



A Journey with Passion

by Juanita Copley, College/University Representative

It was the most unusual audience. I had recently retired from the University of Houston. My husband and I decided to take a trip to missions fields in Poland that we had supported, cruise around Italy, and take a side trip to Bulgaria to visit some friends. While we were in Bulgaria, I was invited to speak to teachers who taught in an orphanage for Roma students. As soon as I entered the doors, both teachers and students warmly greeted me with smiles and verbal greetings that I didn't understand.

The students were unlike any I had ever met. My guide told me that the children at the orphanage were Roma, often known by the derogatory name "gypsies," a traditionally itinerant ethnic group lacking educational opportunities and often facing discrimination. Also, each of the students in the orphanage had a disability of some type. In Roma culture, if people had any disability, it meant they were cursed and that if anyone touched them, that person too would be cursed. Most of the students lived in the orphanage because their families had disowned them. As I greeted each child individually, I intentionally shook their hands, and many of the students reciprocated with hugs. Although I could not understand their verbal language as they showed me their work, I had no doubts they felt loved. They in turn loved and respected their teachers.

In a similar way, the teachers demonstrated their love and respect for their students. It was obvious that the teachers weren't worried about curses or disabilities. Instead, they

showed me their students' work, the posters they had created with the Cyrillic alphabet, and their meager teaching materials. They bragged about the students who had broken away from Roma stigmas. Their passion about teaching and caring for and loving their students was daunting, and I felt totally inadequate to talk to them about teaching. Instead, I listened to them through an interpreter, encouraged them by telling them what I had observed in their classrooms, and gave them some materials they could use in their teaching. I prayed for them, that they would continue to show God's love to his children.

This experience in Bulgaria is one that I will never forget because it reminded me of the reason I was a teacher and my lifelong journey with passion. Passion can be defined as a deep, abiding love for a person, place, or thing. I do have a deep love of teaching, but it involves so much more than just the act of teaching. It involves the students who learn, whose lives are changed by what they have learned. It involves listening with respect as students teach me about how they learn. It involves thinking of new ways to help every student learn. It involves motivating learners to think, to help others learn, and to better be able to function in the world. Passion is when I wake up in the morning with thoughts of teaching—of students or new ways to motivate them to learn. It is more than just enthusiasm, excitement, or a job. As much as is possible, I have put my heart, mind, and soul into teaching, and I have been privileged to be on this lifelong journey with passion.

From the very beginning, I wanted to do "something important" for God and others. And I didn't want to be bored. As a college freshman, I majored in mathematics and thought I would do technology and mathematics and work in the financial world. I didn't think teaching was for me, because "everybody did that" and I wanted to do "something really important." At the end of my freshman year, I became an assistant to the mathematics professor who taught a required math class for prospective elementary teachers. As part of my duties, I taught review sessions for the students who had difficulty with math. I found that I loved it, and I was good at it. In fact, I reviewed so well that the professor thought I had cheated because everyone passed the course with an A or a B, something that normally does not happen. After lots of prayer and consultations with advisors, I changed my major to education with an emphasis in math and science. My passion for teaching was just beginning.

I have been teaching in educational settings for 50 years. . . But my big question is: Have I been able to do "something important" for God and others? Teaching math and instructing teachers how to teach math has been my primary focus. But at the beginning of my journey, I wondered if God could use math to accomplish something important for him and others. I knew I wasn't a pastor, a missionary, or a leader in a church organization. I also knew that I was always given opportunities to teach in public schools and universities rather than church-related schools. Most importantly, I knew that my life was dedicated to God. He created me; he knows my strengths and weaknesses, and he has directed me on this journey. I have faith that I serve a God who cares about my passions and smiles every time I experience the joy of teaching. With his direction, I have learned so much during this passion journey. Let me describe several of my most important discoveries.

I was given the opportunity to teach in Jakarta for a month during the summer. Some of my former students were teaching there. They assured me that the methods I had taught them in their classes would work in Jakarta, and they had all the technology I would need to make presentations. What did I learn? First, the clothing I took was not always the best for the climate. My sandals made me look like a servant, so I had to teach in my shoes with heels. Second, they had lots of technological devices, but they normally did not have electricity. I did not prepare enough teaching materials for the large number of people who attended. I learned that flexibility and adaptation were my best tools.

So how has my journey with passion been transformed? I thank God daily that he directed my life to the world of teaching. Initially, I did not have a passion or even an inclination to teach; my choice was quite different. However, as I learned the skills necessary for effective teaching and began to focus on the needs and abilities of students, I became more and more passionate about that role. I *love* teaching. And I am glad God “worked all things together” in my life so that I can travel this journey with passion.

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