, but that did not give you the right to show disrespect toward them. Even if he disagreed with a friend on an important subject, he would valiantly defend that friend to any outsider. He kept those values in proper perspective, as we all should.*

*I have been to several coaching clinics run by famous and accomplished coaches, and the first bit of advice they give on being successful is, "Be yourself." John knew how to **Be an Individual**, and was never afraid to "bare his soul" to his peers or his students. He was unique in his talents and interests, and was not ashamed of his weaknesses, nor arrogant of his talents. He simply was who he was, and he enjoyed being a special and unique individual. By being himself, he could effectively encourage his students to be themselves as well. For the younger students especially, those in Junior High who regularly face the ridicule of their peers for any quality perceived as "different," there was a strong, sincere message that being oneself was not only OK, but necessary.*

*That also meant that we should **Be Diverse**. John enjoyed an eclectic range of interests and activities. Some of them he knew quite well. His interest in reading spawned prolific writing. His interests in science fiction and Star Trek colored his personal philosophy. His interest in computers helped him create numerous educational opportunities for his students (and, ironically, for unknown e-mail pals in other countries). His interest in his students caused him to work to learn about the things they found intriguing or compelling. This also links to the lesson that we should **Keep Learning**. John had a broad range of knowledge, but he was always active in learning more. He knew that an energetic mind kept one alert and engaged. We often sat together at games, where our conversations frequently turned hilarious. After exhorting the boys to "Show 'em your stufti," he'd ask me about the nuances of the play they were running. After bellowing at the referees to get a call right, he'd ask me what the rule was, whether it had actually been broken, and by whom. Though the basic elements of athletic competition seemed to avoid his grasp, he always wanted to know what was going on. Even if he had to be taught the lesson 5 times (in the same game), he'd keep inquiring, because knowledge was indeed power to him.*

*One of my first memories of John after he joined me at PCHS was from his participation in Mass at St. Francis Xavier. He went up to the lectern to do the readings for that evening's service. It is one of my pet peeves that people who speak in public, especially at an event that calls for their passion and investment, often mumble their way through whatever assignment they've been given. John proved immediately that he was my type of guy, speaking loud and clear, and in a way that left no doubt that the words were meaningful to him, and should be meaningful to us all. He knew that every task demanded that you **Give it Your Best**. Whatever he did, for whomever he did it, whatever the venue, John gave his very best. In the end, it is that which makes all the other lessons compelling.*

*John's final prayer with us all was built around the subject: **When Life Gives You Lemons, Make Lemonade**. I would hope that this epistle would prove that I am trying to live out his lesson. Teachers seem to seldom get what they hope to get. Every test has someone fail it. Every lesson has someone miss it. Every great idea gets shots full of holes by someone who doesn't fully grasp it and doesn't care to. Almost no good deed goes unpunished in some agonizing and unpredictable way. Many of the teachers you come in contact with will have given in to the despair all this will have caused them. Somewhere along the way, someone will suggest that it's better to just give up, go with the flow, stop making waves, and do just enough to get*

by. Well, John would never have tolerated that. There is a best case to be made out of all situations, and the only way to sleep well at night is to know that you've made the best out of whatever ridiculous thing you've been asked to do that day. You can't do so by feeling sorry for yourself, or looking for excuses, you simply have to take the responsibility that comes with your job, and seek the best possible outcome.

**Then, Be Happy.** John's sense of humor kept him, and often many of the rest of us, sane. Finding the humorous quality in any event or situation keeps a person young at heart, and we must try to be so for our students. John could be very serious about important issues, but he was never so serious that he refused to laugh at something silly within those situations. It is amazing how much brighter the day becomes when we can see the humor in whatever assails us.

In closing, I would like to remind you of a favorite Bible phrase that kept coming to my mind at John's funeral. In many ways, I consider it the most important phrase in the Bible, because of its implications about what is our most significant charge. It is the means by which every end in the scripture can be realized: **Go thou and do likewise.** We can do no less than our level best to imitate the actions of those we know to have been good role models. It is by our actions that we will be judged, and by that criterion, John Smith was an excellent teacher.

Dave Woody

### Notes:

Dave states that he and John didn't agree on everything, nor did they approach materials and problems in the same way. This is very important, for we do not want to make a John Smith out of everyone. A school filled with cloned versions of one teacher would be a disaster. We are only asking that those who control the gates to teacher education, mentorship programs or other forms of education improvement seminars, and those who are (or plan to be) teachers use these insights as part of the process of becoming a quality educator. As John would say to his students, "apply these ideas to your life." He never wanted to create clones. Though we would love to have John back, we are not trying to create duplicates. We just want people to be able to see and react to his greatness within the limits of their personalities and time.

"Do you care enough about me to become involved in my life beyond the classroom?" Dave's question and answer are essential. I know of a few good teachers who were never involved beyond the classroom, but were still able to provide a high enough level of instruction that the students learned anyway. These rare souls were few and far between. Though they were excellent teachers on a limited way, they are not the essence of what is needed in grades K-12. A teacher at any of these levels needs to teach so much more than their subject to students with a variety of needs and difficulties. True master teachers must be involved in the lives of their students.

### Discussion Questions:

1. What is your definition of a Master Teacher? What do you feel you need to do in order to become one?

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2. How can you use John Smith's teaching philosophy to inspire your own teaching?

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## Letter Twelve:

*In case you have forgotten me, this is Jason Knight class of 1991, and I have not forgot you. For a few months now I have been meaning to send this email to you. I kept putting this off thinking I would get around to it when I made time. I heard this evening that Mr. Smith passed away this morning and my heart sank into my stomach. I thought his kids, his wife, the students and teachers, then....the email I thought I had all the time in the world to send.*

*Mr. Smith, I will start with you. First of all put down the red pen. I am going to ramble, use run-on sentences, incomplete sentences and every bad piece of grammar your incredible English teacher mind can think of. For a little man you never took shit from anyone and you could talk trash better than everyone. You challenged me, trusted me and put me in my place. One of my most lasting memories is when you gave me an "F" on a paper. We were studying Shakespeare and I didn't read the book. My paper was an overview plagiarized version of the Cliff Notes. You called me into your room alone (so not to embarrass me in front of the others) to tell me you had known what I had done and how disappointed you were in me. No matter how much I tried to use our friendship to talk you out of it, you did not budge. Looking back now....what a statement that made to me. Your not always going to be given things in life. Taking shortcuts gets you further behind. Treat your neighbor as yourself, as you would treat GOD. Would you ask GOD to lie for you? What a better man I am to have known you. THANK YOU!!! REST WELL MY FRIEND!!!*

## Notes:

When we hear of John being a friend and loving students we must remember that he was not in a popularity contest. Through the words of this student you can see that John knew the art of what is called tough love. If a student erred, John would take them to task and hold their feet to the fire so they would grow.

This young man was a very active student with a love for athletics, especially football. And yet it meant something to him when John said he was disappointed in him.. John reached all types of students. Not only did John communicate his disappointment, he did so in a manner which would not publically embarrass the student. Confronting students alone is a great idea. As Jason says it takes away the embarrassment and from the teacher's perspective; it removes an audience.

Modern education has a lot of programs that state they have "discovered the need to teach morals and values to children." John knew this from the start of his first day. Jason clearly shows that John taught the difference between right and wrong. Not merely in the matter of academic dishonesty, John taught personal ethics as well. If you wanted his wrath just mistreat another student in a way that made fun of them for who they were. As his principal, I can say without a doubt that the easiest way to be sent to the office or be disciplined by John was to make fun of another student. He did not reserve his wrath for students alone – there were teachers on staff at times who received the same reaction because they made fun of students or used public ridicule as a means of discipline. John believed firmly that we are all equal with good and bad parts. All were allowed their places, and John was passionate about that philosophy. Moral education was part of John, and the kids knew that from the start.

John not only taught morals through interaction, he specifically addressed them in the classroom. Visit his web site and look at the *Star Trek* course which used science fiction to teach morality and values. From *Star Trek* to books like *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *To Kill A Mocking Bird*, John used anything he could find to communicate the importance of morals. And he didn't do this because some new federal program suddenly declared that diversity and political correctness were the new hot topics. He had been doing things like this from the start.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How do you handle incidents of academic dishonesty? Does your school have an official policy about this issue, or is it left to the discretion of the individual teacher? Do you make clear to your students what your policy is from the first day of class?

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2. How can you use your particular subject matter to teach personal ethics? Do you have activities that can tie in to this issue?

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## Letter Thirteen:

April 8, 2002

**TO:** Crusader Chronicle Editor  
**FROM:** Rich Schaffer, PCHS Class of 1980  
**RE:** *Memories of Mr. John Smith*

*My purpose in writing is twofold. First, to express my deep sorrow on the untimely loss of your teacher, mentor, and friend Mr. John Smith. Secondly, to share some memories of John with your readers when we were classmates at PCHS some twenty years ago.*

*After attending John's funeral on April 2, while digesting Father Matheney's eloquent homily, and Mr. Nedeff's moving eulogy, it occurred to me that not much was spoken about Mr. Smith during his formative years.*

*Before there was a "Mr. Smith" there was "Harvey" or "Harv," a name he received from an upper classman, which stuck with him for the rest of his life. Harv and I served on the first Crusader Chronicle staff a little over 20 years ago. Both of us were awarded a "Quill And Scroll Award" for excellence in newspaper production. We thought we were "big time" journalists covering stories dealing with the usual school activities and student life. It was Harv, though, who could write well and loved doing it.*

*During this same time, Harv had to deal with the death of his mother. The death of a parent is not easy, but Harv did not let it get him down. He did not seek pity from anyone. He was his usual boisterous self always getting in the last word. You could always hear his loud laugh above the rest of the class. Mrs. Frank on many occasions had to tell John to quiet down. Of course, this did not deter him one bit. As I look back, picturing him sitting at his school desk with one leg tucked under the other, Mrs. Frank's admonitions only encouraged his raucous behavior.*

*On Halloween, Harv would come dressed as Mr. Spock, flashing the Vulcan peace sign. When other classmates played a prank by littering his yard with Realty signs, he waited and plotted until the time was right to do his own planting. He did it quite successfully until a shortage of signs was created in Wood County as a result of his efforts.*

*When it came time for the school production of Bye Bye Birdie, Harv was happy playing a supporting role as a convincing Mr. Macafee, the strict father of Kim who forfeits his bedroom to a teen rock idol, Conrad Birdie. Macafee is furious until he learns that the entire family will appear on the Ed Sullivan Show. I vividly recall, it was Harv who stole the show from the lead actors and other cast members with his natural stage presence. He later co-starred in the stage production of You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown as Linus, the blanket toting confidant of Charlie. Again, he excelled in this role and stole the show.*

*While the rest of the “Class of ‘80” ventured off to find our far-away fortunes, it was Harv who returned after college to teach at the high school he loved with a passion. When it came time to organize our 20-year class reunion, it was Harv who stepped forward to coordinate the event. Harv was not content to send regular e-mails to classmates announcing the event in a standard 12 point black typeface, but rather with a red 16 point san serif type. That was his nature. He loved life, he loved his family, his faith, and his alma mater. He also loved getting in the last word.*

*While his death was shocking and saddening, I believe Mr. Smith would not want us to feel sad for long. He would want us to continue on with a passion for living life, and helping others either by teaching, serving, or ministering to the next generation of students.*

*If he were still around, Harv would likely quote Oliver Wendell Holmes who said, “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”*

*Mr. Smith’s spirit now lies within us. Having known him either as a friend, teacher, father, or husband, it is now up to us on how we are to proceed. . . or rather, what role of the supporting cast we will play in his physical absence.*

#### **Notes:**

We are not trying to make everyone into another John “Harv” Smith, aka “Smitty.” The author of this letter provides enough insight in John’s history to show us that we did not have the same background as he did, and, thus, we will never be like him, and any attempt would end in failure. Only one in a hundred people can pull off dressing up like Mr. Spock and retain any type of dignity. We must study his life and apply his traits to us in the best way possible. The Spock costume is meaningless without a sense of humor, a passion for science fiction, a comfort with looking silly and a grin on your face. Don’t put on John’s costume, develop your own.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Develop your own costume. What aspects of your life and history made you what you are today? What can you use from your past to create your own costume?

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2. How did you become interested in your subject? What do you love about it? How can you communicate that passion to your students?

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## Letter Fourteen:

*As a PCHS Alumni I write to tell you, the student body how sorry I am for your loss. Mr. Smith was definitely a teacher that everyone always loved and no one ever forgets. I graduated in 1995 and as I called a few of my fellow classmates to tell them about the loss, it was as if we were seniors all over again. "Smitty" was the teacher that we all desire to have and all of us who attended PCHS at one point or another should consider ourselves very lucky to have met such a wonderful man, father, mentor, and teacher.*

*I deeply regret that I was unable to say my goodbye to Mr. Smith but, I know that he is watching over everyone of us right now and he can truly see what he means to each and everyone of us.*

*When everyone returns from Spring Break and is back together as a "family" I encourage them to support one another but not mourn too long. We all know that Smitty would be upset that we were sitting around feeling bad because of him. I think he would encourage us to turn this opportunity into something positive to help others in his memory. So this is exactly what I am going to do. I was the President of the first Interact Club at PCHS where Mr. Smith helped me to make known to the community and student body the purpose of our group. As an Alumni who wants to pay her respects I ask that the Interact Club help me to know how I can help you? I know about the Club and its purpose so now tell me what you need and let me help. I would tell you how I want to help but, that's not always what people need so you tell me. I will list my addresses and phone numbers at the bottom and look forward to hearing from you soon.*

*To all the other teachers at Parkersburg Catholic High and to those no longer with us. Please know that everyday you touch the lives of so many. Sometimes we don't always show it and other times we walk away not understanding you or your teaching methods. However, all of us in some way or another look back in life and apply something we learned from one of you in our day to day lives. Thank You!*

*Sincerely,  
Sabrina Corra, PCHS Class of 1995*

## Notes:

If you wanted to call John friend or father, which so many students did, it came with a price. You had to be involved in some of his activities. He was a role model working beside you, but you had to work yourself. The Interact Club that John created is a high school version of Rotary club. Each year the club would sponsor two blood drives in addition to numerous other activities. He took special pride in the number of first time blood donors among students and faculty. It was just one of the many ways John touched the lives of others, even those unknown and unseen blood recipients.

Some people go to work and touch money, others touch bricks, and others cars, chemicals, or food. As a teacher, you go to work and touch the lives of children. This brings a heavy responsibility but it also provides the opportunity for great rewards. John and I used to talk a lot about the rewards. Since he had

spent part of two years in administration, he knew that seeing these rewards was often difficult for a principal, and he would often share reward stories with me early in the morning when I came to school. John was usually the first one in the building by choice.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What are your civic interests? Can you involve your students in these interests? Can you help your students find their own civic interests?

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2. Do you have any rewarding stories to share with others? Write them down and save them—savor them--bring them out on the bad days to remind yourself of your successes.

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3. How do you reinforce administrators?

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## Letter Fifteen:

*I can't really remember the first time I met Mr. Smith (for it being so long ago) but I had always known that he was there to turn to if I needed him. Through the years, he seemed to brighten even the darkest day, and bring so many smiles and laughs it seemed like a classic fairytale.*

*He accepted our seventh grade class with open arms and a warm heart. We were the biggest class in PC since God knows when. Other teachers would have dreaded the responsibilities, but not him, he was always up for a good challenge. He took the time to personally get to know all of his students. He cared about us as individuals and wanted nothing short of the best for every single one of us. He wasn't out of touch... within an instant message, an email, a phone call, or a visit, he was always right there, and you knew that he always would be too. Somehow, he managed to get to know all fifty-three of us in a way that he could challenge each of us to meet our different goals.*

*As a senior I can look back and say that over all of our time at PCHS, we held countless fundraisers and activities in order to have the best prom ever. It was Mr. Smith that pushed us to do so. It was his vision of the big picture that would make it a prom that we would all be so proud of, and a couple of days that we would never forget.*

*I would have never thought that rounding the end of the milestone of my senior year, the man who loved us so dearly as young children would suddenly pass away and leave all that he had worked so hard for behind. (I found the following email that I had saved from him just to prove how much he loved us as a whole)*

*(Hi my juniors, I hope all the addresses above are for juniors and if you get this and you're not a junior at PCHS and I've accidentally sent you this please forgive me. I wanted to remind those of you whose addresses I have to bring in a canned goods or more for the Food Fight. Remember this is for clash of the classes and I'm tired of all those other classes getting what rightfully belongs to you. Bring in the goods to my room. Look through your closets and let's show this school the power of the largest, most dedicated, most important class at PCHS!*

*I could be a preacher! Love you all, Smitty  
Happy Holidays and God Bless!)*

*His shocking death broke the hearts of everyone he loved. Now that he is gone-from our lives, we continue to mourn his death, and long to see him in the physical form. His smile seemed to warm our hearts and his laughter was like music to our ears. He is someone that will be greatly missed for a long time if not forever. I can't wait to see him again one day and be rejoicing in the Kingdom of heaven!*

*Anne Matthews, Class of 2002*

### Notes:

In this letter that Anne remembers that John was a friend from the seventh grade all the way through the senior year. As previous letters have stated, he could relate to any kid at any age.

Many people thought that our largest class was a bunch of bandits who could not be controlled by the school and would never make a significant contribution to the school or community. John was their class sponsor, and he changed the opinion of many by pushing each student to be involved in school and community.

John didn't just know their names. He knew them as individuals. It wasn't "how are you doing with college admission?" It was "how are things going with your applications to Wheeling Jesuit, Marshall or Dayton? If you want to get into the veterinary school, I'll write a letter for you." I only wish I had copies of some of the letters he wrote to schools for his students. There was no such thing as a form letter. All students were given an individual letter that matched their skills with their application.

Many teachers look at being a class sponsor as a series of tasks to be completed. Election of officers, fund raising, prom, senior activities, and graduation. As previously stated, John did these with pride. If he was going to be a sponsor of a class, then that class would be the best. *John insisted that these kids bond as a class, and he worked to see that this happened.* In addition to seeing that tasks were completed, he worked to encourage everyone to participate at some level. He actively tried to smooth out differences between individuals and groups. The classes he sponsored were some of the most cohesive in the school because of John's ability to build group spirit.

He insisted on excellence not only in the classroom but also in anything he was connected to. Prom in our school is a \$7,000 process. It requires years of work to raise that much money, and then a great deal of planning. For one night the juniors transform the school into a magical kingdom. John's kids were not going to do anything but the best, and he would be the motivator. He wouldn't do all the work, but he would push the students and parents to have the greatest prom.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Do you sponsor any extracurricular activities? How do you go about creating team spirit?

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2. How do you encourage students to become part of extracurricular activities?

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## Letter Sixteen:

*Brent Hardman, PCHS Class of 2002*

*John T. Smith Jr.*

*“Holy Cow Brent. I got it! I really got it!” exclaimed Mr. Smith, as he pranced around the room. To the casual bystander, one might think that he had won the lottery or perhaps found the original model of the USS-Enterprise in his backyard.*

*“You got it Smith?” I asked, rhetorically.*

*“Oh yeah, daddy’s baby is right here.” He said and held up a videotape that had written on the side, Star Trek Enterprise: for Smitty. One couldn’t help but smile at his achievement: getting a former student to tape the new series of his favorite show and take the copy to Mr. Smith so that he could watch all of the new Star Trek excitement.*

*As he ran to the back of the room to put the tape in the TV to watch it during his planning period, my creative writing class, I could only marvel at how a teacher could be so “cool.”*

*There aren’t many people in the world who wake up in a good mood on a school day, and an even better one on a snow day. Mr. Smith was one of them; he was always excited at the prospect of teaching and talking to his students and simply happy to be around the school itself. He was a person who a student could talk to, no matter what happened, no matter what they did, who they did it to, or even if anyone knew that they had done it. The fact that Mr. Smith would sooner see one of his star Trek videos ripped to pieces than to tell another person something that a student confided in him is a reminder of how accessible Mr. Smith was to all of us.*

*The lives of teenagers shift dramatically almost everyday, and we need a sense of stability in the world. Smith was many students’ rock, a person who they could talk to, but he was more than that: he was a friend to all.*

*He was an 18 year old trapped in a 40 year old’s body. In his actions and words out of the classroom, he was just one of us, a member of the class of 2002. Being a part of our class was important to him, as a result of that, he would often times have to help us fight our battles. He would stand for what he believed in, and we (the class of 2002) would be right behind him, like the members of the enterprise surrounded Jean-Luc Picard. (He even had the bald part down, too)*

*On his desk sat around 10 thick books, all of which had bookmarks hastily shoved into them, as Mr. Smith had crammed them in as the bell rang to end his planning period. Behind him were bookcases whose quantity would make the library of a small town jealous. “That’s nothing,” he would smirk, “You should just see what I have at home.” As you picked up one of his “babies” to read, you would see that every one of them had the words Star Fleet Library stamped on the side. It was just his way of signing all of his books, and a way to show off his love for Star Trek. If students would be looking for a book, they would first check the library, if they couldn’t find it there, then they would often go to Mr. Smith’s room and look for the book.*

*He was passionate, almost beyond human possibilities, towards the subjects that he taught. He loved reading, he loved writing, and he loved teaching. He would wake up happy, for he wanted to be at school that day to*

*help young minds to boldly explore new frontiers. A person couldn't help but gain excitement for the subject that a teacher would so zealously proclaim, even if it was English.*

*He didn't just talk the talk, however, Mr. Smith was so involved in books and English that he was writing his own novel, dubbed, "the novel that will never end" because he kept changing the story. In his class, he even made the tests exciting with an English correction section in which he created a story land using all of the students in our class, in a land of "too tall," and "short" proportions. Once more, he never finished the story with a big ending.*

*He would also become very involved in different areas of interest. The Beverly Hillbillies and World War Two are just some of his newest projects. Two summers ago, I had the pleasure to take his WWII class. It was an Internet class, spawned by his interest, consisting of videos and much independent study.*

*Knowing that Mr. Smith expected much from his students, I did some additional interviews of veterans from the war, and then I went in to talk to Mr. Smith. I can still see the look on his face when I presented him with the information. As I told him about the veteran's involvement in the Battle of the Bulge, Smitty's eyes seemed to grow larger, as did the smile on his face: he was like a little kid in a candy store, only this was the pleasure of seeing a student succeed and learning something to teach to Mr. Smith.*

*"Hey Brent, it's getting good now, you better come and watch it." Smith said from the back of the room.*

*"Hold on. I need to put this comma in, but does it go in before or after the parenthesis?"*

*"Before, but what are you writing?" he asked.*

*"I dunno. An E-mail to a girl." I said shyly.*

*"Oh my Gosh!" He said, jumping up to come over and read it. "I never thought that I would see the day that you would get a woman."*

*If anyone else would have said that to me, I would have been offended, but coming from Smith, it was just a good joke, one of the weaker ones in his arsenal. He, however, could tell the best in our class relentlessly, which would have the rest of the class in tears of laughter, including the one who was foolish enough to try to match punch lines with him, by the time he was done.*

*It was that sense of humor, which gave everyone a footing with Mr. Smith. He used it as a way of relating to people, a way of communicating with everyone, no matter how cool or uncool they may be. Humor was his way of talking to everyone, which is something that no other teacher did. Smith would talk to anyone, even ones who wouldn't laugh at his jokes.*

*When I was a new student at PCHS, it was Mr. Smith who first was my friend as a teacher. He got me to laugh when it was hard to, and he got me to come out of my shell of protection. It was also Mr. Smith who helped me mature through High School, by being my class advisor when I was the president, and just talking with him everyday. It was Mr. Smith who made me*

*interested in English, not by reading books, but by living them, and making English a class filled with action and adventure.*

*For the ending of this paper, I searched Star Trek plots for a line that would describe Mr. Smith. I couldn't find any. Maybe that's because Mr. Smith was a once in a lifetime person. However, even though Mr. Smith may be gone, the book on his life is not yet closed, much like the novel and stories that he was writing. This is because with his life, he affected all of our lives so greatly that a part of him is always with us; all of the graduates of PCHS in the past 20 years have a part of Mr. Smith in them. It may be a love for English, a Star Trek craving, or only a good joke, but no one from PCHS could ever forget Mr. Smith, and in a way, no one ever will.*

*I can just see the little bald man talking into a communicator with God, "Beam me up."*

### **Notes:**

The young man writing this letter is one of the most brilliant students to graduate from our school. He is a National Merit Scholar and received other high honors. John could reach them all.

As Brent said John had a passion for reading, but more importantly he had a passion for reading and sharing what he had read. He did not share to impress, but out of a real desire to discuss and interact with others who read the materials or might benefit from the knowledge.

Like many other students, John had Brent's confidence. However, John worked with the administration whenever the information would have required us to know something about the overall welfare of the students and the school.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Gifted education. How do you relate to your gifted students? What can you do to challenge them, without spending less attention on the "average" students?

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2. Do you share your interests and passions with your students? What are some of your interests that you can share with them?

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3. One of your students has told you something in confidence that could be dangerous to his/her health. How do you handle such situations?

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## Letter Seventeen:

*Dear Teacher,*

*Nobody will ever be able to explain why one teacher is better than another. It's not something specific; it's more like an aura they have that makes them seem so brilliant. Everyone wants to be in his or her classes and become closer to him or her. Mr. John T. Smith Jr. was one of these special teachers. He not only taught his students about English, he taught us important lessons about how to live life. We left his classroom knowing about verbs and nouns but also knowing the difference between right and wrong. There are many reasons why Mr. Smith was as loved as he was. I could never write them all down, and I probably don't even know half of them. Everyone who met Mr. Smith went away somehow changed for the better. What I, or anyone else, will write about him can never do justice to the great man, father, teacher, mentor, friend, supporter, and sports fan he was.*

*The first thing that anyone noticed about Mr. Smith is the energy he had. He absolutely radiated it, always moving, talking, laughing, or cracking jokes. Just by being around him, you felt as if you suddenly had more energy yourself. This made all his classes exciting. We never knew what he had in his lesson plan for the day. The most important thing a teacher can do is try to make everything interesting. Of course, if you teach math you will have a very hard time, but the least you can do is try. The way that Mr. Smith was excited for the lesson made everyone else excited too. He had an incredible talent for making activity so much fun. For instance, when we were learning about poetry, not the most popular section for most high school students, instead of just reading poetry from the book, we brought in our favorite songs. We would read the lyrics, which were actually rhymes, and listen to the song. You never think about a song being a rhyme so it was funny when we read the lyrics. We all wanted to learn more about poetry after that, and when it came time to write our own poetry it wasn't that hard. It was great because we learned, but having so much fun it didn't seem like learning. Another thing Mr. Smith did was connecting with our everyday lives what we were studying at the time. We understood the stories better because we could parallel them to our lives. We grasped more fully the concepts and reactions of the characters because we had an idea of what they were experiencing.*

*Another great thing about Mr. Smith was the way he made everyone feel special. From little 7th graders to the seniors, nobody was left out. He would walk up to you and start talking like you had known each other forever! He could relate to his students on a personal level too. Just because he was a teacher, Mr. Smith didn't think he was above his students. He was genuinely interested in each and every one of his students. Unlike some teachers who have a few students they like more than the others, Mr. Smith loved all of his students equally. If you ever needed anything; a good book, someone to talk to, or homework help, Mr. Smith was always there to lend a hand. He was also passionate about many of the same things his students were. Sports, books, writing, and volunteering were just a few of his unlimited interests. At basketball and football games Mr. Smith was always the loudest person in the stands. It was so much fun to see him there screaming and yelling at the top of*

*his impressive lungs. If you were involved in the game it was even better. Teachers rarely even go to games, and when they do they don't seem to cheer loud. That's why it was so remarkable that Mr. Smith not only attended the games, but he cheered extremely loud! If you played, the next day he would compliment you on some play you had made. The fact that he remembered made everyone feel so important. Teachers that get involved in the school are so much more popular than ones that don't.*

*Of all the things I have mentioned about Mr. Smith, the thing that set him apart was his sense of humor. It must have been difficult to always have that when dealing with a bunch of teenagers, but somehow Mr. Smith did it. Everybody loves people who can make him or her smile and he could do that. Unless you had the privilege of knowing Mr. Smith I don't think you will ever understand what a magnetic person he was. He could light up a room with his smile and make someone's day by telling them a joke. Whenever he told a story, which taught us more than any lesson ever did, he made them so funny and interesting you wanted to hear more and more. Mr. Smith was a special teachers and person. No matter what we do there will never be another person like him. Parkersburg Catholic has been robbed of one of its best and most loved teachers. We will never be the same having known this great man. He touched the lives of everyone he met in a positive way. Mr. John T. Smith, Jr. will be greatly missed.*

*Gillian Powderly, Class of 2005*

#### **Notes:**

“Nobody will be able to explain.” Out of the mouth of babes, or in this case teenagers. Because in her letter, this student does a wonderful job explaining exactly why Mr. Smith was so special.

**Energy.** Many veteran and beginning teachers are “campers.” They pick a spot and never move unless forced to. John was never in the same place twice during a lesson. He was constantly on the move, whatever the lecture, project, or assignment. At the end of the day John was often tired but his high energy level was maintained because he fed off the energy and excitement of his students. He loved kids and his job and that was the greatest source of energy.

**Surprise.** Students were never sure what was going to happen next in his classroom: this created interest and excitement. This doesn't mean that John never planned. In fact, he was probably the most prepared teacher in the school. From putting homework assignments on the web page to creating quality syllabi based on approved curriculum for every course, John made sure every base was covered. The surprise was that students never knew how he was going to present the material to them, and what the interactions during class would create. In a way, it takes more work to appear to the students that you have done less. John's flexibility was based on a complete knowledge of subject and quality preparation. With each lesson he knew what he wanted to accomplish. Because of this, he applied his lessons to their current lives, each class would be taken to their destination through a different route. If all you have is the knowledge in the book, and the only route you know is in the prescribed manual, flexibility will be difficult and often task's meaning will get lost along the way. Young teachers may have to start with only one route, but they should be encouraged to expand through mentorship. Experienced teachers who believe there is only one route to truth, haven't expanded beyond their student teaching days.

**Connected to their lives.** You can't say it any better. Such a simple statement with such a powerful meaning. It applies to all ages in life with all people. Why would we ever try to teach anything to children without showing them how it relates to their lives now or in the future? But how do you relate to their lives? You must learn how they live and try to understand their emotions and thinking. That takes a lot of time, listening, reading about them and their books, attending their events and watching their movies. Simple idea but it requires a lot of work. Especially for the veteran teachers whose teen years were in the sixties and seventies.

**He would walk up and talk to you.** As Gillian and many others have said, John reached out to all students of all ages. And what about our own peers, do we reach out to all other teachers and staff in our school? One of the people who took John's death the hardest was the school custodian.

Gillian is an athlete and noticed when teachers were at the games or events. John could not be at every event, but he often told students that he was at "his kids' events" and that was his priority. He made an effort to attend one of everything and in a 7-12 school with thirteen sports that is a challenge. He didn't limit his outside interest to sports but would try to attend as many co/extra curricular activities as possible. From the descriptions of his yelling and wearing team jerseys, the kids knew that he didn't just attend, he *enjoyed* their events. John would sometimes stretch his time to allow attendance at some of the non-school activities in which the students participated.. He knew enough about the outside activities to ask students about events such as swim team, scouts, martial arts, or equestrian events, for example.

**Humor.** We don't all have the talent to be comedians but John's story makes a clear statement of its importance in dealing with students. Puns were a big part of his success. As an English teacher, the use and miss use of words was a part of his humor. A lot of his humor came from comments about their outside activities. *"Did you see your face in the morning sports page, I can lend you some cash for surgery. It is simple, a monkey and a football player could do it."* Two in one, giving them humor and letting them know he cared enough to read about their game. He could dish it out, and he could take it. Bald jokes were the students' favorite way to tease Smitty. Because he promoted humor, students improved interest in reports and were able to relax and include humor in their power point and podium reports.

Don't be fooled by the fact he allowed bald jokes and let students call him Smitty. This man had authority in his classroom. It came from student respect, quality preparation and a lack of fear to dress students down when they needed it. He knew that teaching required discipline. Many of the students who wrote these letters were the greatest trouble makers in the school. They got their discipline when needed and for periods of time put Smitty their bad list. He waited until they were ready to return and welcomed their friendship with open arms.

### Discussion Questions:

1. How much energy would you find in your classroom movement? What are other ways to show energy without moving? Can you make your room reflect energy?

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2. How many conversations do you initiate with students on other than academic matters or outside the classroom? Do you speak to only those students who reach out to you, or do you seek and address those difficult or quiet students?

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3. How do you keep your lectures fresh and surprising? Make a list of five “new ideas” that you might be able to include in your next week of teaching.

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## Letter Eighteen:

*The Atticus in my life was Mr. Smith. He had that ability to always make you think about everything. When I'd come into his room to complain about a teacher, my parents, a grade, whatever, I always left in a better mood. He would listen and then, when I was through, he'd casually say something about how lucky I was to attend a private school, that I even had parents, that I was smart enough to make up the bad grade. It always amazed me that he could make me feel better about whatever it was that I was facing while also making me realize that I have it pretty good. His wisdom, like Atticus', made me into a more caring, compassionate person. He taught English lessons, but he also taught life lessons, just as Atticus was an attorney, but practiced more than just law. Both men were inspiring role models for the children in their lives.*

—Allison Barney, PCHS Class of 2002

### Notes:

This brief letter answered a question for Mrs. Frank's AP Senior English class pertaining to *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. The question was "who is the Atticus in your life"? Allison adequately expresses how John was the Atticus in her life.

Smitty made everything he taught apply to the lives of the students. If he couldn't show them a reason for teaching and learning a topic, then he asked himself why he was teaching it, or researched it enough that he understood and could show a reason. There are many teachers who know little about the subject they teach and cannot apply it to student lives because of this weakness. If you want to be a good teacher, know your subject. I know that I'm a quality social studies teacher: I know the subject in depth and know the big picture. When I have been asked to teach out of field, my skills are still there but the knowledge of subject is not and detracts from the quality of instruction. John knew his subject. If you want to be a master teacher, you must know your subject and stay current throughout your career.

John was not a friend with just kind words of approval. When Allison complained, he just shot it back to her about how lucky she was. He did not try to be popular, which is a mistake commonly made by both teachers and parents. He was honest and his students knew it. They didn't always like what he said but he didn't care. Calling it like it is— the way John did things.

Furthermore, he would listen. To be teachers, we take classes in speech, but when do we learn to listen? How many times in these letters have we heard that John's success had at its core the ability to listen.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Teaching is more than test scores-- Allison says that Mr. Smith "made me a more compassionate and caring person." How could we teach or students the same trait.?

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2. How well do you know your subject? Do you understand why you teach everything on the curriculum? Can you draw parallels between your subject and your students' lives?

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## Letter Nineteen:

Mr. Woody,

*I am sorry to hear about the passing of Mr. Smith. He was a very good man and an excellent teacher. Mr. Smith had a way of making learning fun and motivated his students to try their best. His personality was one that everyone loved and trusted. Like so many of the other teachers at PCHS, he had the special gift to be a great educator and friend. As my sister's confirmation sponsor and my mentor, he helped my family in so many ways as I know he did with many others. He will be terribly missed but he will live on in the hopes, dreams, and memories of us all. You all have my most sincere condolences.*

*Austin J. Everson, PCHS Class of 1999*

### Notes:

The young man who wrote this letter is another example of how John reached out to all types. Austin was a shy, non-sports person who fit in, but was not on the popularity guest list at school. As he says John was his mentor and worked with him in pursuing his dream of learning Japanese and traveling to Japan. The last time I talked to Austin, this dream was just about to come true. John helped make that happen.

I have taken a lot of education courses but none have covered the importance of being loved and trusted. Some emphasized the importance of being interesting but few used the word fun. If you spent just one day watching Smitty teach, you would see a man who loved and trusted, who was interesting and fun. And because of this, John touched souls, using this touch to make his students, indeed every soul encountered, better people, helped them reach their dreams.

### Discussion Questions:

1. "I remember that time you told me 'Love is touching souls' surely you touched mine 'cause part of you pours out of me. In these lines from time to time." —Joni Mitchell. Do you try to touch your students' souls? How can you better communicate your love and trust to them?

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2. Do you know what your students dreams are? How can you help them to achieve them?

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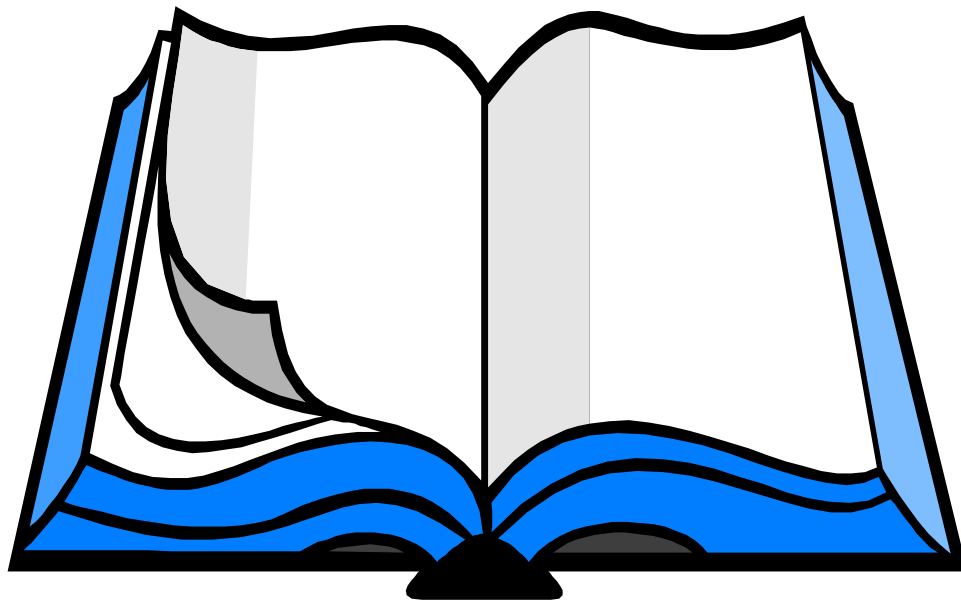
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*At John's wake, we set a memory book out, and then kept it in the front hall at the school for a week. The following is a selection of quotes from students, graduates, friends, parents, peers, and community members... There were many who wrote twice, because the first time was too early and their emotions were too raw. By the second time their words flowed freely. Some wrote pages, while others wrote simple lines, yet all captured the brilliance of this "ordinary" man. . .*

*Memories of John. . .*



## Mr. Smith, Teacher

- He knew how to reach the students. He stayed current and up to date on what they liked.
- I will always remember his advice for dealing with problem students, "call their parents".
- *Thank you for helping me to not be afraid to get in front of a class and give a report.*
- John was the perfect combination of common sense, justice and total goofiness.
- **He always made jokes, and made the class fun.**
- *Not only was he a teacher but also a friend.*
- As a parent, I appreciated his wonderful relationship with his students. He treated them with respect. John was a true role model for all of us.
- He had such a unique gift of making everyone feel important, special and valued.
- Thank you for helping me find simple things about life to fall in love with. You saw a small gift in me for writing and encouraged it to grow. I will never forget you.
- He took a subject I loathed and turned it into the most enjoyable class of the day.
- *He turned English into more than a lesson or class and made it into an experience.*
- *He always encouraged me to follow my dreams.*
- **John was the first teacher I talked to when I visited the school. His love for the school and his enthusiasm made my decision to come here one of the easiest.**
- I LEARNED SO MUCH FROM HIM, NOT JUST ABOUT ENGLISH, BUT ABOUT LIFE.
- You were my favorite teacher even if you weren't my teacher yet.

## John Smith, Cheerleader

- Football season is going to be real tough also because we won't hear his voice when we are playing.
- *I will always remember bugging you because you hadn't been to a girl's basketball game in forever. The most memorable and intense game I played in though, you were there yelling at the top of your lungs. Everything you said about me in your recommendation letter meant so much.*
- *I will always remember you, wearing #70 crusader football jersey, and yelling, "Let's go Crusaders," at the top of your lungs.*
- *Last year Mr. Smith always went to the Jr. High volleyball games with Kayla. I was walking in and Mr. Smith said, "Good Luck Sheridan." I wasn't in any of his classes so I didn't even think he knew my name. I felt so special that he knew my name, let alone Mr. Smith was telling me good luck.*
- *I'm going to miss hearing your proud voice cheering on the crusaders and crusaderettes.*
- **I will never forget how Mr. Smith would always make fun of the goofy faces I would make when I play basketball. Just him saying that always brightened my day.**

## Smitty!

- *John was a joy to work with (although he didn't like waiting in line for the restroom).*
- Smitty was the bomb, there were some days when something went wrong and he always helped me out.
- Justin, he spent every lunchtime in your room, teasing you, or being teased... Zach loved trading barbs with you — but he also knew not to cross over a certain line.
- You always had a special way to make me smile and laugh; your talent was turning frowns upside down.
- HE EVEN TOOK JOKES WELL.
- That's the way Mr. Smith was, always making me laugh. I looked forward to his jokes every morning.
- He always made me laugh because he was always having such a wonderful time.
- "Short, bald, fat, and Irish" that's how Smitty used to describe himself. Oh, what to say? He was so proud of us.
- *One thing you taught me is to always be able to laugh.*
- "This is simple; a monkey and two football players could do it" — Mr. Smith.

## Advisor. . . Friend

- He shared with me some of the things you had went through with your father.
- *He never turned me down.*
- He would do anything for us to make sure we did our best.
- *Everyone knew you truly cared.*
- *The song that you love and was played at the prayer service "because you love me" says everything you are to me!*
- He was always so proud of our senior class.
- *Thank you for always having an open door, an open ear, and an open set of arms. Thank you for being the person who believed in each of us, no matter what the odds. Thank you for giving ever the most unlikely characters, both the perfectionists and underachievers, a chance to succeed. Thank you for the undying support and parental pride. Thank you for all the times of laughter and joy. Thank you for helping so many through struggles and hardships. Thank you for all the good that you've done in the school, the community, and my life. Thank you for a personality that could expand to fill any space. Thank you for making your room like home. Thank you for being a human spell-check and making me feel smart in math. Thank you for not suffering.*
- I don't know his purpose in life but he helped give my life purpose.
- I think you were the only person in this school who would've noticed if I fell off the face of the earth.
- You always listened.
- ***Mr. Smith went out of his way to welcome me my first year at Catholic.***
- *Thanks for being like a second father figure to me.*

### Quotes:

Comment on how one or more of these quotes has significance to you as an educator.

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## **Appendix One**

John had been writing books most of his life. We wanted to include the first chapter of one of his unfinished works as an indication of his passion for literature and creative writing.

## Chapter 1: A Wizard, an Apprentice and a Crow

The impressive stone keep sat in the bottom of an immense valley. This day the sun beat down on the peasants who tilled the fields of their lord and master. They did not begrudge him the work, for he was a fair master, who made sure they were properly cared for. As they worked the warm spring soil, they could hear the pennants flapping from the walls and the four towers that marked each corner of the huge edifice that guarded their homes and the valley in which they lived.

With the last snows had come the spring flowers and the peasants had known that planting season was upon them. Eagerly they had sought permission from their lord to begin the planting and had received it gladly. They were spending most of this morning working in cow manure to fertilize the ground and would begin the actual planting that afternoon. The men used ox drawn carts to haul the winter collection of manure to the fields, while the boys spread it, and the older women plowed it under.

One older matron was chewing out a young lad for chucking a cow patty at his friend and landing it right in his face, when a tremendous explosion ripped through the air knocking most of them flat to the ground. Gasping, several of those still standing watched as the roof of the North Tower blew sky high and began to rain down on them in bits and pieces. Standing up on shaky feet the peasants stared at the blackened remains of the upper tower and then began to chatter among themselves.

“’is Lordship’s gonna be mighty peesed,” stated own brawny man as he dodged a piece of roofing that floated to the ground.

“Aye, t’is goin’ ta be a nasty day in the keep for the boy, ah’d say for sure,” replied his friend who had a tight grip on the reins of the scared oxen.

“Ah’d hat ta be i’ the boy’s sandals when ‘is lordship gets up there ta inspect the damage,” commented one old grizzled man who had his long white beard tucked into his belt to keep from lopping it off with a hoe. His wife, whose mustache was every bit as impressive as his, nodded wisely as she chewed her wad of tobacco.

“Poor lad, ‘e does try ‘is ‘ardest to do as the master asks. Ah guess ‘e’s just not cut out to be a magician. ‘Andsome enough ‘e t’is,” she cackled, wishing she were sixty some years younger. She spat a dark line of baccy juice at a line of ants trying to escape her hoe.

“It’s a good thing he dinna set the bloomin’ tower on fire. Lord Monrath would’ve had to conjure up a thun’er storm ta put oot a magical fire,” said one of the young boys filled with his own knowledge. Old long beard nodded sagely at the statement.

“Aye, an’ we’d lose a day o’ plantin,” he said to the boy, who appreciated the older man’s support of his wisdom.

“Which we’re gonna do if we don’ quit standin’ around jawin’ you lazy bags o’ bones,” snapped an extremely large woman waving a shovel at several of the boys. They saluted her smartly and smiled at each other behind her broad behind as they began the odious task of shoveling cow manure into the fields from the carts. Old long beard winked at the nearest boy before making one last comment.

“Well, Ah ‘ope the boy ‘as enough sense to skeedaddle while ‘e ‘as the chance,” he stated loudly. The boy chuckled at hat and was promptly booted in his seat by the large woman. His laughter ended as he landed face down in a pile of ripe manure.

“That’ll teach ya ta laugh when ya’r supposed ta be working, ya silly scallywag, now quit sleepin’ on the job. We’s got work to do,” she said hauling him up by his long hair. The peasants laughed at his discomfort and wondered how the apprentice would fare.

Timon did not have the sense to skeedaddle. At the moment he was quite senseless due to the explosion which had wracked the immense keep and had blown the roof clean off the tower. The blue, cloudless sky appeared through the shattered beams of the roof allowing the sun to brighten the blackened upper room of the North Tower. There was a loud, obnoxious cawing and a large, black crow flew in through the hole and lighted on the young man’s shoulder. Its beady black eyes peered intensely at the soot stained face of his friend and mater.

“You literally bombed that experiment, didn’t you,” said the raspy voiced crow.

“Oh, Gernerax, I added too much newt’s eye to the potion. I never knew a love potion could blow the roof off a tower,” stated the lanky lad. His blonde hair, cut in a bowl shape, and blue eyes made him seem younger than his seventeen summers. Gernerax noticed that for a magician’s apprentice the boy was starting to bulk up a bit with muscle.

“How in the Eight Hells of Mulvania do you expect the potion to take affect without it being potent?” a deep voice reverberated around the remains of the room. Timon began to quiver, which left the crow quaking on his shoulder. There was a loud clap of thunder and the master wizard appeared in the center of the room. Gernerax bent to whisper in Timon’s ear.