

## Making a teachers day: World Teachers Day - ACE Awards

**Melissa Phelps**

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### When and why did you become a teacher?

I still remember the look of wonder in my grade 3 teacher's eyes as I handed her my picture. I had drawn it so carefully using the sharpest of the class pencils, taking care with the almond shaped eyes, the long brown hair and just a few freckles on the nose. "Wow" she said, clearly amazed, "this looks just like you!" She smiled at me as though I was the next van Gogh whilst she took my portrait and tenderly pinned it to the door beneath the sign, Welcome to 3M, and it took its place with 27 other smiling faces. I hung my head so that my classmates wouldn't see the pride slowly seeping through my body, but by the time I got back to my seat I felt like I was going to burst with happiness.

I don't remember the exact time or the exact event that made me decide I wanted to be a teacher. I think it was a combination of things really. All I know is that to a little girl in a vast world, my teachers made me feel important. They made me feel special. They made me feel as though I was somebody who had value, somebody who mattered in the world. I'm reminded of a quote I read recently; To the world you may be only one person, but to that person you might be their world. I got to the point when I felt I needed to give back, to do for others what my teachers had done for me.

I have been teaching for about 12 years and I still find purpose and meaning in what I do. When you teach a child something, the learning that they have been part of can never be taken away from them. I feel blessed to be able to enrich children's lives in such a way.

### What do you love most about teaching?

To be quite honest teaching is hard work! Well, it is for me anyway. It's challenging but also equally rewarding. And there is never a dull moment. Whether it's coaxing a child down from the guttering because they shinnied up the drainpipe, helping a boy with dyslexia hear himself reading fluently for the first time or removing a lump of chewing gum out of a girl's long hair because she heard you coming and tried to spit it in the bin – and it missed! Some people wake up knowing exactly how their day is going to pan out. I think the best thing about teaching is never quite knowing what challenges the new day will bring.

### Who have been significant mentors on your professional journey as a teacher and how did they help you?

Initially I trained as a primary school teacher. I taught for a few years in infants and then upper primary. There seemed to be more and more students in my classes who had special educational needs and diagnoses that I had never heard before. I moved into the field of special education, working with students with disabilities, learning difficulties and special needs. At this time I was being trained by my school's learning support teacher, who was looking at retirement, to take over the role of learning support teacher for the school. Her name was Mrs Judith Manser and one of her strengths as a teacher was the way she linked assessment to instruction. Judith was meticulous in her planning. She knew how to work out where a student was performing and how to move them forward in

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ACE awardees  
Vanessa Baywood  
and Melissa Phelps  
are colleagues at  
KAS

# Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

their learning. I still base my intervention programs on the things Judith taught me.

There have been other people as well who have supported and guided me during my teaching journey, including my mother who works mainly in the field of Indigenous Education. As a Christian teacher though, I think the strongest models of teaching are those presented by Christ during his Ministry. Jesus was the ultimate teacher. His teaching ministry was personal and relational and lets face it, relationships are what teaching is all about. The best-planned lessons will fall in a heap if there is no foundation of trust between teacher and student. I often remind myself that we are teaching for an eternal future.

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## **What has been your most memorable experience in your teaching ministry?**

I taught a little boy once who had had a very difficult life. He had been diagnosed with ODD and presented with very challenging behaviours. He was disruptive in class, demanded teacher attention all the time, was violent and aggressive and often non-compliant. He used to get to school very early, often when I was trying to put aside time for morning prayer. He would ask me what I was doing. Most of

the time I was actually asking for strength to help me survive him, but rather than tell him this I would say that I was praying to God. I told him I had a special Father who loved me and whom I could talk to at any time. Eventually, the boy was removed from his mother and placed in foster care. I heard that he was bounced around a few foster homes just in the first couple of months. Years later, I met the boy again, now a young man. I barely recognised him but he recognised me. He told me that in those early years when he was being shuffled around different foster homes, he found comfort in prayer, which over time turned into a meaningful relationship with a loving God.

## **Which reasons were cited for giving you the award?**

In my role as Learning Enrichment Teacher, I am responsible for preparing and coordinating the implementation of Individualised Education Plans and for ensuring that appropriate support structures are in place to support learners with special needs. The award that I received from the Australian College of Educators was in recognition of this individualised planning.