Chapter 7
Influences of the Places of My Life

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ABSTRACT

The author is a math educator who has taken on several roles in education, primarily including classroom teacher and curriculum writing. This chapter is an exploration of the pivotal places in her life that shaped the gifted and talented educator she has become. The chapter starts with a look at the rural South Carolina county where she grew up and attended public school. Next, she describes a very significant life shift when she enters a specialized public boarding school called the South Carolina Governor’s School for Science and Mathematics for her junior and senior years of high school. She then describes the importance of her time as a student at the College of Charleston and all of the opportunities that were opened to her there. This chapter wraps up with her career experiences, and how they continued to shape her as a teacher.

INTRODUCTION

I am about to step back into a classroom after being out of one for almost five years. I have done teaching in that time, but it has been all online. Even with a distance learning model where I see my students by video, there is still a disconnectedness. It is not the same as being in the classroom with them, and it is much harder across a computer screen to create the student relationships that make me a more effective teacher. I am excited to be re-entering the classroom on a whole new adventure in post-secondary education, as I have spent my career thus far in high schools. How will this be different? How will this help me grow even more as a teacher? I am excited to reflect on where my journey as an educator is headed.

It’s an odd thing to seriously reflect on your life at thirty-one. How did I get where I am today? What do the puzzle pieces of my life look like? When I allow myself to fall into the memories of my past, it is the places that I can vividly see and the people that filled them. There are four main places through my life that have shaped me into the person and teacher that I am today. This article will explore those places and influences on my life.

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THE PLACES OF MY LIFE

Calhoun County

I grew up the second of four children in a very rural county in South Carolina. At the end of our red clay driveway lived my grandparents and there were cotton fields as far as I could see. Our closest neighbors with children our age were about a mile away, and my parents encouraged outside play and imagination. With three siblings and about 80 acres to explore, they didn’t believe we should ever be bored. My childhood winters were spent with memories of playing in the woods and down at the gully. In the woods our imaginations ran wild! One day, a tree would be our pet brontosaurus, and another day, we would rappel down the sides of the gully with ropes my dad had tied off to trees.

Neither of my parents attended college after high school. Growing up, my father was the town mechanic and worked shift work at the local power plant. My mother was a homemaker, and somehow made wrangling the four of us look easy. I remember my mother always being there. She dropped the four of us at school and often we’d see her show up, sometimes not even for our class! I was always the child that had a parent volunteer on field trips and during events like talent competitions at my school. As a child, especially in middle and high school, this parental presence often embarrassed me. As an adult, I see how incredibly lucky I was.

We had a childhood rich with reading at home. One time my dad had to attend a training away from home, and before he left, he recorded himself reading chapters in *The Little House on the Prairie* that we would listen to while he was away. We always had a family book that we read out of every night. This love of reading became buried deep in me, and this manifests itself in my classes as a teacher. In my classroom, I had students pick mathematical fiction books, including their favorite, *Secrets, Lies, and Algebra*, that I would read from at the end of each class. This was the favorite part of the class for some of my students who had trouble finding their love of math.

Although neither of my parents had a formal college education, nothing but the best was expected from us in regards to our performance in school. We lived in a community that had seen the Southern effects of white flight in the 1960s. The private school in town was founded during that time and remains today. My parents were firm believers in the public education system. They believed, and were right, that with parental involvement, a great education could be received at the public schools in our rural county. For the most part, all four of us siblings had the same teachers for our K-12 school careers, so they knew our whole family well. We were well-known for our intelligence, manners, and sometimes hard-headedness. Teachers knew that they would receive support from my parents, especially my mother, in the classroom with anything they needed: snacks for Field Day or support for a discipline issue (mostly my siblings, of course!).

The public schools I attended consisted of approximately 80% minority students. I remember feeling different from other students in school; not only from a racial perspective, but also from an academic perspective. In preschool, I spent a portion of my day with the kindergarten class in the computer lab doing *Hooked on Phonics* to develop my early reading skills. Towards the end of that school year, my parents sat me down and told me that the school suggested that I skip kindergarten and go straight to first grade. However, they wanted to give me the choice. At that point, I was in school with my best friend, and I couldn’t imagine the next school year without her so I chose to not skip a grade. As a mother...
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