



I'll Be Fine...I Promise
By: Rhonda Winstead

On the first day of school of my fifth grade year, I stood at the door of the classroom of Fairview-Marguerite Elementary School. Mr. Smith met me at the door. He said, "It'll be fine...I promise." But I wasn't so sure. I had just moved to Morristown, Tennessee from Maryland. Just a few months before, my life had been turned upside down. Determined to get out of an abusive marriage to my step-father, my mother announced in June that we were leaving—leaving our home, our school, our friends, and our family. Now just a couple of months later, here we were—new home, new school. I was homesick. I missed the rest of my extended family, and though we had a house to live in, we had brought just a few of our own things with us. We were using cardboard boxes as dressers and our beds were mattresses on the floor. Though everything was clean and the house was actually really nice....this wasn't home to me yet. To make matters worse, some kids on the bus were already making fun of me for my strange accent. So I wasn't convinced when Mr. Smith said, "It'll be fine...I promise."

I was a good student, but very quiet. I didn't speak unless I had to. Mr. Smith was a funny teacher. He used a lot of humor in the classroom. It was 1979 and those were the days when we eagerly took our purple ditto sheet—just off the duplicating machine—and lifted the papers to our noses to take in the fresh smell. I remember thinking it was funny to see EVERYONE smelling the papers, but even funnier was reading the papers. Mr. Smith would write out the worksheets himself and sometimes he would replace names

in the multiple choice answer columns with real student names, or write silly items for the TRUE/FALSE section of the test. You never saw such anxious students scouring the paper to see if their name was included this time.

Mr. Smith could see that I was struggling socially. He also knew just enough about my situation to know that I was probably also struggling emotionally. So one day on the playground in late September, he asked me if I played basketball. I had played some in the driveway with my brother, but I wasn't a good player. I could barely toss the ball high enough to reach the rim. But Mr. Smith was the girls' basketball coach at Fairview, and asked me to try out. I told him I didn't think I could. When he questioned me, I explained that my mom had to work and she had four kids to take care of. She couldn't be there to pick me up after practice, and we couldn't afford to buy the required Converse tennis shoes that the team wore, or pay for the required insurance coverage. "And besides," I told him, "no one really likes me anyway, and I can't even play basketball." To me, that was the end of it, but it wasn't over for Mr. Smith.

A few days later, mom told me to stay after school for basketball tryouts. I didn't know it, but Mr. Smith had called her and had it all arranged. He talked to some other parents about taking me home after practices and he had arranged to pay for my shoes and insurance up front and let my mom pay him back when and if she could. And before I knew it, I was a Lady Wildcat. During practices and on those rides home, I got to know some of the girls and they got to know me. I guess they decided I was an okay person, even if I did talk a little funny with that northern accent. Before long, we were laughing and playing together at recess and eating lunch together. I made some friends, and gradually

the other kids in the class started talking to me too. I was starting to fit in and feel comfortable at school, and in our new home as well.

By the time the basketball season started, I was fully accepted by my teammates and my classmates. But that didn't make me a basketball player. I didn't know what "walking" or "double dribble" meant. When shooting foul shots, I had to do it "granny" style. Mr. Smith calmly and patiently worked with me. I scored a grand total of six points for the entire season, but to me, it felt like six thousand. I had come so far in that short season and by spring time, I was feeling better about everything.

Mom was able to get our furniture for the house, so no more cardboard boxes and mattresses on the floor. She was dating a really nice man and we didn't live in fear of hearing her cries at night anymore from being knocked around. I had tons of friends now and I just knew we were all going to be all right. Things were definitely looking up!

When May rolled around, we were all looking forward to summer vacation. But one of the highlights of being in fifth grade was the annual "Who's Who" contest. Before our unofficial graduation, we would all cast votes for classmates to determine titles such as "Most Talented" or "Most Athletic". There were about 15 or 20 different categories on which to vote. We carefully considered, then cast our votes. We couldn't wait until the assembly when the winners would be announced. Of course, being the new kid and having such a rough start, I knew I wouldn't win anything, but I was crossing my fingers for a few of my friends. We all knew Lisa would win for "Most Athletic Girl" and Joey would win for "Best Looking Boy"—how could he lose with those flowing, wavy, blonde locks? At the end of the day, when all the awards were given, I was humbled and shocked to walk away with three

honors: "Cutest Girl", "Best Looking Girl", and "Most Popular Girl". I couldn't believe it! After such a turbulent, life-changing year—what a way to go out! And I attribute most of it to the kindness and compassion of Mr. Smith. He saw my pain and put forth a little time and effort, and made a huge difference in my life.

That was Mr. Smith's last year of teaching. I don't think he retired, but just decided that his life and career needed to move in a different direction. I'm so glad he hung in there one last year!

I have seen Mr. Smith from time to time in the last 30 years or so since I was in fifth grade. He has even "friended" me on Facebook. Sometimes teachers, and even one college professor, assigned us to write to a former teacher to thank them for their service. I always wrote to Mr. Smith. He would always send me a card or letter back saying that I don't give myself enough credit, but I know he doesn't give himself enough credit.

I am now an educator in my 20th year of teaching. I am currently an elementary school guidance counselor. I have seen many student success stories during my career, but I have also seen some kids who were not able to turn things around for themselves. They were not able to overcome the hand that life had dealt them. It's not always fair, and no matter how hard we try, we can't win all the battles.

I like to think of myself as a success story. Life had not dealt me a good hand, but with a loving and supportive family, good friends, and many caring teachers, I think I turned out okay. I don't even like to think about how that year could have been the

beginning of a life filled with anger, bad choices, and regrets. Overall, I can say I had some really fine teachers over the years, both in Maryland and Tennessee, but Mr. Smith just took that extra time and put forth that extra effort and helped turned that year around for me.

I hope I can touch at least one life during my career and make that kind of a difference for a child. As guidance counselor, one of my duties is to stand at the front doors of the school building at the beginning of each new year and greet the incoming kindergarten students. As they nervously cling to their parent's hand and walk into the building for the first time, I reach out to pat them on the back and I tell them, "It'll be fine....I promise." And I always think of Mr. Smith.



Principal Sammie Taylor, Rhonda Winstead, Wayne Smith, Dan Tollett