

NYSTRS Centennial Stories

Letty Sustrin

"I sat down in front of my computer to write about my life as a teacher. Where do I begin? It's like taking a trip down memory lane. My identical twin sister, Sheila (deceased in 2015), and I always knew we were going to be elementary school teachers. When we were three years old, we played 'house' with our many dolls, but soon our dolls became our students and we considered ourselves the 'Twin Teachers.'

After graduation from Brooklyn College, we started to look for teaching positions. The Brentwood school system was building new schools at the time, and we were both hired to teach kindergarten in the same school. This was the start of 38 wonderful years teaching side-by-side in Brentwood.

We taught kindergarten for 18 years and later both became first grade teachers in another Brentwood school. We were known as a great team and were even named Brentwood's Teachers of the Year together in 1978. We nurtured our students and I like to think we were surrogate mothers to them. To this day, I am still close to many of our former students.

We retired in 1998, but it was a very hard decision and we missed the children. We decided to go back as school volunteers. Someone once asked us why we never married, but we explained: 'WE DID!' We got married to our job. It became the main love of our lives.

One day, my sister and I started to discuss how we could

continue to enrich the lives of children. We decided to begin writing children's books. Our first book was *The Teacher Who Would Not Retire*. The book turned into a series about an older teacher who has many escapades with her students. I wrote five books with my sister and the sixth and final book of the series alone. When my twin passed away, I continued my involvement with schools, and I wrote another book called *A Penny from My Sister*.

I love being able to relate to children, charm them, and make them happy. In today's world, children need to be able to laugh and enjoy life. I have had 61 wonderful, memorable years with the Brentwood school district. I am still looking forward to many more fruitful years as an active retired teacher!"

Letty Sustrin retired from Brentwood Union Free Schools in 1998 but continues to serve as a school volunteer.



The Sustrin twins with some of their own storybooks.

Nancy T. Cupolo

"All I ever really wanted to do was teach kindergarten! When I was seven years old, I would conduct skits and performances for neighborhood children in our basement and ask my eight siblings to watch me sing, dance, and play school.

When I started college, I got a job working with a four-year-old boy named Stuart who needed assistance with walking on his own. I leaped at the opportunity to work with him, not knowing that my life would change forever because of a four-year-old's inspiration, wit and humor!

I graduated with an undergraduate degree in nursery, elementary, and special education and later got a master's degree in special education. Working with Stuart inspired me to teach children with emotional disturbances, physical challenges, learning disabilities, hearing impairments, and speech and language delays for Rensselaer-Columbia-Greene BOCES.

I was fortunate to be one of the first educators to conduct a class at an elementary school, within the local community, for children with severe and profound disabilities, long before inclusive education was even something thought of.

A few years later I served as an education program assistant for the State Education Department, training teachers on laws and regulations relative to special education. Later, I became an adjunct faculty member at Russell Sage College in Troy, where I taught for 13 years.

When I became a parent, I decided to open my own private pre-school so that I could be a parent and teacher simultaneously. I operated my private school for 10 years and I also began my own consulting business to support parents and those who work with children.

In 1990, I became a full-time professor at Hudson Valley Community College,



Cupolo, left, with her first pre-school graduating class in 1982.

where I taught pre-service educators for 24 years. I served as the department chairperson for 12 of those years.

One thing I would say to new teachers is: 'Look at their faces.' Students' faces show us if they are engaged and listening or if they are confused or experiencing trouble at school or at home."

Nancy T. Cupolo retired from Hudson Valley Community College in 2014 but still runs her consulting business.