



John Marius Sherin
ROBS History Project
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My name is John Marius Sherin, and I was born August 11, 1937 in Victory Memorial Hospital on Seventh Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. It was and is still located on the approach to Fort Hamilton on the tip of Brooklyn. My parents were at that time living with my maternal grandparents at 656-77th Street in the Bay Ridge section. Their home is the last building on the block left standing following the demolition of that area under eminent domain in preparation for the construction of the approach to the Verrazano Bridge to Staten Island.

Steve Rochester offered to interview me as part of our History Project even though I had previously been interviewed by Karen Storjohann some years earlier. He said, correctly so, that there were things about my life that had not been a part of the first interview that he knew about and thought were important enough to be included. Who could possibly refuse such a kind offer? I agreed and this was the result. I hope you concur.

The neighborhood where I grew up had been primarily comprised of people from Scandinavian backgrounds and was for the most part almost exclusively Norwegian, Swedish and like my grandparents, people of Danish lineage.

The first school I ever attended was P.S. 127 on the corner of 7th Avenue and 79th Street. It was, by the time my parents left my grandparents home on 77th Street to rent their railroad flat on the second story of a house at 529 – 79th Street, on the same side as P.S. 127. Our landlords became good friends. They were a

Norwegian couple, and Mr. and Mrs. Nelson were known to all of us affectionately as Tanta and Uncky. Mr. Nelson was an elected official of the Carpenters Union and was the first man any of us ever knew who had finished his own basement with wood paneling he shellacked and flawlessly varnished, installing small lighting fixtures in the walls with geometric shapes of brightly colored glass. Tanta, was mother of Mildred (Mimi) Nelson, one of my mother's closest childhood friends, who with her had attended P.S. 127 when they were both in Primary School a generation earlier. Mimi became like a Governess to me. Besides my mother and father, she was the first teacher I ever had, who taught me to sing and tap my feet to melodies like *Alexander's Rag Time Band*. I think I actually became helpful to her because following her "*student teaching*" experience as mentor to me, she acquired trusted employment for rich and powerful people like movie actor David Niven, Governor Thomas E. Dewey, heirs to the Jack Frost sugar empire and prominent political figures living then in the Hamptons, as Governess to their children for generations. She never married and remained close friends of family until she died. Mimi was always near and dear to us and was like a beloved member of both Sherin and Andersen families.

Going to school on my first day was neither a pleasant occasion nor a cause for celebration. I'd never before been separated from my mother. It was a different experience. I cried my first day in Kindergarten and wanted to go home until I met Evelyn Matherson, whom I thought was a beautiful little girl, and by whom I was smitten. I went back to see her years later in Brooklyn when I temporarily returned as a teenager to visit the old neighborhood. It was when I learned the meaning of Thomas Wolfe's phrase "*You can't go home again.*" I was so disappointed to find she was no longer the adorable little girl in my eyes I remembered from Kindergarten. I wondered then what her impression of me was when she saw me?

Nevertheless, I learned to love school, and I'm still able to evoke memories of our children's library aroma, creaking wooden floors and dusty picture books I loved to borrow five at once, then enjoying and returning them, time and time again.

It was during the late forties that our family moved from NYC to the suburbs. Our destination was Floral Park, a Hamlet in the County of Nassau, which was within the confines of an area sanctioned by policy of the FDNY for legal residence of department employees. It made commuting to and from work for my dad more accessible than it otherwise might have been had we moved further away from Borough Park and 282 Engine where he'd worked.

I spoke of my sister Betty Ann and my brother Michael Joseph. Betty Ann was two years my junior. I was in my 69th year at the time of my interview and Betty Ann would have been two years behind me. Mike was born two years after Betty Ann and had already celebrated his 65th birthday in April. She was the mother of seven daughters: Tricia, the eldest, Christine, Suzanne, Kathleen, Elizabeth, Ann Marie and Michele, the youngest.

Michael was living at the time in Huntington Bay on the north shore with his wife Mary Jean. They had three children, Michael, Jean Marie and Christopher, two of whom were married and also living in Huntington. Michael was married to Stephanie, and they had one daughter, Emily. Jean Marie married James Brown and had two daughters, Ryan and Michaela who lived with them in Huntington as well. Christopher Sherin who was single lived in nearby Halesite, also in the Town of Huntington.

When our parents moved us to Floral Park, I was under ten years of age. I'd been left back in St. Hedwig's due to the absences I'd accumulated due to my health issues the previous year. I repeated third grade the year we moved to Long Island. St. Hedwig's was on Depan Ave. the street where we lived. It was off Jericho Turnpike on the same side of the block our house was located. It made walking to and from home at lunchtime easy.

The nuns who taught us were Sisters of St. Dominic. The first few years we were required to study and learn Polish as part of the curriculum. That changed when the requirement was dropped after I begged our parents for our sake to please opt us out of Polish. They conceded, but not before I'd already committed to long-term memory the prayers we'd learned to recite each day, including the

Sign of the Cross, the Hail Mary and the Lord's Prayer. I graduated in 1952 from St. Hedwig's Eighth Grade and enrolled at Sewanhaka High School in Stewart Manor. There I attended classes for several months until we all moved back again once to Brooklyn.

For almost two years we lived rent-free with our McGowan relatives in a basement apartment of their home at 1177-86th Street, Brooklyn across from the Dyker Heights Golf Course. Uncle Lester, a NYPD Detective, my mom's sister and his wife, Isobel (Aunt Izzy to us), and our cousins Lester, Barbara and Patricia McGowan, who all generously made us feel welcome for the time we'd invaded their privacy while our parents saved to put money down on their pre-owned cape cod on one quarter acre in Hicksville, L.I., that in 1954 cost \$13,000.

While back in Brooklyn, I'd attended New Utrecht High School. That was in the same building "*Welcome Back Kotter*" was immortalized a few years later by Gabe Kaplan and his "*infamous sweat hogs*," whose theme song "*Welcome Back!*" by John Sebastian became a rock and roll anthem. It was yet another chapter in my life for which I learned to feel grateful, but it was difficult. New Utrecht itself was an imposing building with five floors. There were staircases designated UP and DOWN as described in the well-known book of similar title. The lunchroom was on the top floor. I could see ocean liners through the high windows, if I stood on tip toes, entering New York Harbor along the Narrows on their way to destinations on Manhattan's west side piers in the Hudson River.

Dr. Applebaum was my French teacher. He was a little man for whom I had the greatest respect. Each morning he would arrive on his bicycle wearing a black beret'. Though small in stature he was a giant in my eyes for the manner in which he controlled his class of occasionally disrespectful, perhaps unappreciative reluctant learners. He clearly loved the French language and respected the culture of France so much that it was understandable to see how his love of what he was doing had the power to make a hand full of his students embrace the subject. Paris became my primary destination of travel through nine countries of Europe when I graduated from college, cashed in the childhood policy my parents

had bought for me and began to enjoy exploring the world on my own. He was a tough no nonsense little man who had taught me that it was indeed possible for teachers to earn the respect of students even after all the less than memorable teaching I had been subject to during my education so far. It was about that time that I first remember thinking *"I don't ever want to be a teacher. Why should I subject myself to the kind of abuse teachers all have to take just in order to teach?"* I sure had a lot to learn.

Then after a little more than a year of living on 86th street, my parents bought that modest Cape Cod in Hicksville in a neighborhood of the Hamlet where streets were named after trees. We lived on 34 Oak Street. Surrounding us were Spruce Street, Elm, Pine, Chestnut etc. Shade trees on our block stopped abruptly half way up the street. From the nearest corner our street was barren. Not long before it had been a field where potatoes were grown. Still, the builder had neglected to plant any trees on the lots of houses where we lived. Dust was everywhere. There were no lawns and no shade, but we felt very lucky to be living there.

During the school year 1955 that began in September I attended what was then called Hicksville High School. It was a stately building facing Jerusalem Avenue across from the Public Library. It had a bell tower and several large impressive columns in front of the building giving the impression it could be a junior college. As soon as I saw it I loved the building for its freshly cut wide green lawn extending all the way out to the street. A mere block and a half to the west, lay Division Avenue where a brand newly completed two story building would open just in time the following year for me to become a member of the new Hicksville High School's first graduating class in 1956. The building I had so enjoyed attending was renamed the Junior High School the next year. I had attended four distinct High Schools by the time I graduated. While that was something I never would have chosen for my children, I can honestly convey that for me it turned out to be a blessing. I had always been shy, but learned to come out of my shell and become ever open to the possibility of making new friends. Initially I'd been more of a follower than leader, unless things started to move in a direction I thought was wrong. Then I

could become something more of a leader, nonetheless a reluctant one.

Teen years can be difficult at best. The notion of seeking acceptance can also be stressful but compounded by the thought that you can easily lose your new friends as soon as you make them. Old friends tend to visit once or twice but distance becomes a mitigating factor when you're a teen, when you don't own a car or drive yet. Moving to a new location and a new school takes a heavy toll on your social ties. Anyway, they did for me.

That was when I embraced music and used my interest in the guitar as a motivating factor to get me noticed by the opposite sex. Simultaneously, I was extending my social life to include likeminded musician friends and acquaintances. Singing and performing in front of groups of strangers enhanced my confidence while I continued building my self-esteem. I found myself becoming increasingly comfortable acting the role of bandleader and fronting the group. My communication skills became more self-assured as experience performing with different groups continued to grow as time went on.

I had learned a few months prior to graduation from my Guidance Counselor that I was a half credit short of requirements. That meant going through an empty commencement ritual and having to come back during the summer to complete the credit I lacked. The fact that I received my diploma by mail was fine with me, just as long as I got it. When that counselor learned I was planning on college, he insisted I enroll that very fall to start classes at Hofstra. I confirmed my acceptance, thanked him but declined his suggestion. I'd accepted a position I was promised working for the Nassau County Clerk at the County Seat in Mineola. Working with attorneys in the Document Room I believed would guarantee me essential experience and insight I lacked. I needed to know if I was making the right decision by pursuing Law as a career. My counselor argued strenuously against my plan. He insisted that it had been his experience anyone going to work immediately after high school would more likely be disinclined to pursue higher education after feeling the incentive of a weekly paycheck deposited

in a bank account. I insisted I knew myself well enough to know the importance of an education in achieving that on which I was so focused. I had no intention of being deterred.

Adamant, as a former member of the Young Republican Club who'd been selected as a poll watcher and someone committed to running for future public office, I wasn't interested in simply making money. I wanted to serve, specifically in Public Service. I saw Law as my means to that end. Our founding fathers had for the most part been lawyers. What could be more appropriate than preparing for a career by emulating their committed, dedicated, and successful risky examples?

I visited C.W. Post and Dowling College. I visited Adelphi University and Hofstra College and then decided to apply to Hofstra. I began midyear in February of 1957. I graduated four years later with a Baccalaureate. It was in my third year that I decided on my major, having met a very special teacher that year whose class in Creative Writing I enrolled. His name was Charles Calitri. I had never been more impressed by any teacher I had ever had before than I was by this person. Encountering him then in my life *blew me away*.

He was the author of several published books, one of which, his most recent, was called appropriately "*Father*." The story was about his own father, who'd been a Roman Catholic Priest. In return for a blessing once received by his mother she had presented him to the Seminary that he might be ordained into the priesthood as an act of thanksgiving. When he grew into manhood, he realized he was on the wrong path, for it was truly not his choice in life to be a priest. Subsequently, he left the Church, came to New York City, met and married a young, Jewish, Public School English teacher, raised a family of several children in a decidedly spiritual, non-sectarian home and made a good life for everybody. I've been telling people ever since then how and why I came to love that man *like a father*. He was the singularly most emotionally intelligent, and compassionate, *mensch* I ever met. I wanted to be like him and do in a classroom for kids exactly what he was able to do for them. If he could get me like that, I only imagined what I would be able to

do with and for kids for whom I wanted nothing but the best. His class was magic. In a flash of insight I knew what I wanted to do and I began signing up for History Classes and enrolling in Education courses to become certified as a Secondary Teacher. Why history classes? Here's why.

When I was still in St. Hedwig's School and in the Eighth Grade in 1952, I received one hundred percent on the NYS Regents Exam. The local Chapter of the American Legion got wind of my accomplishment and presented me at our Graduation Ceremony in Church with an engraved Gold Medal for Excellence in American History. Fast forward years later when I began to question what I might be good at, I remembered the medal and thought, well if they thought enough of my accomplishment to award me a medal for the achievement perhaps I really deserved it, because I am good at History. Like the material manifestation of inner strength illustrated by the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in the story we all know, when he presented a token of his esteem to the cowardly lion for the courage he had displayed, I felt deserving for the first time of the honor I'd received.

I student taught in the high school of Plainview Old Bethpage. My advisor was Dr. Mary Ann Raywid of Hofstra University. She was Chairperson of the Educational Foundations Department of the Graduate School of Education. Her husband to be was Dr. Raymond Scheele, who I learned was one of the Directors of the Ford Foundation Grant to Brentwood Schools for Curriculum Development. He was the first person to recommend Brentwood to me as a place where "*interesting things were happening.*" Those people who might read this will be reminded that often times people with whom we come in contact when we are starting out are the very same people who in later years are there to encourage and support us as we advance along life's purpose. Dr. Donald Bragaw was Head of the Social Studies Department where I student taught. He offered me a teaching job when I completed student teaching. I thanked him but declined his offer explaining why I would prefer teaching in a community like Brentwood. At that time Brentwood was a diverse community probably about sixteen percent Latino (mostly Puerto Rican), about eight percent African American.

Pilgrim State Hospital employed a lot of people professional and menial workers, and was predominantly a middle class white working class community. I aspired to teach in Brentwood, and I have never for one minute regretted my decision to apply for a position teaching there. I was interviewed and hired by Frederick Weaver and Milton K. Siler Jr. Fred Weaver was Principal of the Ross High School (there was no Sonderling Building yet), and Milt had recently been appointed Social Studies Department Chair. He had replaced Stanley Yankowsky as Chairman of the Department. Stan was appointed Associate Principal to Fred Weaver.

I remember working with Nick Siciliano. Guy DiPietro was a member of the Social Studies Department. He had come down from upstate where he had been a Chairman of a History Department that he told me was much smaller than the one he found here. Hal Paster was one of the more senior guys at the time. Dick Arsenault was too, because by comparison in most of the department were beginning young teachers. Dick would bring his lunch with him to work every day in a lunch pail similar to the one Archie Bunker carried with him. Howard Anderson and Rolf Meier were here. Jack Warner, the only black teacher in our department, was teaching here as well. Milt was a fabulous Chairman of Department. He never called a meeting unless he had a specific reason for scheduling it. The meeting would only last as long as it took to address the important business on the agenda, and then it was adjourned. We all had grown accustomed to having our Principal, Mr. Weaver call faculty meetings that would last three or four hours. He would go on and on about minutia, reprimanding the teachers for the height and level at which window blinds were expected to be set. There was a time when we used to have two meetings on the same day, one for Administration and the other for the Teachers Union.

We spoke to the institutionalization of the culture of school. Some things have seemingly always been assumed to exist without pause or question: our District Contract being one such example. Brentwood was the first and only district at one time on Long Island to have adopted a salary schedule based upon the average of all the districts around us, thereby eliminating the squabbling and discord

surrounding establishment of salary schedules at a time when teachers were making comparatively little money.

Former Superintendent Dr. Louis Naninni told us a story during his interview about how on one occasion he'd taken off for a few days to visit his mother who was still living upstate. Upon returning to Brentwood he discovered in his absence that a member of the school Board had reversed a contractual decision already agreed to by the Board, infuriating teachers and prompting the calling of a strike by the union. A picket line was already in progress. It took him and Jack Zuckerman, the Teachers Union President to untangle the situation and restore peace to the district's working relationship. It was a close call, and the only time in the history of the District that we came that close to calling upon members to walk a picket line.

Stephen Rochester, who was conducting my interview, remembered meeting me the first time he arrived in Brentwood. It was during the summer that he ran into me. I was already preparing materials for the opening of school in the fall. He was surprised to learn I was doing so voluntarily without pay and so were other people. Brentwood was indeed a different kind of work environment. Teachers were being paid so very little back then that we had to have supplemental sources of income available to us.

Many Brentwood teachers used to take substitute assignments in neighboring districts when we were released for the Jewish Holidays. Other districts were still being required to work. Since I had never done that, he asked me what I did to supplement my salary. I explained how I always had at least two options open to me.

I supplemented my teacher's salary by working as a sales clerk in a locally owned retail hardware business in the Plainview Shopping Center that had recently been completed and opened. It was called Fairway Hardware Inc., and was owned by a hard working businessman whose name was Irving Siegal. My choice to work there was no simple coincidence. My father's family in Ireland had been members of a merchant class of locals in Kilkenny, where

they owned a hardware and furniture business and were known for two generations as ironmongers. I worked for Irv part time for much of the year and continued in his employ for close to twenty years, through high school and college and a first marriage. The job provided not just income, which was not a lot to speak of, but also as a first time homeowner we forever needed something else from the store. With my line of credit I bought whatever supplies we needed and was given benefit of a thirty percent discount on everything I bought for the length of time I worked there. Meanwhile, I was learning to do a lot of the work we needed done at home myself and was able to save what would otherwise have been the considerable expense of hiring plumbers, electricians, carpenters, carpet installers, glaziers, locksmiths and lawn maintenance services to name only a few. I learned to do all these things by myself for myself.

Weekends and summers provided yet another source of income. My musical abilities became instrumental (no pun intended), as I used my salesmanship abilities to seek and acquire work, my performance art of vocalizing and ability on acoustic bass to entertain clients at party venues, in private homes, country clubs, fashion shows, bars and restaurants, celebrations indoors and out, weddings, birthdays and celebrations of every conceivable kind. My father feared that the money I was earning would spoil me when it came to doing other kinds of honest work. He'd watch me go to work wearing a tuxedo and come home with clean hands and fingernails. It was harder work than he knew but he didn't see that.

Occasionally, we'd be called by an agent with an offer of a gig performing for the USO and we'd be flown for example, to a US Air Force Base at St. John's, in Newfoundland via Military Air Transport (MAT). That was rare. I didn't appreciate being so far away from home and declined other similar such offers.

That first year in the District I was married on November 30, 1963. Our marriage gave us our two beautiful babies, Heather Laura and John Marius Marius Jr. At the time of the interview Heather was single, living in Bethpage and working for International

Lights, a lighting manufacturer's representative located in New York City to and from which she regularly commuted by LIRR every day.

John was also single, living in Scotch Plains, New Jersey and was employed by Continental Airlines as a Flight Attendant. He was fully fluent in Spanish and flying regularly to Countries in Latin and South America. At that time he was back and forth to Mexico City, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Colombia and Puerto Rico and enjoyed the cultures, the language and what he was doing.

Steve next called to mind a time when he and I were assigned to teach in the Sonderling building. We were in adjoining classes on the second floor. I remembered the event, because all of us experience stress at times and have our own way of expressing it. This was such a time for me. My body still has its own way of reacting to and expressing internalized manifestations of anxiety. Whatever stress I have gets expressed not as weight gain or loss but by an autoimmune disease called by its Latin name *alopecia areata*. It normally occurs when your immune system attacks your own body, with the hair follicles being the site of the attack resulting in hair falling out, often in clumps the size and shape of a quarter, but it differs for everyone. In the past when it happened I might lose a patch in my head that only my barber would notice because once discovered I could comb my hair in such a way as to disguise the loss. On yet other occasions if I was sporting a beard and I saw a hole appear on one cheek, I was usually able to trim the beard in such a way that until it grew back, which it always did, I would patiently compensate during my morning shave by "*turning the other cheek*" and trimming it during morning ablutions. As we all learn in life, it's not the things that stress us out but the ways in which we react to them that can keep us sane and safe rather than sorry. Alopecia after all, I tell myself, could have been worse. I might have had to endure *alopecia universalis* an even more severe case of hair loss. In that instance, however, the only hair I had lost was of a portion of one side of my moustache. The obvious answer to my problem would have been to shave the entire thing off. Not wishing to waste any opportunity to create a good lesson, I asked myself the question: "How can I use this absurd occurrence to invent a

memorable “*teachable moment*”? As I was arriving to work that morning, the idea came to me.

I pulled into the parking lot of the Sonderling Building and parked as close as possible to the side door nearest to the staircase that would take me directly to the second floor. As I exited the car there was no one in sight. I made it into the building and to the staircase on which there were already people ascending during the change of periods. With my free hand, I reached to my face and covered the missing half of my moustache. In my other hand cradled against my chest I held my attendance register and several paperbacks. So as not to engage anyone in conversation, I held my head down as I climbed to teach the second floor, walking quickly to my classroom, I opened the door and made my way to the seat behind my desk in front of the room. There I sat with a hand over my mouth covering the missing half of my moustache as students began entering to take their seats. As the last bell signaling the start of class sounded, I stood with my back to the class while I began writing on the blackboard. “*Please open textbooks to page 247*”. Nonchalantly, now facing the class with my right hand and two fingers concealing the part of my moustache no longer there, I spoke in as authoritative a voice as I could muster asking them to follow my instructions. “*Please open your textbooks and begin answering the question at the bottom of page 247. Look up at me when you’re finished so I’ll know when you’re done.*”

I’d left my seat by now and had walked to the back of the room where I was standing. Students were all looking down at their papers engaged in their assignment. My intention had been to see how long it would take before someone in the class would notice I had only half a moustache. My reason for staging the experience was to give the class an experience and a memory I didn’t want them to forget. *People see what they want to see and all too often what they expect to see.* To imagine anyone would go walking on the street with half a moustache is too crazy to believe. People would be more likely to say to themselves, “*I’m not really seeing what I’m seeing. It must be a whole moustache I’m looking at*”. It just doesn’t register.

I will never forget how about ten minutes into the class there was a boy seated in the last row wearing shades. He had sun glasses on, and you know how often the person sitting in the back row thinks the teacher isn't going to notice them, because they're not all that engaged in the lesson, and their sun glasses provide them with a kind of anonymity. In fact the opposite is most often true. It's the people sitting in the front row who are "overlooked" by the teacher because standing in front of the class the teacher is more likely to notice people in the back row first. So here's this guy who suddenly leans back in his chair, flips his glasses up, points to me and in a loud voice proclaims, "*Look! Mr. Sherin, you have only half a moustache*". In that moment the entire balance of the class looks up and sees for the first time what he sees. The cat's out of the bag. So I begin to move around the room up and down the rows, asking students, "*Who else noticed but didn't say anything?*" One girl, sheepishly raised her hand and offered, "*Yes, I saw it but I didn't want to say anything because, I thought maybe you had something wrong with you. I felt too embarrassed to say anything.*" They all had reasons for not saying anything, but the great majority of the class had not even noticed my moustache was missing a large piece. Even Stephen admitted to falling into the last category and even though he was teaching right next to me hadn't noticed anything missing. As a footnote to the episode, I added my own observation, "*There are a lot of things I did back then that today I never would do.*" Stephen offered one of the saddest commentaries on contemporary approaches to classroom teaching today when he said, "*I think had you ever tried to do some of the things in a classroom today that you did back then, you wouldn't have been allowed to remain in a classroom*", or words to that effect.

We also used to have what they called, "*Back to School Night.*" It wasn't uncommon on those evenings for students who volunteered to assist their teachers during the evening to outnumber the turnout of parents who came to get "*progress reports*" from sons' and daughters' teachers. Attendance was also often poor, because out of economic necessity both parents worked or they had multiple kids in multiple schools all scheduled for the same night in October. Brentwood was the largest school district on Long Island out of the more than 150 Districts in Nassau and

Suffolk Counties, with 23,000 students attending classes in more than nineteen buildings divided between morning, afternoon, overlap and evening school sessions at the High School. The high school was overcrowded, though designed and built to accommodate a fraction of the unexpected number of pupils in regular attendance from 7 am to 11 pm when the high school closed until the following day.

Parents Night began punctually at 7pm in the High School. As part of the annual routine, parents would follow their child's abbreviated schedule on a pre-planned lockstep program of seven periods during which they were encouraged to meet and speak with the teacher, feel free to ask questions and receive information about student progress, academic difficulties experienced in class, while other students' parents were expecting to do the same in no more than ten minutes. Test Grades might be questioned, along with attendance, patterns of performance, overall strengths and weaknesses. It should be noted that the highest attendance on such nights belonged to parents of students in advanced track academic classes. The poorest attended classes were those of parents with kids having difficulty and whose patterns of performance were less than optimally successful. You get the picture.

With all this as background, I decided to use the opportunity to convey something I believed was essential to present to as many parents as I could reach without saying a word, but in a way I hoped they would remember.

The year was 1973, and building on what I had already learned, I was experimenting with experiential education to a degree unusual even for me. Fall meant we were in store for another back to school night. That was when a few parents of students in Honors and AB Classes would show up knowing their kids were doing well and expecting to hear the usual litany of complements from teachers. Meanwhile families with several students at different academic levels faced the usual conflict deciding what teachers to visit. Did they attend classes at the High School? The Middle School? or one of the many Elementary Schools? Which teacher did

they visit given the limited time allotted to the exercise? On most evenings teachers outnumbered parents and seldom was there a crowd of visitors waiting outside the classrooms of slower track students to hear from the teacher of an offspring struggling to achieve a grade. What parent wanted to listen to a depressing account of minimal success from a child's teacher? The report was to be brief, to the point, focused upon grades, test scores, quarterly exams, patterns of attendance, attitude and overall performance. For parents it was a predictable, boring, repetitive exercise of last year and the year before. It was my intention to scrap the routine by giving parents something to think about. I'd believed from the day I began teaching that parental involvement was not only important but also essential to the success of every child's education. As a consequence I did what to some parents and educators may have seemed over the top and undoubtedly crazy.

I came to school that night dressed as usual in shirt and tie wearing a conventional suit jacket and seated behind my desk in front of the classroom while my head was covered with a black muslin hood. I had a clear view of the room through the material and of the person sitting before me. At the same time there was no way that they could see me or what I looked like given that their vision of me was so totally obscured by the black hood I had over my head. I sat down and greeted the first parent on the waiting line to speak with me. *"Hello, Thank you for coming. My name is John Sherin and I am your son Angel's teacher in this class."* I made no mention of the hood but continued to conduct an otherwise routine parent-teacher conference, unless the parent pointedly asked me what for them had to have been the burning question....WHY?

"Why was I wearing that hood over my head? Be it known that in the course of that entire evening only one parent, the mother of a female student in my class asked me the question, straight out. "Why are you wearing that thing over your head? Well, I told her. "I've never met any of the people in this room before tonight. I don't know anyone who has come here to see me. No parents in this room have ever met me. Why then, should anyone want to leave here tonight saying to themselves after talking with me for less than ten minutes, they know me. They won't even know what I look like. How

could they possibly know me, let alone what I think, what I believe or anything at all about me?

Honestly, that will take some time and it's a vitally important investment to make considering that the education of a person they love is at stake and it's the future of that young person that is on the line here. We have to talk, maybe not here, not now, but somewhere soon. We might make a date to meet in town for coffee at *Friendly's maybe*, or you might invite me to your home on an afternoon if that's preferable. Maybe we should schedule an appointment to talk and get to know one another. At least a little better than we know one another now. They're must be lots of questions you'd like to ask? Wouldn't they like to know about my values, my dreams, my aspirations, perhaps even my inspirations? Do you want to know who the major influences in my life have been? Where do I want to be in my life ten years from right now? In other words, I want every parent here to know that they must be more involved with their children's education and we should be *working together to that end*. Each one of the parents who have come here tonight is essential to the success of their child's educational experience.

Meanwhile, people out in the hall were peeking into the room, pointing and giggling and all the while saying things like; "*Look at the 'Masked Marvel'*". A parent reported me to the Principal, and later that same night I was visited by the President of the Brentwood Teachers Association who asked for my explanation of what I did. A Board of Education Trustee enquired of me as to the purpose of my mask in a formal reply in writing mandated the following week explaining and justifying my actions. I got more attention than I ever expected but I was not sorry. People had taken notice and they'd asked questions and sought answers. Given the events of more recent times and the tragic consequences in schools throughout the nation that we've been witness to, I believe my actions and intentions of that night spoke for themselves.

Stephen then moved our discussion to a different subject while continuing the focus upon public education. It was the early seventies, Brentwood was bulging, school at that time wasn't

meeting the needs of a lot of students, I'd always been known for being very creative with the things I did in the classroom but at that time, Steve said, you, and Milt and Ken Moss, my ex-roommate were very instrumental in starting an alternative school called the Maslow-Toffler School of Futuristic Education. Why don't you tell us about that?

I said, *"I'll be delighted to tell you about it. No one has ever asked about it in quite this way."* At that moment an alternative school was desperately needed in Brentwood. The number of students quitting school was out of control and other students were simply falling through cracks in the system, and mind you there were very, very bright students who would have been able to go through our existing system and graduate and never have a problem but there was something missing for them in their education. A lot of it had to do with the soft skills and things that we didn't have time for in **'No Child Left Behind'**. As the group of us began to speak together, it turned out we had all read similar books and decided to come up with a proposal to submit to the District based upon the work of several authors since prior to that, the Superintendent had asked teachers in the District to come up with their own designs for an alternative school. Attendance at the High School was at an historic high and he was considering as a possible solution to the problem, the opening of a High School Annex. But what was he going to do? Force bus students to an annex? You couldn't do that. So his plan was,"- Let's create a choice that kids will opt for and their parents will agree to so we don't have to force anybody to do anything against their will. At that point and given declining enrolment at the elementary level and the 1954 **Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court Decision** which concluded that separate was no longer equal, the District was under pressure **"with all due haste"** from the Feds to integrate its schools. There were certain Elementary Schools like South, that serviced what was a predominantly African-American neighborhood where kids lived but was about 90% Black and fell under the ruling of the court. As a consequence, it didn't represent an integrated school district and the thought was, - If we assign some of the kids from South to another school nearby and transfer the remainder to a different school in a neighborhood close to where South was, we will have opened a location for the High School Annex in which to locate an

alternative school, satisfied our locals and met our federal obligations at the same time. It's a win-win.

The Board then released an announcement stating there had been eleven proposals submitted by the staff at the high school for plans for their alternative program designs. When the decision was made, the District chose the Maslow Toffler School because proactively we had gone into the community with our student registrants and in advance of being selected had already signed up ninety sets of parents who gave permission for their students to attend M-T in the first year of its existence. 1974 -1975.

The name of the school came from Abraham Maslow the humanistic psychologist who had authored among other books, *The Further Reaches of Human Nature*, *Motivation and Personality*, *The Third Force Movement* and the Futurist, Alvin Toffler who had published *Future Shock* in 1970 that was translated in almost every language in the world and universally acclaimed as one of the most important and popular books of the age. The accuracy of his projections had been irrefutable

I had the good fortune to meet George T. Lock Land when his first book *Grow or Die; The Unifying Principle of Transformation* was in pre-publication. In it he said, "*The first postulate of transformation is that human behavior has evolved from biological behavior and that the behavior of all living things is growth-directed activity.*" In observing patterns of growth in crystals, cells, animals, individuals, communities and societies, Land identified three distinctly different forms of growth: **(1) Accretive growth** an accumulation of sameness, simply extending boundaries and getting larger without changing basic form. **(2) Replicative growth** occurs by influencing other things to take on the form of the initiator....and the reverse. **(3) Mutual growth** is a reciprocal interaction: a two-sided exchange, the equilateral sharing or joining process...the culmination of the success of accretive and replicative growth. The process continually transforms itself into ever-higher levels of organization, said Land.

Robert Ornstein was another author we looked to for our direction. His research had been in the area of bimodal function.

Some thought his interest in the brain was a fad and of passing interest others claimed it as revolutionary in its attention to the study of human consciousness and cognition. Unless educators were in a position to understand how the brain worked they would be at a disadvantage working with future generations of students who would be expected to be familiar with the knowledge of mysteries of the mind being revealed at an unprecedented rate in literature of that day.

A great emphasis of ours was on academics. In addition to academics we wanted to prepare kids for college, so we had Syracuse University offering accreditation in English, Psychology and Sociology for a while once our staff members had been qualified to represent the University in Brentwood by teaching their courses to our students. They received high school credit as well as college credits that would be placed on their transcripts. We encouraged our students to think about the possibility of college for themselves by reminding them they could succeed in these courses. They did.

We opened up with the Town of Islip and Pilgrim Psychiatric Center or Pilgrim State Hospital as it was called then, a Work Experience Program where students could leave the building for part of the day and get experience in the field that they might have wanted to go into. If it was Clerical work, they might work in the office of the Town Supervisor, if it was in Security they might work with the Security Force over at the State Hospital. Whatever it was required us to work with the Educational Directors there to build Work Experience Programs that gave our students a certain number of hours toward their graduation requirements.

The third function of the school was thanks to the creative contribution of Ken Moss who brought the performing arts and The Performing Arts Center to M-T. Ken was responsible for writing so many original plays. He and Jeff Goldschmidt who was still teaching at the High School choreographed music and drama and put on some absolutely stellar performances that you would swear that these were all professionals. I wish we had video archives of all the things that they did starting back in 1974 (*I Heard It in the Boys Room*), and that was even before he did *Winnie The Pooh*, and *The*

Dark of the Moon, the first year, absolutely marvelous because when our kids got in front of an audience they came out of themselves and they began to get not just acceptance and support, but it enhanced their self esteem and they found the courage to try other things that they had not had the courage to try before. The school lasted for about nine years and for me it was more like dying and going to teacher heaven. It was wonderful. The ties we built with students, the close relationships we created with parents were possible because it was a small school. The second year we doubled in size and it almost got too big. At that point local politics became a factor. The Superintendent of Schools who clearly supported and endorsed the concept became vulnerable because his adversaries where hell bent on hurting him and all they had to do was to kill the alternative school in order to hurt him. They were unable to get him in other ways. He was too intelligent and far too street smart to allow himself to be hood winked by the likes of his opponents. As a consequence we found ourselves targeted by members of the community who saw us as a threat and what we were doing as a threat and though they never visited the school, created their own fantasies of what was happening and would talk to others about the school who had never visited but exchanged rumors about the prevalence of illicit drug use and relationships between students and teachers that they claimed were taking place. All the fantasies got played out. It was tough.

The practicality of the situation was that they had provided an entire building for us. We were only using one wing. We hadn't in the time allowed grown to a size where we could justify use of the entire building for our purposes and therefore it became a matter of practical consideration. They had to justify use of the building by assigning certain teachers to teach Special Education and BOCES (early dismissal) classes by coercing them to go there. Stephen was one of them. Add to this those students among those populations who resented being singled out and discriminated against by bussing them from their classes in the high school and friends they were accustomed to seeing every day without their permission.

Conrad Follansbee, who was Principal of our building, wore several hats. He wore one hat as the Alternative School Principal

that was best described in the words of Lao Tsu who's been quoted as having said "*He governs best, who governs least*" as far as MT was concerned. But where the classes from the high school and Special Ed were concerned he had to employ a much more hands on approach. It could easily become a schizophrenic kind of approach to management incredibly difficult to sustain. What a wonderful guy and what a nightmare of a job he had for a number of years, trying to be all things to all people. If he had not been there, I don't know how we would have been able to do what we did. I told Steve, we asked for him when Guy asked us, "*Who do you want to be your Administrator*"? Without any hesitation, we said, Conrad Follansbee. This was the only person we wanted. He had not been in Brentwood long, but had already established himself as an exemplary and compassionate human being, and as Steve echoed during our interview, he was "*the right choice, a humanitarian like no other*". Conrad's first day in the District was one we both remembered. It had been labeled what local press in NEWSDAY called "*a race riot*". An argument between a couple of guys over a girl that may have involved a drug sale gone bad was Conrad's introduction to his first day on the job at the High School and it went from there.

I loved what I was doing and never thought I would ever retire from teaching once I committed to being a teacher. From that point on I always imagined I would die with my boots on. But in the last couple of years my immune system became compromised. I began to get colds that invariably went into bronchial pneumonia. I remember within six months of one bout with pneumonia I got it again. I began to hear about people like Jim Hensen who died of pneumonia at a very young age and I started thinking, you know that could be me. I think I better start thinking more about myself. My wife almost had a nervous breakdown when she heard I was thinking about retirement. She didn't want me to retire. When I did retire it was mostly for health reasons. I retired in 1992 and for about the next year I walked south shore beaches, crunched leaves and ice and snow in the fall and winter enjoying the four seasons and began looking back at some of the things that I didn't have when I was teaching that I would like to have had. One was finding a way to be more effective in the teaching of geography than I'd

been. It's almost as if we have a learning disability with geography in this country and that goes all the way through to adulthood. What made me aware of that was while teaching my last class in the high school before I retired I asked, "*What ocean do you swim in when you go to the beach?*" There were people who didn't know. So when I told them the Long Island Sound was on the north shore of Long Island, but when you stand on the north side of it near Sunken Meadow State Park looking across the water on a clear day you can see land, I asked what state it was, and one of my students, after some serious prompting because they said they didn't know, ventured the guess -, "Arizona". I said to myself, "*I have to do something about this when I retire, because this is tragic.*" Twelve years of schooling, there's no room for anything else. I've got to do something.

What I did were two things. I didn't know what I wanted to do best, so I did them both. I trademarked and patented a manipulative way to teach geography, to take regional geographic land areas and make Long Island, the Towns, Counties of Long Island and New York State, such that they can easily be moved and positioned in a geographically correct configuration by students. www.mapzzles.com

The other thing I accomplished was to patent a manipulative non-verbal team building kit that I trade marked with the brand name *C Squares*, since all the objectives of the activity started with words beginning with the letter C. www.csquares.com

Steve asked, "*How would you like to be remembered?*" I'd like to be remembered first as a guy who was a good father and someone who tried very hard to be a good husband. My father was a good husband. I want to be remembered as a decent human being who thought of other people before he thought of himself. Life has taught me that that's the surest way to find your happiness. It's not that you don't think you're important, but if you know and trust everybody around you to go for what they need and help them, sooner or later you'll find they've already been helping you get what you need. "*What goes around comes around*". That's Karma.