

This is a transcript of the T/TAC William and Mary podcast *Ruth Tobey's Story: A Special Educator Reflects on Student Success* (June, 2015).

[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Intro]

Butler: Ms. Tobey, it's a pleasure to have you give me your time today to sit down and capture a story that came upon my attention from sitting with Ms. Gross who is Principal at Tappahannock Elementary School and Ms. Roane who is the current Director of Special Education and that is where I learned Ronni Sydney, one of your former students made a presentation before the school board where he recognized you as one of the teachers that made a significant difference in his life. During that speech he stated, and he was holding his thumb and fore finger to illustrate that diminished this big feeling of what it was like to be a special education student when he first entered your class and how that very small feeling that characterized how he saw himself at that time was transformed through your learning relationship with him. You know I saw Ronnie's tribute to you as an example of what it means to really champion students through a learning relationship that taps into students strengths and connects them to opportunities to practice and showcase those skills and talents and then imagine a future that was richer in possibilities than a limiting label or other diminished expectations would have held. So I'm particularly curious to learn from you if there is a particular story about a time when you developed a learning relationship that gave you a sense of championing the best of yourself and the student and what made that story, that experience remarkable. What beliefs about a teacher may have made this possible, about the capabilities of students with disabilities that would make a former student like Ronnie come forward years later after having accomplished pretty outstanding educational achievements and recognize you.

Ms. Tobey: Well first of all it was an overwhelming experience for Ronnie to come back and do what he did and I'm so proud of the way he expresses himself and the way he carries himself and I'm proud that I was his teacher. And he was also my teacher. Very, very much. I think in terms of a learning relationship, I was inspired to become a teacher by my sixth and seventh grade language arts teacher Ms. Margaret Shiro, who took us places in literature that you couldn't even imagine. She read to us great literature that we would beg for over and over again. She would read one chapter and we wanted more. One particular thing or story I'd like to tell about Ms. Shiro was we had to do research and then do an oral presentation on a Province of Mexico and mine was Chihuahua (chi-wah-wah) and I very confidently presented for about five minutes about Chihuahua (cha-hua-hua) and never once did she correct me in front of the students and never once did she crack a smile or laugh at me which when you think about it it's absolutely hysterical that I was standing there saying Chihuahua (cha-hua-hua) and later on in a very private manner she said I think it is pronounced Chihuahua (chi-wah-wah). Can you check on that for me? So I never felt that making the mistake was a big

deal and I carried that within myself all through my training. I think that I had excellent training at Slippery Rock University in Special Education and I was just so focused on helping students discover their own self-worth and discover their own strengths and know that they are capable and that they can do, but that students who are identified with specific learning disabilities simply learn differently. And that was a big deal with Ronnie and his fellow students that we always talked about. You know we just learn differently and actually that makes us stronger because we know what it is like to go through trial and error. We know what it is like to learn from our mistakes, but we have the intelligences and we have the capabilities to figure out what works for us as a learner and what doesn't work for us as a learner. I do remember Ronnie specifically very determined to try different strategies. Particularly organizational strategies or study skills and he would come back to me and say I don't think that's the one Ms. Tobey. That one didn't work quite so well. And in that process he was gaining an understanding of himself as a learner and he was also gaining the capacity to handle making mistakes which I think is one of the things that has made him so strong. He is not afraid to make a mistake and he learned that. When Ronnie first came as a student, as many of my students it was very obvious. There middle schoolers so just by virtue of that fact they have a hard time figuring out who they are, whether they are really work anything. I could tell that Ronnie struggled with that, but the minute he opened his mouth and started telling you about something you knew there was intelligence, you knew that there were great things inside of him and he was having a hard time himself tapping into those things. He and I needed to work together to find them. And so that was very easy. It was very, very evident. He's a great public speaker now and he was than as well. It's been refined which is wonderful, but he has always been able to verbally express himself in that way. So I think that in the process of working with students like Ronnie and others and finding the things that work for them and helping them find what their strengths are and maybe how those strengths point them to their future endeavors or whatever I was able to learn as well. You know every student teaches you. Every student opens up a new world for you to understand "oh okay wait a minute" and then you take from that student into the next learning experience with a different student. You take that experience and you know more and you are better prepared to help students, but I think the most important aspect of all of this and the most important thing for me as a teacher has always been that students learn to take themselves further. That they learn that they are worthwhile. That I cared about them and that they should care about themselves. That students would be willing and feel comfortable making mistakes and learning from mistakes and building on those things. I think that's what I've learned and what my learning experiences, what my learning relationships with my students have taught me. Being a teacher is an incredible, incredible honor. As a parent I always wanted that teacher to know that I was trusting them with my most prized possession. And I always wanted my students and parents to

know that's how I felt about them.

Butler: Well it's interesting because when I spoke with Ronnie to hear his story, he describes coming into your class and feeling as if every student in your class was special and what's special to you as an individual learner and your job was to help them see themselves for those learning differences and I love that language you use rather than it being a disability it becomes a learning difference that you are there to learn more about, but also for them to learn more about assuming responsibility for it as well.

Ms. Tobey: You know you saying that brought to my mind that often times after a while and getting use to the process of elimination and the trial and error, I watch the students especially when they got to the higher grades and were getting ready to more to the high school. I watched them get to the point where they could help each other figure out what would be the best way for us to approach certain learning task or assignment and that was everything. Because you could than step back and one of my other special education colleagues is now serving on the school board, Denise Hammond, use to say that her job was to work herself out of a job and I think that's true that when you realize... And that is hard for a teacher because you think "oh they don't need me". But that's when you know that they have arrived and that was always an exciting thing to see. The students figuring out things together and supporting one another.

Butler: Right. So it makes me think that when you talk about kids working together first by seeing themselves as a learner and understanding their learning differences than they can do that for one another and Ronnie used the term self-determined. One of his wishes is that students would become self-determined. That they would learn enough about themselves, believe in themselves, recognize their talents, their brightness, and resilience so when they make the mistakes you described and they fall down, they have the resilience to go "oh I've learned so much by the failure. I can get up and I can go forward." I think you mentioned earlier I can go forward having learned something about myself as a learner or how to approach that differently the next time.

Ms. Tobey: That was really the kind of watch word. Ok there has been a mistake. Sometimes it may have been a mistake in behavior. Sometimes it may have been a mistake in a learning project that we are working on and it was always ok so next time what am I going to do. How am I going to take this forward and fix it? How can learn from this so I don't do this again so I don't find myself in this hole? So I don't find myself in this situation. It took several repetitions of that sort of thing for certain things for the students and that is true for all of us. Sometimes we do have to make the same mistake more than once and that we shouldn't beat ourselves up over it. Because we are going to figure out a way so that we can avoid that mistake and we can take it and learn from it. As adults, live long learners that's what we want to do.

Butler: Yeah. I don't remember the person who said it, but the real learning happens from the mistakes that we made. It may have been Einstein. So it's really the mistakes that we make that allow us to figure things out ultimately and arrive at our successes. We don't ever arrive at a success the first go round. It's multiple. As you said it's the trial and correction and trial and error that allows us to really arrive at that success of having mastered something.

Ms. Tobey: Well if you think about it every scientific discovery, that's the whole point. That's how we came there. How many times did Dr. Salk miss the mark, but he finally got it thank god. (**Butler:** Yeah, lots of experiments.) He didn't give up.

Butler: Yeah, and it's a hypothesis right. So it's my best guess so based upon that, I'm going to try this and I'm going to see what happens and I'm going to come back around and try something different. So that's what I'm hearing you certainly did in your relationships with your students. I think with Ronnie he described you really seeing him where he was at that particular time which then allowed himself to see himself. Both of those areas that were his talents and strengths, but also those areas where he learned to trust he could look at. Those areas whether it was written language that he improved it or organizational skills would give him access to those things that were already strengths that he could then build on in new ways.

Ms. Tobey: Much of that was really just breaking a large task down for him and helping see that he could do it step by step. Because I think that he thought he should be able to do the whole thing right off the bat. Many of my students, not just Ronnie, said "why can't I do this". Well maybe we can't do the whole thing, but we can go this far and let's see how we go. And then teaching them to how to eat an elephant one bite at a time. You can't eat the whole thing at one time. (**Butler:** Yeah). That sort of thing. The other thing with Ronnie I have to say particularly, he was a lot of fun, he was a lot of fun to be with. I know that he was struggling with who he was a feeling good about himself, but he has always had an enjoyable personality and outgoing personality and he was a lot of fun to be around and I was in an educational setting where I could really enjoy that. So that was a positive and we could build on that too because we could have a little humor and get back to work. So he really has always been a lot of fun to be around. (**Butler:** Yeah). He always has been.

Butler: I asked Ronnie what was it about him that may have contributed to that learning relationship being so effective for him and he didn't recognize that he was so much fun. Maybe in looking back he could remember hearing your story that yeah he was fun, but does remember coming more alive in your class and coming out of a kind of darker more discourage period and being able to see that he was capable of more than he was at that particular time.

Ms. Tobey: Doesn't it just make your heart ache to think what this little guy was thinking. With all this potential, with all these.. he always had great manners and he always had create values. He had so much going for him and all he could see were the things that weren't going right and to know he was carrying that is just so heart breaking and you realize that's a very important lesson for us as educators, because we don't know. We can have a little inkling and I might have had a little inkling about Ronnie, but what we don't know and we have to remember that we don't know what kids are carrying and we don't know what we may inadvertently say that could be the catalyst for a kid to get on the track that they need to get on and we have to be really, really careful about that and if Ronnie is an excellent example of don't ever give up on a kid. Just don't ever give up. (**Butler:** mmhmm) Because you know they might not be there now, but they are going to get their somewhat and some day and you've got to believe that. You really do as a teacher. And that's the blessing as a teacher. You get to be just a small part of that.

Butler: And you don't know till years later the big part it was. So he was feeling so small as he indicated in that presentation and yet your relationship with him turn that around and restored for him an ambition to go further educationally than at that particular time he was capable of and now he has a master degree and is returning to Essex to give something back in ways that I know.... (**Ms. Tobey:** In counseling. He knows the struggles. I can't imagine a wonderful counselor he is.) Exactly, exactly. So we've talked about your beliefs and values both within yourself and those things you treasure from your own learning as a student and then one going and getting a good education at Slippery Rock, but I'm also curious about if there aspects of the context in which you were working at that time whether they would be policies or resources or other colleagues that were really pivotal in contributing to your capacity to have the kind of learning relationships like the ones with Ronnie and your other students.

Ms. Tobey: Well as in anything there were positives and negatives. There were things we struggled against. It was very, very hard for people to understand that these students were identified for a special education program, but had normal intelligence. It's very, very hard for some of my colleagues to recognize that if we found a way to let them prove it, they could prove their intelligence, but on the other hand there were so many people at that particular time at Essex Intermediate School who were so student focused. It was a phenomenal faculty of people who like to find ways for kids to shine. The kid that was overactive that drove you crazy in class, but could shine in the physical education program or could be a highlight in one of the school plays. Things like that. There were a lot of people doing so that which was a positive. I did struggle with the perception of where my students would go when they left, but I wanted them to leave Essex Intermediate School knowing that they were capable individuals and that life wasn't going to be easy. I remember telling them all along what stinks about this is the

learning difference does not go away, but you just get better at handling it. You get better at working around it and get better at knowing how to deal with it. And that means it's going to be harder for you. I never tried to make it nice and a bed of roses because it was going to be and I wanted them to be tough enough to handle it. But I do think that at that time there was less of an idea of their potential and I struggled with that. But the positive thing was seeing so many of them blossom and so many of them go onto the high school and do exceedingly well in spite of somethings. Many of Ronnie's classmates are college graduates and hold wonderful jobs. One of the fellows who followed him a couple years later served in the Marines, has had five deployments. Has worked across the river in the correctional center and now works for one of our local electrical co-ops and I met him. I always meet them at the frozen food section at Walmart and he was very proud to tell me he is getting ready to get married. So there are very, very accomplished young men and women and Ronnie is a premiere example so there were some policies that some of them were also gifted and I had to kind of pursue that avenue so would also benefit from the services for the gifted students. That was hard sometimes, but buy in large the atmosphere at Essex Intermediate School was "let's find a way for kids to do well". So most of my colleagues at that time were on board. There were some wonderful, wonderful other special educators who worked with us at that time. One of them is still at Essex Intermediate School and that is Gayle Dungee and I just have the same concept that we are going to take these kids and help them go as far as they can go. (**Butler:** Yeah and you will be hearing back from those kids in the frozen food section of Walmart.) Oh all the time. Why always the frozen food? Haha. (**Butler:** It's a meeting place right. We don't have front porches anymore, we have Walmart.) Right.

Butler: So in thinking about the future and I would be curious to know if you had three wishes for yourself, the teachers with whom you work, and the students who's learning you ultimately support. What would those wishes be?

Ms. Tobey: Well more of the same. I have the good fortune of working as a literacy coach now and an instructional coach, I get to work with many, many teachers and I think my wish for them is to know that their teaching cannot possibly ever be reduced to a test score. My wish for them is to know that the effort that they make to have a relationship with their students and to see their students as individuals and to strive to find the strengths and the unique qualities in each of their students. That effort is worth it. It is so worth it. You just really do not know. You don't know. I absolutely adored Ronnie and I've been in touch with his Dad especially and I have seen him remittently since he graduated from the high school, but I had no idea. I really did not know the depth. I always thought that I had the gift of Ronnie. So it is worth taking that time, the effort. And that's the real pleasure. How they make students feel about themselves is eons more important than a number on a test score. For the students I want them to

know that they are not a test score. I recently.. one of the last students I worked with when I was in the classroom came so far, worked so hard for me, improved several reading levels within one grade level in eighth grade and missed passing the SOL by one point and felt like a failure and my heart still breaks about that because he was not a failure in any way shape or form. Things had clicked for him and he had worked hard and he had accomplished so much and I want my wish is that are job, in our world and our accomplished would be so much more than the testing right now. And my wish is for every teacher to have a Ronnie experience and to have, sometime down the road, a student come back and say thank you because for every Ronnie who does it, I think there are a lot who feel it and maybe don't have the opportunity to do that. So I think that's my greatest wish. That people know that being an educator is a knobbler profession and what they are doing matters.

Butler: Absolutely. That's a big beautiful wish and I'm really glad that you shared it with me today. Any other wishes that you would want to also comment on before we end our conversation?

Ms. Tobey: I hope that knowing their impact and knowing the effects of their teaching, happens sooner than later. As I've gone along my former students in the LD program sent me a letter and she is a teacher of English in one of the high schools in I think either Hanover or Henrico. I would hope that the teachers that are working so diligently now would have that kind of experience to know, okay because we are a unique crew. It doesn't keep much to keep us going. You know you get a letter like that, you are good for a decade, but I would really hope they would know the students know their worth and the teachers know theirs.

Butler: Well I think your story is going to remind teachers of their worth and I'm very, very grateful of your willingness to sit down and to share that with me as a tribute to all teachers, but also to acknowledge Ronnie's tribute to you and unpack a little bit the many ways in which you made that relationship such a meaningful relationship and remind teachers that they're doing the same thing and you would wish the same opportunity for them as well. So Ms. Tobey thank you.

Ms. Tobey: Thank you.