

A Principal's Words Have Power

By Shawnta S. Barnes – October 22, 2017



Shawnta S. Barnes, third grade

When I entered Mary Evelyn Castle Elementary School in second grade, it was my third elementary school in three years. We moved for a third time because my parents had finally saved up enough money to purchase a house. Although the house was located within Indianapolis Public Schools' boundaries, this was one of a few parts of the district being bused out to desegregate other school districts in Indianapolis. Not only was I beginning a new school, I was also switching to a new school district into the Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township.

The worse part of attending a different school each year was losing friends. My best friend in kindergarten was a red-head girl and in first grade, it was a boy named John. When I entered second grade, I decided I would not make any more friends because I didn't see the point. What if we moved again? It would be another friendship lost. By end of second grade, I'd succeeded. I ended the school year without friends.

I was determined to carry on that mission into the third grade, but a little girl in my class had other ideas. Although third grade was the first year I had been at the same school for more than one school year, I wasn't convinced we wouldn't move again. A girl in my class really wanted to be my friend. She talked to me every chance she had. At recess when I tried to avoid classmates by walking the perimeter of the playground, there she was walking right alongside me. It didn't matter what I did, she wasn't getting the message. I decided I had to take action because she was wearing me down and was interfering with my no friends plan.

From her ramblings when I was trying to ignore her, I learned she had a favorite sweater and I decided this was my opportunity. She had taken it off, placed it on a bench, and went running around the playground with some other kids. I took her sweater, left the playground, and threw it into the dumpster. Of course, someone saw me and the told the teacher supervising recess. The teacher was shocked and the girl who tried to befriend me asked why and I said, "I hate you and wish you would leave me alone." This prompted the teacher to radio the principal Mrs. Dyer.



Mrs. Dyer, Former Principal of Mary Evelyn Castle Elementary School

Inside I began to panic. My mom was a faithful school volunteer and always told my sisters and me, “You don’t know when I’m at your school. I could pop up at any moment.” I knew the principal knew who my mom was. I had imagined my mom running out of the school in front of the principal to snatch me up. Fortunately for me, my mom wasn’t there that day.

Once the principal arrived to the playground, she and I walked over to the dumpster and she reached in and retrieved the girl’s sweater. Then, we walked to her office. I sat next to her in a chair with my head down and eyes focused on the floor. She said, “Shawnta, I don’t understand what happened here. You don’t normally act like this. Why did you throw her sweater in the dumpster?” I told her about how I didn’t want any friends because we might move and it made me mad that she was ruining my plan. Mrs. Dyer said, “Shawnta, you’re lucky. You have been to more than one school and you know different kids from different neighborhoods. Even if you move again, you will have your memories and stories to tell your new friends. I think you would be happier at school if you tried to make some friends. Who knows, you might not even move again.” I finally looked up and asked her the question that was swirling in my mind while she was speaking, “Are you going to call my mom?” She said, “No, I don’t think that is necessary.”

Those words made all the difference. Mrs. Dyer changed my perspective about school and I made some friends including the girl whose sweater I threw into the dumpster. She helped me deal with my fear of moving again and instead of dishing out a punishment (which I rightfully deserved), she was compassionate. Turns out she was right; my parents didn’t move again and still live in the same house today.

Today, during National Principals Month, I want to thank Mrs. Dyer. She probably never knew what her words meant to me. I hope all principals remember their words have the power to change the trajectory of a child’s life.