



After the housekeeping is done, Ms. Reid delivers an off-the-cuff welcoming address to her fifth-grade class that is as inspiring as a moving sermon. She even makes students and parents sign a contract that they will abide by her rules.

some instances would throw a chair if they were pushed to that or tell you off if they were pushed to that. So I work with all of those types of kids, and I've never had one to throw a chair at me. I've never had one to curse me. Never. They may get out that door and call me a few things, but they've never done that to my face."

Parents are different nowadays too. Some treat the school system as glorified day care, and jump to the defense of their children before considering both sides of an issue. Still, she says, "in my 37 years, I have never had a parent to be abusive...I've never had one to get up in my face." Once she sits down and talks with them, "we always leave understanding and knowing what to do."

And then there are the distractions of modern day life: cell phones, TV, computers, games, both parents working fulltime. "I think kids just want some attention. And they'll get it one way or the other, either by acting up or by doing the right thing." Besides, she shrugs, "they have everything. So they don't really have to earn or work for anything, hardly. We give them everything, and all we ask is that they come and do what we expect of them."

School is out for the day. The phone rings in her classroom. She answers and a conversation with a parent ensues that couldn't have been better timed than if we had scripted it. It's about a student who is not doing his

work. When it's over, Ms. Reid claps her hands and laughs aloud. "That's the kind of parent who is on-board," she exults. "She's going to take care of it. She said, 'it will not happen again.' And I will make sure that she knows next week, good, bad or indifferent. If it's good, I'll call her. If it's not so good, I'll call her... She needs to know, because he's been a frequent flyer. He is smart as a tack. There's no reason for it. I told him yesterday, 'you are somebody I expect to go to college.'"

She tells kids that a lot. In fact, the mothers of at least two of these children in this classroom today had Ms. Reid for fifth grade themselves. They remember the college pep talk. And it is a common occurrence for adults to walk up to her and say, "Ms. Reid, do you remember me?" Recently an Orange County School administrator appeared at her door. "She had been wanting to come by to see me and let me know what an inspiration I was for her when she was in the fifth grade." Another student, who she had kept repeatedly after school to make him finish his work, turned up with the news that he is now teaching English overseas. "I'm doing that because you stopped me and made me do the things I needed to do," she quotes him as saying. "So that's the kind of stuff, when it happens, it's almost like the Lord is trying to tell you something; that you're doing what you're supposed to be doing."

At one point in her career she was invited to apply for the assistant principal position. It was an agonizing decision. "It got all the way down to two people and I decided I did not want to do that." Thank God. Ms. Reid's place is down in the trenches teaching, not upstairs in administration.

"Orange County is a great system and Orange Elementary is a fantastic school," she says without hesitation. "If it had not been a fantastic school, I would have been gone a long time ago. So, I really believe in this school. I believe in the people in this school." Last year, she was voted Orange Elementary's Teacher of the Year by her peers.

Of the controversial Michelle Reid (no relation), the superintendent who is shaking things up in the Washington, D.C. school system, Ernestine says, "I agree with her, there has to be accountability. I think when you choose this career, that's got to be a major part of it: I'm going to be accountable."

But she quickly adds that a college degree in education does not prepare you for the "21 little personalities" starting back at you the first day of school. "I think that when teachers come into this environment, that if they need help, it's the job of the administration to make sure that they get it... Young teachers need to be mentored and helped when they are going through that kind of scenario where they don't quite know what to do...I believe your first five years is

finding out who you are as a teacher and finding all those little tricks up your sleeve that you use for this kid, this kid and this kid. You learn those tricks as you develop your teaching style."

Some time ago, a former student, Kimberly Mason, sent Ms. Reid an invitation to her graduation ceremony from Longwood College. Kimberly is a middle school teacher today in Northern Virginia. She credits Ms. Reid for helping her make that career choice.

Ms. Reid wasn't sure if she could make it to the ceremony or not. "I didn't want to tell her 'no,' and I didn't want to tell her 'yes' and not show up." So when she did, it was a complete surprise. Kimberly's family spotted Ernestine, invited her to join them, and pointed her out as their daughter came down the aisle.

Kimberly gasped in surprise and put her hand over her heart. "I thought at that moment, this is where I was supposed to be, to give her an 'Aha' moment and to let her know that I really appreciated her sending me a card inviting me," says Ms. Reid. "She was shocked that I would show up. So that was really special for me, because I never knew that I had made such an impact on her." Like the impact she is making on Nicole Butler and all the kids in her fifth-grade class this morning.

Kids! You may not realize it yet, but Ms. Reid is the teacher that you will remember for the rest of your life.

Ms. Reid— The born teacher



Ms. Ernestine Reid addresses her fifth-grade class on the first day of school at Orange Elementary. Nicole Butler (black T-shirt, far right) hangs on every word.

It's the first day of school at Orange Elementary, and Nicole Butler is the first child to come to class. She's so excited that her eyes are as wide as saucers. Like her sisters before her, she has drawn Ms. Ernestine Reid as her fifth-grade homeroom teacher.

"Ms. Reid is the best teacher ever," she says breathlessly.

Now, how can this 10-year-old possibly know that?

"She's just born like that," she replies confidently. "She's just the best."

Ms. Reid, dressed in a pea green tailored suit, fields the compliment with natural elegance and reserve. She smiles, inclines her perfectly coiffed head slightly and bids Nicole a warm "Good morning. How are you?" Although she never curries favorites, privately she says of this child, "She is such a sharp young lady, and I mean smart, and that's the kind of person you want to say, 'Girl, go do it all. The world is yours to go conquer. Just do everything you want to do in life. You can.'"

Nicole takes her seat and waits expectantly for the other kids to arrive. As usual, this first day of school has had its share of glitches. A couple of late buses and the like has kids straggling in piecemeal. Finally, all 21 of them are seated at their desks.

The bell rings....and rings...and rings. Announcements are made over the P.A. They all recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and finally, after a few house-keeping matters are settled, Ernestine Reid launches into a welcoming address that positively inspires. Never talking down to them, she addresses them respectfully, expecting respect in return. Let's listen in.

"I'm going to remind you that you set the example for the little kids. When they see you doing things, they're going to say, 'Oh that's a fifth-grader. That's a big kid.'"



Ernestine Reid's mom had a photographer snap this shot when her daughter was just three years old. Born and raised in Emporia, Reid knew she was destined to be a teacher since childhood.

They're going to want to be just like you. So you have to always be aware of what you're doing when you're in the hallways; what you're doing in the cafeteria; what you're doing in the classroom." Twenty one pairs of ears hang on her every word.

"I am here to do whatever it takes, and I seriously and truly mean that, whatever... it... takes... to get each of you individually to have the best year you've ever had. My goal is to make sure that when you go to Prospect, you are the best of the best. Understand? The best of the best." Ernestine Reid is just warming up. It gets better.

"We're going to step it up a notch this year. We're



Ernestine Reid's high school graduation picture. She lists two teachers in her past who inspired her to become a teacher herself.

going to do some things that people think we can't do, but we know we can. And I'm here to help you do those things. So use me up this year. If you need help, I'm here to help you. Sometimes I will look at your face and say, 'Come back and have lunch with me. Let's work on so and so.' That's...not...a...punishment. Having lunch with me is a privilege because I want to give you my extra time."

Here's another zinger. "There are no stupid questions. The only questions that are like that are the ones that you walk out the door and don't ask; because, I want you to ask questions. I want to know when you don't know



This photo was taken in 1997. By then, Ernestine Reid had already taught fifth grade for 24 years at Orange Elementary.

something, and I want us to understand that we are a family in this classroom; that we help each other. We don't laugh at each other; we don't make fun of each other." Twenty one heads nod in agreement.

Then she hauls out the contract. By the end of the week, each of them and their parents will have signed this binding document that they will obey Ms. Reid's rules!

Rule number one: "each child will accept responsibility for his or her own actions.... If you've done something and you know you did something wrong, just tell me to my face, 'Ms. Reid, I did that...I won't do it again.' Then we're cool. We're going to shake hands on it. Remember, if you ever shake my hand and tell me that you're not going to do something, I expect you to be a person of your word. Fair enough? Because if I ever tell you I'm going to do something, then I will do my best to do it."

Rule number two: "Each child will complete assignments on time. This is a biggie with me...When Ms. Reid gives homework, she expects it to be done."

Rule number three: "Each child will take pride in their work by using neat handwriting." She arches her eyebrows and pretends to peer schoolmarm-ish over imaginary half-moon glasses. "...will...not...accept...sloppy...wrinkled...spaghetti...noodles...soda...ice cream

homework." Twenty-one pairs of eyes open wide.

Rule number four: "Each child will use time wisely...I want you guys to go home today and talk to your parents about your study time, if you don't have one. I truly believe that each student should have at least one hour every night. Whether the teacher assigns you something or not, you should spend that time."

She tells them as of today they are all honor roll students. "Every one of you, you're an A student, every subject... today. How many of you want to be an honor roll student at the end of the marking period. Raise your hand. That means you want to be an A-B student at the end of the nine weeks, because you're one today." Twenty one hands go up.

She makes them recite two slogans: "A great day begins with you," and, "Strive for excellence, not perfection." At first they mumble the words tentatively, but by the third try, it's become a cheer. This is better than a pep rally or an inspirational speech; more riveting than a good sermon. It makes you want to pump your fists in the air and holler "Yeah!" Anybody who thinks that public education is going down the tubes, needs to hear this.

But sadly, this may be the last fifth-grade class to be filled with Ms. Reid's inspiration, knowledge and experience. After 38 years, she may be retiring. Asked if she's made up her mind yet, she hedges and says, "I will leave wanting to stay. It's 38 years. I'm young...I just want to be able to go travel, visit my grandchildren when I want to and visit my children when I want to. So, I'm weighing a lot of stuff in my head." Note that she hasn't slammed the door. She hints that if she does retire, she'll still make herself available on a part-time basis. Education is not something that Ernestine Reid can just walk away from.

"I know how I feel about these kids and what I want so much for them, just to be able to have a good life for themselves, just be able to live and be happy. You know," her eyes darken with intensity, "live...and...be...happy. That's all you want for them. That's what you try to teach them. Find the passion that you have for something in life, and go for it. Don't let anybody stop you. Don't let anybody crush your dreams. Just go for it."

She can remember her first day of teaching right here at Orange Elementary. The year was 1973. She wasn't nervous; just excited. "I was ready. I think mentally, once I decided I wanted to teach, I had been preparing myself for that day when I would walk into that classroom with

kids."

She had just graduated from St. Paul's College in Lawrenceville, VA. Her husband-to-be, John, was finishing up his senior year there. A year later, he came to Orange and joined her, and they have lived in this area ever since.

Ernestine Reid had always known that she would be an educator. Raised by her grandparents in Emporia, she would play "school," when other little kids were playing doctor or cowboys and Indians.

Many of us remember one teacher who inspired us. For Ernestine Reid, it was two: the prophetically named Miss Muse, an elderly spinster who taught her in third grade and insisted on neat handwriting and Mrs. Jenelle Todd Smith. "And that's one person that I think that if I had to give everything I've become ... she was the one. She and her husband really did. She was my mentor, and even today she's my mentor."



Orange Elementary School's fifth-grade class of 1979 with teacher Ms. Ernestine Reid. Many of the kids in this picture were inspired to go to college by their teacher, and some are living and working in Orange to this day.

The Smiths actually helped Ernestine Reid move to Orange; lent her enough money to buy a car! "These are my teachers!" she says incredulously. "They didn't have to do that." And it was from them and others that Ernestine Reid picked up her bag of teaching tricks. "I truly believe that everything that I am as a teacher is what I picked up when I sat in the classroom under teachers...You pick up certain behaviors and certain things that you do, and it's because of other people who inspire you that you looked up to...Everybody asks me what's the secret? I don't know what the secret is. If I did, I'd bot-

tle it up and sell it."

Even today, when she invites you to share lunch with her to work out a problem, either disciplinary or scholastic, she's not sure what approach she'll take until you walk in the door. She gives an example of what she would say to me if I was constantly acting up in class.

"It bothers me," she says whisper-soft, staring intently into my eyes. "I'm not able to teach the way I want to teach. Now Phil, I know you're not intentionally trying to keep me from doing my job. Right?"

"Yes ma'am."

"I need your help," she continues, inviting the disruptive child in me to become a team player. "I need you to stop that behavior so I can do my job and do it well, because you are being unfair to all the other kids in the classroom. So, if you need my attention, you let me know you need my attention."

Fifth grade is an important year. These aren't little kids anymore; they are students who are enjoying a brief window of opportunity before the onslaught of adolescence complicates things. "This is where life really begins to change," notes Ms. Reid. "It's time to really grow up and get serious about education, from this moment on."

These kids are like vessels into which she will pour knowledge and learning. "I think they are even more intelligent, in this age of technology," she notes. "These kids haven't even tapped into 20 percent of what they're capable of." The trick is finding the right way to give it to them. "You've got 21 little personalities and you get to know those personalities so you can know how to teach each kid."

Are kids any different nowadays than when she started 38 years ago? She pauses a long beat and then cautiously answers, "Yes... I think we have more issues now. Kids come to school with more issues. As teachers you have to decide, whether you're going to deal with it or not. And the unfortunate thing is if you don't deal

with it, that's a child you're not going to reach. They come with so much stuff and so many things going on at home that you have no control over. So, you have to realize that really the only thing that you can control is right here." She glances around the classroom. "So you've got to make that as pleasant and as good as you possibly can, so they can remember it. If home is bad, and this is bad too....then your whole world is just a bad place right now."

She has seen it all, from attention deficit disorder to abused children. "All of it," she says tersely, "kids who in