

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

Season 2 - Episode 4

10/2/24

"Students Make the Best Teachers"

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois - Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Easter Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

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Students Make the Best Teachers

Season 2; Episode 4

10/2/2024

Hosts: Jan, Rob, Dee, & Jim

Our Back To School special. Reminiscences of memorable teachers and memorable students.

JIM: Students make the best teachers. Were they good students? Were they indifferent? Did they ask questions? Did they turn their work in on time? These traits might tell you what kind of a student they were, but they don't always predict what kind of teacher they will be. But yes, the best teachers were once students.

But that's mundane. So let's take the next step.

The good teachers I have worked with are those who never cease learning, who never stop being students. They think about how they learned as students, and then they expand their teacher toolkit with all the other modes of learning their varied and unique students will bring to school. This child is a visual learner, while this one would rather just sit and listen. This child sits still while that child is in constant motion. And this child will ask question after question, while this one is quiet as an empty chair. And that child over there might not hear a word you're saying because she's looking forward to that school lunch she's about to have, which just might be the last meal of her day.

So yes, all teachers were once students. And yes, good teachers are those who continue to learn. But to say students make the best teachers also means students create the best teachers. And the best teachers know this by the question students ask or don't ask, by the attention they give or refuse to give, by talking out of turn or by not talking at all, or by sitting in complete disinterest until the teacher finally happens to say something that the student can actually connect with. The best teachers are created when they notice how each student responds, and when they have learned the right time to say, "Follow me," and the right time to say, "Go and do."

[Music begins]

With that in mind, I asked our group to remember a standout teacher, good or bad. They all choose good ones. And then I asked them to remember a standout student. And - let's listen.

[Music ends]

JIM: Since it's back to school season, we thought we'd share some of our own experiences as either teachers, librarians, or students ourselves. So I'm going to start with Jan. Are there any memorable teachers, for better or worse, that come to mind?

JAN: I took biology in junior high. And we had this great teacher. His name was Mr. Blair. And I loved biology. I don't know where that came from exactly, maybe, because I was already following Rob's footsteps. I don't know.

JIM: By following Rob, you mean enamored with.

JAN: That's what I mean, yeah.

JIM: Obsessed with.

JAN: Obsessed, some kind of...

JIM: Stalking level interest in Rob.

[Laughter]

JAN: But I love biology. It was very hands-on learning. For our last grading period, we got to choose our project. And my good friend, Sue Bobowski - now Sue Anderson - we decided, in some moment of insanity, that we wanted to dissect a cat.

JIM: Like a neighbor's cat?

JAN: This was back in the time when you could do this. I don't think you can do this anymore. We set our aim high here, because this was a big project. And we put together our proposal with Mr. Blair. And he said, "Have at it." And so we did. We got a cat. And we dissected it...

JIM: Wait, you went right by a really important part there. "We got a cat."

DEE: How did you get the cat?

JAN: The cat was not alive. The cat had been put to sleep by a local vet...

JIM: Okay.

JAN: ...who my friend Sue knew. So we had a resource for a deceased cat.

ROB: Okay. I was just thinking, did the owners know what happened to their cat?

JAN: I have no idea.

JIM: Well, I once had a cat. And when it had to be put down, one of the options was to donate it to science. And that's what I did.

DEE: Oh, really.

JIM: So it could have ended up in, like, a classroom setting, more likely at a university level than...

JAN: Well, this was 9th grade.

JIM: ...9th grade.

JAN: So we had our cat. And here's what I want to say about Mr. Blair. He gave us an environment in which to learn and learn on our own. We would have to turn in projects as we went.

JIM: What exactly was your proposal? You wanted just to explore?

JAN: Well, we were going to dissect the cat completely, disassemble, and then reassemble the skeleton...

JIM: Oh.

JAN: ...which we did. I mean, it was...

JIM: Where is it?

JAN: ...a comprehensive - It's in the school.

JIM: Really!?

JAN: Yeah, it's in Whitman. Just the very act of putting a skeleton back together and getting it right, I learned so much. And Mr. Blair never stopped us. He just made it all available to us. And, I mean, I got a "A."

ROB: And what about the - tell them about pithing the frog.

JAN: I'm not telling that story. Thank you.

ROB: I think Jan is on a PETA watch list.

DEE: Yeah.

JIM: Dee, do you have anything like that?

DEE: No. The teacher I feel was most significant for me was actually in university. And it was Madame Rosemarie Landry. She taught French chanson at the University of Toronto. She was very demanding in perfection and had very high standards, and scared the crap out of me when I was a student. Because anyone who knows me, you know I'm extremely shy. And our classes, even though it was a very large music school, they - our classes were small, which I really appreciated. And I remember we would sit, like, in a horseshoe against the wall. And there would be this open room with a grand piano. We would basically prepare songs to present to her. And she would critique us. And she would have us speak the text before she would allow us to sing it.

JIM: Mm-Hmm.

DEE: And if the pronunciation was not correct, she wouldn't let us sing it. And I remember my pronunciation my first year going into her class was horrific. She was kind to me. She was very direct, but she always made you feel, like, "I'll be there to support you..."

JIM: Mm-Hmm.

DEE: ...and you can do this." And I found that type of teaching worked well for me. And she made me bring in a recorder. And I had to record myself in front of all these other students with her helping me in the pronunciation. And then, when I sang, I had to record. And it took months before she said, "Okay, you don't need to bring in the recorder anymore." But she pushed me to be better. When I achieved what she wanted me to achieve, she was very highly complimentary and very supportive of me. It made me want to work better and work harder to get her approval. And when I got her approval, I knew it wasn't just...

JAN: It wasn't a token.

DEE: ...it wasn't just to encourage me, but it meant something. Like, "Oh, I really did it," sort of thing. And I remember when I was graduating, I asked her for a recommendation. And she was over the top excited to write a recommendation for me. And, in some ways, I wish she would have been my private teacher as well.

JIM: I remember the time I realized - it was a heartbreaking thing to realize - that you're very quiet. You've got these insecurities that every singer carries. And yet singers also have to carry a certain sort of confidence, even if it's made up. But that somehow gave you the reputation of being standoffish and elitist. It crushed me when I realized that's what people thought you were, because you're anything but. But that's still the way that people perceived you. And so that's where a lot of behind-the-scenes work against you came from. And I've never really - I've acknowledged it, I've set it aside, but I am aware that it happened. Do you have somebody, Rob?

ROB: Elementary would have been Mr. Francetto. He was a social studies teacher. I honestly don't remember a lot about the teaching, except that he was just a cool guy. And he made me interested in maps and places and capitals and states and countries and things like that. Probably initiated, or helped to push along, my love of travel. In high school, it was Coach Kaier. He was my swim coach. He was great. I loved him. He was funny. I also had him for PE. And I was notoriously late getting dressed out for PE. I was always one of the last ones out. The last one out always had to take off their sneaker, their shoe, and he would - you'd bend over, and he'd hit you with it. And it was nothing. And it was like a joke. But it was like, "McMahon," or later on, I got the nickname of Fruit. We used to take at swimming practice. At the end of swimming practice, they'd give us these - they were vitamins. And it was an orange flavor. And I would put it in my mouth. I'd say, "Oo, tastes just like fruit." Everyone started calling me Fruit after that. So Coach would say, "Fruit, you late again? Give me your tennis shoe." And he'd hit me. And he'd smile. And I'd smile. And I didn't care. It was kind of a stupid thing. Couldn't do that today.

DEE: No.

ROB: You'd get fired. But I think the best educational experience I had with instructors was at the U of M Biological Station. I was working on a master's degree at U of M. And I spent a summer up in northern Michigan. And I did a bird class and an animal behavior class. And it was outstanding. It was just really good professors. Took us out to lots of different places. We saw lots of different birds. Got to do some research. My particular research in the animal behavior thing was on the green frogs in a pond. And I was looking at whether or not they are territorial, whether they inhabit a place. And I would catch the frogs. And I would move them to a different spot in the lake or pond. And then I'd go back and identify where they were. And I did that by clipping toenails. That was the way to do it. You could identify what the frogs were. And I found that, yeah, they tended to go back to where they were. It was just an interesting experience. I lived in a little tin shack that had a wood burning stove. Jan came up to visit me. My dad came up to visit me that year. Russ and Sandy came up to visit. It was just a great experience, a learning experience. And that's also where I discovered NPR.

JAN: Michigan Public Radio.

ROB: Yeah. National Public Radio.

JAN: Well, I know, but it was on Michigan Public Radio.

ROB: Right, right.

JIM: So, Dee, yours was a French teacher. Jan is killing cats, and Rob is kidnapping frogs. I'm going to give all the praise to a man named Mr. Slack, who was my 6th grade teacher. In Michigan, the 6th grade was the last grade of elementary school. So this was before you went on to junior high, which is 7, 8, 9 in high school, 10, 11, 12. It's different down here where 5th grade is the last elementary. But Mr. Slack was the last chance I had in elementary school to kind of get my act together. And in 5th grade, the teacher that we had for 5th grade had come into 5th grade from 4th grade. And I believe he didn't really have a 5th grade expectations for what the class should do. And I succeeded in becoming a very lazy student of not really achieving very much and not getting my work done. And I go into 6th grade class, and Mr. Slack is there. And if you didn't turn an assignment in, he had a little slip of paper about the size of a Monopoly property card. And on that, it was the assignment, the date, and you had to put why you didn't get it done. Right? And he had a copy, and I had a copy.

Come about winter break, I had a stack of these things about the size of a playing card stack. And so it was time for a parent teacher. And he comes in, and he tries to explain to mom why her son is such a failure. No, he's explained this really has to change. And so I, "Oh, these papers really did mean something." And so the next half year, I was on it because I didn't want Mr. Slack to be disappointed, and I didn't want him to bring mom in again. And at the end of the school year, he had said something. He introduced me to the expression of "pulled up by your own bootstraps," which to me made no sense at all. And the way that he kind of stayed on me, and then I went into junior high with a better idea of, "I actually have to do work. I have to get things done." And Mr. Slack, for me, is forever the hero of my public school education. So praises to Mr. Slack from Rosedale Elementary School.

So the teachers who are here: do you remember - now that you've talked about a memorable teacher, do you have any memorable students?

ROB: I have a student. His name was Doug. When I was teaching high school in Richmond, Michigan, he had a deformed - I think it was his right hand. He only had four fingers on his right hand, the thumb and three fingers. And he always had - I ate lunch in my room, and he always joined me for lunch. And we would talk. And at the end of each time, he would say, "Give me four, Mr. McMahan."

[Laughter]

ROB: So he would do that. He loved AC/DC. I remember that. He thought they were the greatest group ever. And we talked about that. But at the end of each - "Give me four, Mr. McMahan.

JAN: Why did he stay and talk to you?

ROB: Oh, just because I would, I suppose. I had him in class, too. But he always liked to come - I think perhaps he was a little different than the other kids. And he just enjoyed being by himself. But I was a safe place for him. And we would talk. And I think he enjoyed that.

JAN: That's what I was going for.

JIM: That's a huge thing, a safe place for a kid. I mean, there's - a lot of the things happen when you're not in the classroom and you just have these relationships. [to Rob] Like a student comes to have lunch with you because that's a safe place. [to Dee] You have students having lunch with you because it's a safe place. I locked my door and turned the lights off because I was in my safe place.

So I'm at Trinity Oaks. And there's this - everyone comes in either by car. They walk. A bus comes and gets them. So it's at the end of the day, I go up to the front office. There's this one girl still sitting there. And so I'm about to talk to her and sit down and see how her day was and stuff. And she's got stuff she wants to show me. And then the principal - I saw the principal over there just kind of waved me over. And I went over. And the principal let me know that her mother - single parent - mother had dropped her off and then told the principal that she wasn't coming back. Because it's too - because it was overwhelming for her. Well, this happens all the time. And schools are there to kind of help the whole thing. So I had to talk to this girl who was thinking her mom was coming to pick her up. But she wasn't. She was going to be taken away by some child services stuff and placed someplace. So I'm watching her. And she wants to show me what she did in art class and things like that. And I could just sit with her for a while and accept the kind of parenting role that I'm not cut out for. But that's the task I was given that day of just to see her. She was a delightful child. But that's the sort of thing that happens.

When you're a public school teacher, I found out, that it's the non-instructional stuff that is where your heart lives most of the time.

ROB: Yeah.

JIM: I mean, there's mounds of things we could say about that right now. But I know that Dee - do you remember Shaddai in kindergarten class?

DEE: Shaddai was the most bright-eyed kid. Everything was wonderful. And, "Wow! Can you believe it? This is amazing!" And he was this kid. And you looked at him, and you said, "Please don't ever lose that optimism and that wonder and positivity." And he was in kindergarten, and we were teaching together. And the school had just started - what was it? Blue - blue tickets.

JIM: Blue tickets, yeah.

DEE: And they could - with so many blue tickets, they could go to the cafeteria and get a prize or pick something out from the store. I don't know.

JIM: It was some sort of behavior motivation...

DEE: Yeah.

JIM : ...tool.

DEE: So Shaddai - I don't know. He did something that was right. He answered a question correctly. So I said, "Oh, Shaddai, that was awesome." I said, "I'm going to give you a blue ticket." And I said, "Do you know what a blue ticket is? Or, what you get to do?" And he held it. And he goes, "Wow! I got a blue ticket. This is wonderful!" And he said, "I'm going to put it in my pocket. I'm going to keep it safe. And then I'm going to go down to the cafeteria. And I'm going to pick something out from the store." And it took everything for

me to keep a straight face, to listen to him. And then you have a memory of Shaddai, that...

JIM :Well, we're teaching note values, right?

DEE: Yes, so...

JIM: And so a whole note, four counts; a half note, two counts; a quarter note, one count. So the question was asked, "How many quarter notes are in a whole note?" And he's sitting right down in front. They're all sitting crisscross. Right? He's sitting right down in front. He raises his hand. "Shaddai, how many quarter notes are in a whole note?" And his answer was, "Hey, if you went home with me, maybe we could play Donkey Kong."

[Laughter]

DEE: Yeah. And I had to turn away. And you were laughing. And I think I turned around and said, "Okay, Shaddai, we'll talk about that later."

JAN: Don't you just love that?

JIM: Yeah, it was. And then he went on. He was...

DEE: I mean, that made, like - those were the days when you go, "Okay, this is pretty good."

JIM: Yes, it is. And he was a small boy, kindergarten. Then he was - he's taller than us, plays trombone. And he went on and still had that enthusiasm. But it was the whole family.

DEE: Oh, yeah, the whole family was that - his little sister, baby sister, was so competitive. And she was like, "I did better than Shaddai, didn't I?" And he was a really good big brother. And that family, I love that family.

JIM (voice-over): Recording this session brought back many memories - too many to relate here - of teachers and professors who have made a strong impact on me, not so much through their praise, but more through a clearly communicated, "Hey, kid, get your act together." So let's name them for the record. Along with Mr. Slack in elementary school, *[music begins]* there's Miss Manners in junior high social studies, and Miss Buda in high school AP math. Let's say, Professor Charles Ruggiero and Professor David Liptak at Michigan State University, and Professor Alexander Ringer and Professor David Liptak at the University of Illinois. Yes, you heard David Liptak's name twice. He chased me from MSU to the U of I to have another whack at me. To them I say, "You know what you did, and I thank you for it." So if students really do make the best teachers, then maybe not only did these folks help me, but maybe I helped them as well. Until next time.

[Music ends]