



Doing What You Like to Do

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Little Things Mean a Lot: Part 1

By Tony Mussari

The secret of life is not to do what you like, but to like what you do. American Proverb

The headlines of this week belonged to Tiger Woods, Jenny Sanford, Sarah Palin, President Barack Obama, and Reinhold Niebuhr. All important stories in their own way, but not all that important to a driven man in pursuit of a dream

So what is it like to be old enough to be a grandfather and inspired enough to be doing what most 30-somethings would not even consider, let alone try to do? I can answer that question with clarity and conviction

.In a word, it feels wonderful

.That's exactly the way I feel as this week comes to an end

.Not because it was an easy week. It was not



.Not because I earned a lot of money for what I did. I didn't

Not because my work made the evening news or the morning papers. It did not happen, and never will. That's a reality, and it's of no consequence

.It's the dream, the opportunity, and the work that matter here

More important than relaxation, financial gain, or notoriety is the fact that I spent most of this week doing what I like to do. I took full advantage of an opportunity to shed the light of affirmation on an impressive group of students, teachers, parents and administrators in a school district that is small in size but big in heart; a school district that is welcoming and receptive to new ideas, a school district that is drawing an inspirational portrait of what America is becoming, a school district that is demonstrating the beauty and strength of diversity



Located almost three hours from where I live, North Plainfield, New Jersey, and its school district of 3,100 students has become a second home for my wife and me. This week we spent two days with our North Plainfield family and almost two days travelling to this place of learning in the future tense

At midweek, we arrived at our Wilson Avenue destination shortly after 10 a.m. We spent the next seven hours recording scenes with students, teachers, and parents in virtually every corner of the high school



Central to our story is a group of 13 cheerleaders who bring a refreshing spirit of optimism and hope to everything they do. We found them in history classes and in the auditorium practicing with the orchestra for a Christmas concert. They were in the cafeteria having lunch with their friends. They were in a class for the yearbook staff working on a section about sports.



We found them in the hallway doing what high school students do; talking with friends, checking their lockers, posing for the camera, rushing to class, and helping us make connections with some of their friends

That led us to the Navy Junior ROTC classroom where we watched an inspection. It



was a singular moment of patriotism and pride for the students dressed in their Navy dress uniforms. It was a special moment for the guest in their midst who first learned about the benefits of Junior ROTC from a former neighbor and now a friend, Lt. Col. Joe Walsh

While walking the hallways, I found a biology classroom where I met a most impressive group of students. These teenagers were working with a former Bell Lab researcher, Dr. O'Donnell, who brought the knowledge she gained in her Ph.D. program and her experience as a research scientist to this classroom. This is a place of high expectations and serious-minded students who want to make the most of their education



In another part of the building, I watched Mike Nardi, a substitute teacher, working with students in a class about World War I. Next door to his classroom, Mary Beth Winsor was using The New York Times to teach another group of social studies students about current events

In both classrooms, I was given an opportunity to answer questions and speak to the students about topics I love: the nature of trench warfare in World War I and the cemetery at Verdun, France with its emotionally powerful Trench of Bayonets and the art of making documentaries

In both classes, I found the students to be interested, engaged and cooperative. They wanted to learn, they asked good questions, and they were having a good time learning

When I suggested that they use their laptop computers to search for pictures of Verdun and the Trench of Bayonets, they did it. When I asked for questions about the documentaries Kitch and I are producing, the students were quick to respond

Later in the day, I had a chance meeting with Mr. Nardi in the hallway near the cafeteria. He told me that his students were fascinated by the pictures of Verdun they found on the internet. Now that's a teacher's moment



After more than two hours of shooting, Kitch and I were treated to lunch in the library. Thanks to the kindness of Skip Pulcrano and Dr. Hope Blecher-Sass, arrangements were made for Kitch to set up a command station in a section of the library filled with current magazines. Together with our hosts, we shared heart-healthy sandwiches and we talked about our morning experiences and our afternoon schedule

.Then it was back to work

Returning to the first floor of the building, I made my way to the shop area where I watched a group of creative students
.having fun with the things they made

I was greeted by the smiling face of a parent who has four children in this school system; three of whom I met and talked
with on this special day. She took the time to collect some precious items from her home to document the work her
.daughter has done to help people remember the events of September 11, 2001

We found a vacant classroom, and I recorded some of the materials from the
Rodrigues family treasure chest. Then, it was back to work walking the hallways
.recording scenes of students doing what students do between classes



The centerpiece of the afternoon was a faculty meeting about commemorating 9/11.

It was attended by 16 teachers,
administrators and guests like Michael

.Giordano, the Mayor of North Plainfield, New Jersey



Listening to the participants discuss various ways to help students better
understand the significance of the day the earth stood still for America, I thought
to myself how wonderful these people are and their work with these students is.
This is a place best described in a letter I received from Sam Fajardo, the Editor
:-In-Chief of the school newspaper

*We are a very small school... but our pride and warmth is great. We are all constantly interacting with each other. We don't
seem to have the typical clicks as other schools do; the number one ranked student in my senior class for example is one of
the captains of the football varsity team...For North Plainfield, diversity is an asset... It is this spirit and environment that
.connects us all*

There is but one thing I would add to Sam's comment. North Plainfield is a place
.where little things are not neglected

You know what I mean: securing a parking place close to the front door, opening a
hallway door for a man with a camera, creating an inviting atmosphere in the
classroom for a visitor and encouraging students to engage and gain the
perspective of a visitor, providing lunch, extending an invitation to a school
committee meeting, soliciting and welcoming feedback and ideas, making a person
.feel welcome and at home in his home away from home



If there is one truism about this school district it is this: It is easy to like what you do when the place is North Plainfield, New
.Jersey

.To be continued

Please provide feedback to: tmussari@gmail.com

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