



ESL MiniConference

My Old Wrestling Coach A Personal Essay About the Influence of Steve Wolf on My Life

There are many teachers who have influenced and contributed to my life. Their attention to the details of my development is a gift for which I am always grateful. I do not know what all of these individuals are doing today, and there are some who have passed away. My decisions in life have taken me far away from those classrooms where I learned so much and received such encouragement. When I moved back to Kansas after being away for nearly 15 years, I realized what a rare and wonderful thing it is when a person can meet an influential teacher again many years later, and be further motivated by him or her.



I am now studying and teaching at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, and at least once a day I walk by the famous old Ahearn Fieldhouse, which used to be the main center for indoor sports at K-State. Ahearn is also where they used to hold an annual statewide wrestling tournament for elementary school students in Kansas. I went there in fifth grade--the year I won the 66 pound weight division in my hometown, Great Bend--and again in sixth grade, as a 76-pounder. That second year, 1970, I managed to get two victories at the state tournament before facing a tough kid from western Kansas in the third round. That wrestler put me onto my back at least six or seven times in the first two periods, racking up an advantage of about 15 points to zero, before I succumbed and was pinned.

Autumn 2006

Achievement
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Nieto

Steve Wolf

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As I left the mat after that grueling contest, I was surprised to see Mr. Steve Wolf, who had been my wrestling coach at Jefferson Grade School in Great Bend during fourth and fifth grade. He had emphasized "bridging" in our practices during those two years, and my neck muscles were very well developed as a result. Now my old coach had just seen me getting whipped at the state tournament, and I imagine I felt embarrassed about that as he drew near to shake my hand. "Where did you learn to bridge like that?" were the only words Mr. Wolf spoke in reference to my match.

A person who motivates is someone who perceives a positive tendency and encourages its growth. That is what Mr. Wolf has done for many young people in the Great Bend community during a lifetime of service. From Jefferson, he went next to Riley Elementary School, where he was principal for 16 years before moving to the central offices of USD 428 and becoming a district administrator for ESL and migrant education. At Riley, Mr. Wolf welcomed some of the first Mexican immigrant newcomers to the Great Bend community, and he eventually spearheaded the "Cinco de Mayo" celebration that became an annual tradition there. For many years, he was a leader in both the Kansas Association of Bilingual Educators (KABE) and the annual Kansas Migrant Education conferences. A tribute to him at the 2004 Migrant Ed event lasted more than half an hour, as personal messages flowed in from colleagues and students whose lives he had touched during his nearly 40 years of service to Great Bend and Kansas schools.

When I returned to my home state in 2002 to work as a faculty member at Fort Hays State University, about 70 miles northwest of Great Bend, I was excited at the prospect of visiting my hometown and people and places I had not seen for 25 years or longer. It was an interesting coincidence to find that my old wrestling coach had ended up dedicating much of his career to helping English language learners, meaning we had a lot in common. I kept in close touch with Steve Wolf over the next months and years, and found him very willing to participate in activities to raise consciousness among teachers regarding the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

When I became involved in the Kansas Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (KATESOL), and had the opportunity to chair KATESOL 2004 at Hays, I asked Mr. Wolf to serve on the conference committee, and he readily agreed. I got nothing but encouragement from him as I pushed to bring together that amazing event, where we learned from Steve Krashen, Joy Reid, Bill VanPatten, Rebecca Kopriva, and Jackie Boyd. My old wrestling coach and the

dedicated ESL professional Steve Wolf came to town a day early and told me to put him to work, letting me know he had plenty of paperwork he could do in his hotel room if I didn't have anything for him to do. His other condition was that he did not want to be publicly recognized at the event for what he was doing. "I'm doing this because I want to help," he said. "Nothing more."



We spent many hours together that weekend, preparing handouts, carting supplies from Wal-Mart, and, basically, I depended on Mr. Wolf for advice and emotional support during those sometimes hectic, stressful hours of the event. When I was busy presiding at the Saturday noon event, he saw my wife needed lunch and personally escorted her to the Fort Hays Student Union kitchen to put them to work making her a sandwich. "This is Robb Scott's wife," he said, as it was reported to me later by her. At the end of the day Saturday, Mr. Wolf joined me and two of my Fort Hays colleagues, all of us a little chubby and none of us young, in carrying more than 100 desks from one room to another, so that I could comply with my part of a deal with the facilities staff.

Spending all that time, from Thursday to Saturday, with my old wrestling coach, I began to experience images of him flitting through my mind from all those years earlier, remembering vividly his face and appearance as a young elementary school teacher. When we shook hands and he drove away, I felt some strong emotions. How often does a teacher from your grade school years come back into your adult life and continue to support and encourage you to strive, grow, and learn? Every time I see Ahearn Fieldhouse, I think of Mr. Wolf and my spirit is lifted anew because of his coaching, his teaching, and his example.

By Robb Scott

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