

Austin at School

At Christmas time, I asked Austin if he would like for me to visit his school. I told him that I wanted to meet his classmates and see the kind of things he was learning. He said that he would have to think about it. That is the way Austin is. He thinks about things before he commits himself to any activity. Austin is now eight years old and in the second grade at Betty Jane Elementary School in Akron.

When Austin was a very young child, we worried about him because he didn't talk until he was almost three years old. Everything else about him seemed normal, but when we would say, "Austin, say mama." He would just look at his mother and smile. He seemed to understand everything, but he would only let you know by glances and smiles. When he did start talking, the transformation was amazing because he seemed to start using sentences almost immediately. He reminded me of that old story where the young child didn't speak until he was six years old. When he finally did speak, his first words were, "This oatmeal is cold and I don't like cold oatmeal!"

The child's whole family was shocked and after they recovered, asked him why he had never talked before. He said, "Well, so far everything has been OK." That seemed to be the case with Austin. He was a happy boy and instead of talking a lot, observed what everyone else was doing. Austin has two older brothers, Andrew, fifteen, and Connor, ten. Connor is two years older than Austin and plays with him all the time. Connor is truly Austin's big brother, looking out for

him and including him in play along with his older friends. I'll never forget one of the first times I took both of them swimming. I would hold out my hands and Connor would jump into my arms. I would then hold out my hands to Austin and he would look at Connor. He wouldn't jump unless Connor said it was OK to jump. Austin had developed complete trust in Connor that he hadn't yet found in others. Austin has been content observing others and his muse has yet to be determined (Andrew's is music and Connor's is music and gymnastics).



I didn't say any more about visiting Austin's school, but during the last week in February, out of the blue, Austin said, "Grandpa, I want you to visit my school." I said that I would like to do that and he said he would talk to his teacher, Mrs. Crofford, and find out when I could visit. He called me the next day and said his teacher said that I could come any day. I asked Austin when he wanted me to visit and he said that he would like me to come two days later, on

Wednesday. I said I could do that, and we agreed to meet at his room at 11:00, one half hour before lunch.

I arrived at Room 1 at the appointed time, with my camera slung over my shoulder, and was met by Mrs. Crofford, who when told that I was Austin's grandpa said, "Austin, come up here and introduce your guest." He jumped up, came to my side and said, "This is my Grandpa." It wasn't a long introduction, but I liked it and all of the kids said, "Hi grandpa." A greeting like that really makes you feel at home.

They were just finishing a lesson on the main categories of rocks...igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic. Students were giving examples of the various types and identifying samples held up by Mrs. Crofford. For a moment I had this chilling thought that my grandchildren were attending a magnet school for geological students, because this was the exact lesson that Connor was studying when I first joined his class several months ago.

And then I had another thought, maybe all teachers in the Akron City Schools whip out this "rock lesson" when parents and grandchildren visit. Although all students seemed to know the answers to each of the questions about rocks, I dismissed this idea as a mere coincidence. After we watched a great teaching film about, you guessed it, rocks, we went to lunch.



Lunch was the only negative part of the day for me. The food was good, the kids were fun to be with and the surroundings were pleasant, BUT, the lunchroom supervisor never stopped telling the children (over the PA system) how bad they were behaving. She told them how noisy they were, and issued a threat-a-minute about imposing total silence and/or penalties if they didn't improve. The kids seemed to take it in stride.

I have been to hundreds of schools (Remember, I was a State of Ohio Supervisor for 4 years early in my career), and I will never figure out why children aren't permitted to talk during lunch. Discipline for throwing things, yes. Discipline for leaving their tables without permission, yes. But, constant harangues for talking at lunch leaves me cold. I hate to say this, but unfortunately for the children, they have learned that this behavior on the part of lunchroom supervisors is par for the course and just ignore them most of the time.

After our pizza, salad, cookies and milk we were off to a noon movie about tadpoles/frogs, salamanders, and dragonflies. We had this movie because it was too cold to play outside. The children really seemed to enjoy the movie and (I wish the lunchroom supervisor could have seen them), watched without any noise or fooling around. No teacher was present and the supervisor was a fifth grade student who never had to say a word. Following the movie, we went to library period to pick out new books and read for a while.

After reading for twenty minutes, we watched ten minutes of the movie, *Charlotte's Web* and then returned to Room 1 for mathematics class. As an old math teacher, this class was fun to watch. These second graders were learning to check their subtraction problems by adding the difference to the subtrahend to get the minuend. (You didn't think I would remember that did you?) Every few minutes, Mrs. Crofford would say, "When do we check our math problems?"

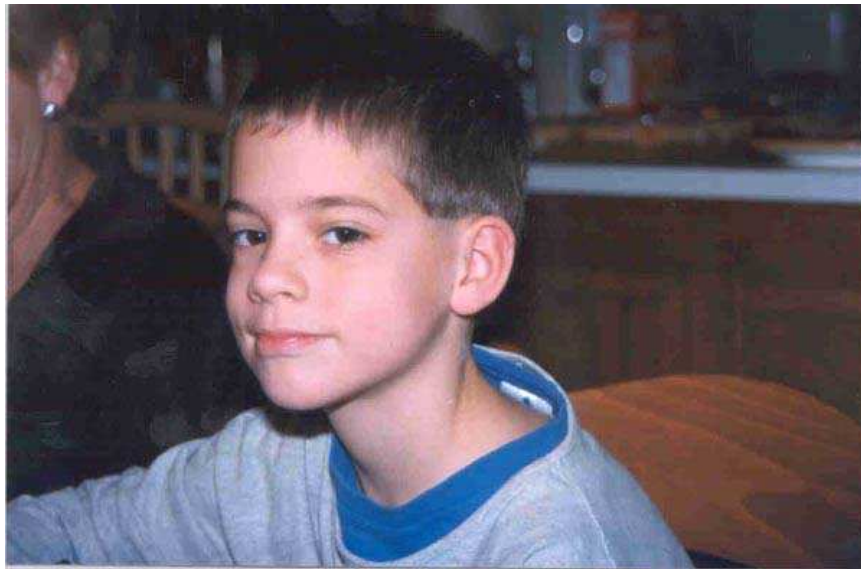
The entire class would shout, "Until the day we die!" Then they would all look at me and smile. You could sense that they all cared for, and respected, Mrs. Crofford very much. Later, we had a math contest. I was reminded of how deliberate Austin worked when I saw him do his math problems.

He always seemed to get the correct answer, but he took forever! Mrs. Crofford would give the problem and then Austin would erase his small slate board and write down the problem. If the numbers weren't lined up, he would erase

them and do the problem again. The key thing was that Austin got the problem right, but pushy, goal directed grandpa sat there suffering a slow death. You see, grandpa always had to win those contests in his school and would never think of having a dirty slate board as the teacher was about to announce the next problem.

In fact, having the line already drawn for the subtraction problem would save time! During one contest, Austin erased his problem three times before he started the computation. As children raced to get their problems completed, and immediately took them to the teacher, Austin worked his problem out and coolly walked it to the front and handed it to the teacher next to last (out of seventeen children). I felt sort of sorry for him, until the teacher explained how to do this new problem and asked the three children who got it right to stand up.

Austin was one of the three who had the correct answer. So much for those of us with Myers-Briggs Judging personality styles that try to do everything as fast as we can...the Perceiving style had just won another battle of thoroughness over speed! Grandpas and parents just have to remember to encourage the talents of their offspring and not expect others to be like them. I just relearned that lesson for the nine-millionth time...when will it ever sink in?



The day concluded with the Mrs. Crofford telling the class that that they might want to sit around my chair, on the floor, and ask me questions about what school was like when I was their age. I told them how important elementary school was...that as a high school math teacher I noticed that most student mistakes were made by students who didn't check their work...the very lesson that they were practicing today.

They asked if I could remember my elementary teachers and I think they were impressed when I named Mrs. Brenner, Mrs. Amstutz, Mrs. Arthur, Miss. Cole, Miss Fox and Miss Fox (twins) who were my first through sixth grade teachers. They wanted to know if the twins dressed alike and I told them that they always did...the kids thought that was funny.

I told them how Mrs. Arthur started a basketball team in the third grade and we got to go to Findlay to play a big city school... and lost our only game of the season, 2-1. They thought that was funny too. Austin came up and sat beside me and put his arm on my leg as I was talking. Ruth says I'm

getting more emotional in my old age, but I was very touched by that.

They wanted to know how kids were disciplined when I was little, and I hesitated, not knowing if I should tell them or not. Mrs. Crofford said, "Tell them the way it was, Grandpa." I told them that teachers used paddles at my school and that if you were really bad, and got sent to the superintendent, boys sometimes got whipped with a piece of garden hose. They all went, "ooooohhh" and Mrs. Crofford said, "You are giving me ideas." The children said, "You'd never do that," and she agreed.

One girl said to me, "Did you ever get whipped with the hose?" I told them that one time I swore at Floyd Hissong's older brother, Kenny, and a girl told the Superintendent. He called me into his office and when I got there, he told me to have a seat. I noticed right away that he had that hose on his lap! He asked me to tell him what I had happened on the playground. I told him that Kenny was taking our ball away from us, and repeated what I had called him. He told me that I was wrong, but since I had told him the truth that he wasn't going to whip me. He told me to promise him that I would never say things like that again on the playground. I promised that I wouldn't, and he told me to go back to class. A boy asked me if I had kept my promise, and I told the class that I had.

The bell rang and school was over. Mrs. Crofford said I could pass out the candy I had brought and everyone cheered. Each child took an appropriate amount and everyone said

thank you. A cute girl came to me as we were filing out and said that she liked me and hoped I would come back to school again the next week. As I walked from the school with Austin and two of his friends, a teacher stopped me and said that I had taught one of her best friends, Peg Fahrenback, when I had been a professor at Kent State.

I told her that we still see Peg and Bill, as they go to our church. I thanked Mrs. Crofford for the wonderful day. She gave me a hug and thanked me for visiting the class. As Austin, his two friends and I walked across the playground in route to my car, one of the girls said to me, "You and Austin have the same name, Glenn. Should we call him Glenn?" I said, "You'll have to ask him about that." Austin said, "I like the name Glenn...I wouldn't mind." I said, "Well, he will always be Glenn Austin." The two girls shouted, "Until the day he dies!" We all laughed at their clever response and continued our trip to the car. Austin took my hand and said, "Thanks for coming today Grandpa, it was really fun."

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