

# A Tribute to a Teacher Who Changed My Life

If you've ever had a teacher who affected your entire life, you'll understand how I feel about Jacquie Bell, my high school journalism teacher, who taught me the basics of journalism and inspired me to make that my life's vocation. We live in a day when the educational system seems in disarray and most teachers seem unappreciated, so I hope this encourages other teachers. I want you to know that you are influencing students, even if they never have a chance to write something like this to let the world know how much you mean to them.

Jacquie Story Bell died peacefully on Tuesday, Sept. 3, at age 91 in Lakeland, Florida. I had only reconnected with her a few years ago when she tracked me down and called my office. She had followed my career and wanted to see me. I took her to dinner twice, and we reminisced over copies of the student newspaper. I also gave her copies of *Charisma* and books I've published, including *The Harbinger* and *God and Donald Trump*. Four months ago, I took her on her last "date" to attend my 50th anniversary class reunion. That night, she was the center of attention, or should I say, the "bell(e) of the ball" (pun intended.)

Few readers have had the privilege of knowing her or appreciating her feisty personality. She was both religious and a little profane. Edgy and traditional. The 30-plus years she taught spanned from Lyndon Johnson's presidency to Bill Clinton's. As the classes got bigger and bigger, she taught at least 7,000 students over those years. Few of those students went into journalism or started their own publishing house as I did, but that's not the point. You couldn't be in Jacquie Bell's class and not be affected by her over-the-top personality, her love for learning, her love of her students

and her love for life.

If it's true (as the book says) that "everything I learned I learned in kindergarten," then everything I learned about journalism I learned from Mrs. Bell in "Journalism I" class. I learned to get the facts right, to report both sides, to be fair and impartial and to spell everyone's name right. Those are things most in the media seem either to have forgotten or never learned.

My family had moved to Florida only a few years before from Iowa, so Southern culture was new to me. She used to delight in telling us students stories of how her grandfather was one of the early Lakeland settlers. Those were the days of segregation. My first integrated classes in Florida were while I was Mrs. Bell's student (as I was when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.) The Vietnam War was raging, and there were riots in the streets. Those were difficult days. But in our high school paper, we reported who was on the honor roll, and what the football team and cheerleaders were doing.

After graduating from Florida State University, she and her husband ran a newspaper in the Florida Panhandle. So unlike many teachers who never have real-life experience in what they teach, she knew all about putting out a newspaper. And she was good.

Mrs. Bell told stories of how an elderly aunt told her as a young girl to not let life pass her by with never really "living." So as a result, she learned to fly, which in the 1940s was unusual and still is. For a time, she was a swimmer/entertainer at Weeki Wachee Springs when it was an important tourist attraction before the days of Disney World—the creation of which was announced during the time she taught me.

At the time I was her student, I was unsure about the future, including what I would do with my life. Little did I know I'd

end up majoring in journalism at the University of Florida and then getting my first job with the newspaper in Orlando. At age 24, I started *Charisma* magazine, which grew into Charisma Media and allowed me to travel the world, interview four U.S. presidents and speak at the United Nations. Mrs. Bell was especially proud I've written a couple of books about Donald Trump, whom she adored. When I last visited her at Lakeland Regional Health two weeks ago, I took her the manuscript for my new book *God, Trump and the 2020 Election*, which won't release until January 2020.

She lived on her own until the end. She didn't like going to doctors, so they never found the cancer that killed her. When they took her to assisted living, she kept demanding to go home. Now she is home—in heaven. Her faith was important to her. She used to talk about how in the 1940s, a young evangelist named Billy Graham was the speaker at a youth camp in the Poconos in Pennsylvania when she committed her life to Christ.

This article is my attempt to honor the life of a woman who influenced thousands of students, but none more than me. I doubt I'd have pursued journalism and publishing without her influence. I can see now that God used her to direct me to do His will for my life. I hope someday someone will say that I have had such a significant influence on their life.

And I hope my very personal tribute reminds you that whether we are a vocational teacher or not, we are all influencing people's lives every day. So we need to make our influence count for good and for God.