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Tribute to Dr. Donald Hetzner

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Dr. Donald Hetzner – walk into any secondary school in Western New York – visit the Social Studies Department – and you are bound to meet someone who has been mentored by him. He is truly an icon with regard to social studies education and has been a pillar of the History and Social Studies Education Department for over 40 years.

When I was asked to write a brief piece to commemorate Don's retirement, I graciously accepted the request. For the past few years, Don has mentioned that his retirement date was near and I knew it was around the corner. However, what I thought would be one of the easiest pieces to write soon became one of the most difficult. Completing this piece made Don's retirement real – and I'm not sure that I am ready to say, "Goodbye..."

I met Dr. Hetzner a.k.a. Don almost 30 years ago when I enrolled in his 200 level course – Introduction to Teaching. I remember thinking how much the instructor resembled Jerry Garcia from the Grateful Dead. What I would soon find out is how inspiring Dr. Hetzner can be – and over the years – I would learn that Dr. Hetzner has just about as many followers as Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead! Although only a freshman, I knew then – like I know now – that the method of instruction was truly unique. Don required class presentations before they were considered the norm, encouraged interaction amongst class members and always told a story which made the theory we were studying relevant to life. Pure lecturing was not the main mode of instruction. Rather – through dialogue and the sharing of life experiences – we learned from each other. I think we were trained to be effective teachers because Don taught us to value, understand and respect one another. Ask many of Don's former students who are now teaching and they will comment on how memorable Dr. Hetzner is – not because of the content of his courses – but because of the quality of his character.

I think the most memorable thing about Don is his storytelling ability. He begins with, "You know..." then raises his eyes, tilts his head to the side and the life lesson begins. Having worked with so many diverse people and settings throughout his career – Don can take a current situation – reflect on the past – and make it a teachable moment for the future. Always told with a smile – and attempting to hold back a laugh at times – Don's life history can make even your hardest day end with a smile. That is one thing I can say about Don Hetzner – he has the ability to brighten your day and he can make whatever situation you are going through a bit more bearable – while teaching you the life lesson associated with it.

Little did I know that our paths would cross again and we would become colleagues years after that first encounter. For the last 15 years, Don and I have not only been colleagues – but friends. Forever the teacher, Don helped me through many situations with our student teachers – and once again – had a life story that related to whatever situation we were dealing with at the time – which made the life lesson even more meaningful. I have been fortunate to be a guest in his home and his wife Gigi, and their children Sean and Matthew share the same character traits of warmth and kindness that Don expresses through his teaching and his day to day life.

There is an old saying that one never knows how far the influence of a teacher goes. When I visit secondary schools and meet up with Don's former students, I see firsthand the techniques and strategies they are using in the classroom – many of them introduced to them by Don - and the life lessons they are passing on to their current students reflect Don's method of instruction. Reflecting on this has helped me to complete this piece. Dr. Donald Hetzner will never really retire. His warmth and compassion, ability to listen to others and accept differences, and his ability to take a situation and teach a life lesson will live on and continue to reach countless others through those teachers fortunate enough to call Dr. Hetzner one of their former teachers.

I am proud to call Dr. Donald Hetzner my former professor, colleague and friend. Thanks for the memories Don - and teaching us to find the treasures in life that cannot be taught - but only experienced. Knowing that you have left a part of yourself with all of us makes it a bit easier to say, "Good-bye..."