

Inspirational Teacher Suzanne Dukes
A Story by Sheila Jones

I was an overweight kid who was picked on relentlessly as a child. Fortunately, Physical Education (PE) was little more than kickball and tag at the elementary level. That all changed in junior high, and the idea of changing into a PE uniform was mortifying.

We had to run a mile in PE, and I knew there was no way I could do it. I dreaded that day but I really liked my teacher, Ms. Dukes, so I knew I had to try. She encouraged me to do my best and run as much as I could, but walk when I needed to. She stayed with me at the track until I finished (I finished last). As we walked back toward the rest of the class on the soccer field, she talked about the importance of physical activity and said walking was a good start. I wanted to please her not only because she was nice, but because she was the first teacher who truly took an interest in my health. When I joined the rest of the class, I was the goalie. Within a few minutes, I blocked a shot, then another, and another (I suppose the backyard football games with my brothers paid off!). At that point, two girls on the other team threatened me, saying they would beat me up if I blocked one more shot.

It happened. I blocked the next shot, and they ran directly at me, knocking me down. Not only did Ms. Dukes stop the bullying, she taught the entire class a lesson about working together. Kids who had conflict would become teammates, working toward a common goal. It was genius on her part! The two girls not only became my soccer teammates in future games, but we were also put in classroom work groups (long before differentiation was an instructional strategy). Our strengths, rather than our weaknesses, became the focus.

Ms. Dukes' compassion truly resonated with me. Fast forward to the early 1980s (when I became a teacher) and I would often ask myself, "What would Ms. Dukes do?" I tried to focus on equity and anti-bullying during my teaching career largely because of the difference Ms. Dukes made for me and my classmates. I now have the privilege of working with 300 teachers as a curriculum supervisor in the areas of health and physical education for a school division of 80,000 students.

I am certain what Ms. Dukes taught me translates to my current work with teachers, and I believe this positively impacts the students in my school division. Ms. Dukes later became a school counselor and then a school administrator. In a twist of fate 16 years ago, Ms. Dukes' daughter became my sister-in-law, so I no longer have to ask myself what Ms. Dukes would do. She is part of our family now, and when in doubt, all I have to do is ask!