

**Spirit Award Honoree Michelle Marino's  
Remarks at the Huntington Foundation Gala  
January 20, 2012**

Thank you. I feel so privileged to be honored for something that I truly love to do, teaching. It's who I am and it's what I do.

Last spring, when Jodi Bernacki came to me and asked me if I would accept the nomination for the Spirit Award, I was stunned. Although I was thrilled, and slightly terrified, it presented a unique opportunity for me to stop and reflect back on my 29 years in education; my days as a junior high art teacher, the first time I walked into a kindergarten classroom and of course, my years as the principal in the Woodhull Early Childhood Center and Southdown. Along the way there were many challenges that can seemingly be forgotten in relation to the overwhelming amount of happiness and celebration that all centered around the children.

So if you'll permit me, I want to bring you to my first year, first day at Washington Primary School as a kindergarten teacher. Newly certified as an elementary Pre-K-6 teacher with no student teaching or teaching experience other than art, I walked into a kindergarten position that was 6 weeks into the school year. At this time, kindergarten was a ½ day program and the classes were overcrowded, and they needed to divide the 3 classes into 4, and that's where I came in.

Olga Smith, the principal at Washington Elementary School, had hired me with assurance that I would be fine; after all, all kindergartners needed were a place to work and a pencil and beside that, they love art and music. So I accepted the challenge and stepped into the classroom to meet my new students. On our very first day together we sat in a large circle, becoming acquainted. At that very moment, who should walk in the room, but Mrs. Smith the principal, to calm my nerves.

For those of you who never had the privilege of knowing her she had and still has a commanding presence about her. Mrs. Smith sat down in a tiny little chair, joining our circle and immediately started speaking to one child after the next, "I know your brother Tommy, you're Sarah's little sister, or Jonathan, I've been watching you grow up since you were born..." and so on. She stopped and asked the question, "Does anyone know who I am?"

The young boy sitting next to me leaned over and quietly whispered, “I think she’s God.” And that was my introduction to kindergarten.

I made it through that year with a tremendous amount of help, especially from Claudia Mingin, who taught the morning session in the same room and who had a whole lot of intuition. You see, I was not a fan of elementary school when I was a student many years ago. The philosophy then, for the most part, was the teacher taught; you listened and then regurgitated the information. No active participation or student choice. I was not going to make that same mistake with my students. School was going to be a place of joy, a fun place to learn. And we had a great year. I still hear from several of my students from that very first class. I’m so proud of them all.

I spent the next 17 years learning and improving my teaching, revising my lesson plans and finding different ways to inspire children to learn. For those of you who know me, my style has always been somewhat less than traditional. I always was and always will be an artist at heart, and it wasn’t that unusual to see my children involved in all sorts of non-traditional activities. We learned about the changing seasons and springtime through the eyes of impressionist artists, we sang our way through the life cycles unit with the metamorphosis song, planned a full wedding ceremony and reception for the letters Q and U as well as for 2 favorite class guinea pigs in our habitat house of more than 20 critters, yet somehow we were able to still find the time to learn to read and write, count and spell, and all of the life lessons like personal responsibility and what it means to be a good friend.

Those were 17 very happy years until one day, I just couldn’t tie one more shoelace, and I knew it was time for a change. The district was also making some changes and the wonderful Woodhull Early Childhood Center closed its doors and reopened as an intermediate school. Our kindergarten staff was scattered to the different buildings and I found myself reassigned to second grade at Southdown Primary School, the school where I visited with my mom growing up as a young girl. What really surprised me about second graders was that they weren’t that different from kindergartners. Sure, they could tie their own shoes, for the most part, and they were more independent with most tasks, but they had the same needs; to feel valued, accepted and successful.

This is my 8<sup>th</sup> year as principal of Southdown Primary School and things continue to change. The state is asking more and giving less, data collection

and analysis has become an integral part of what teachers do, the bar is constantly being raised and children are being challenged to perform to their personal best. But that's education, a continually changing paradigm and somehow we always find a way to keep the joy in teaching, because that's what we do. Because there is one constant factor, and that's the children, and no, they haven't changed.

Here's one last quick story that happened last year, and overheard by my math teacher. Two 4th graders were walking in the hallway ahead of her. One turned to the other and says, "When Mrs. Marino retires I am so going to beat up Kevin!" I don't know if the delay was because he fears me or respects me, but I'm not retiring any time soon, for Kevin's sake.

So I want to take this opportunity to thank the many people who have been so influential on my journey over the past 29 years starting with my principals who believed in me and allowed me the freedom to create my own teaching style; thank you Olga Smith, Carmela Leonardi and Hertha Essman.

I have always been inspired by my teaching colleagues, from my first days at Washington Primary through my wonderful summers at the USDAN Center for the Creative and Performing Arts, I knew that I was surrounded with talent. I tapped into those talents and learned from the best, and it was those experiences that motivated me as a teacher and principal. Thank you.

I am so blessed to work with some of the most dedicated and intelligent people that I have ever had the pleasure of knowing- my principal friends, "the 4 m's- Margaret, Marsha and Marlon, and me, the directors and chair people and of course, central administration: Jim Polanky, Ken Card, Joe Giani and Dave Grackin. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to build a community of learners and the freedom and support to do it my way.

My passion for teaching started at a very young age. It was inspired by mom, Elaine Gates, a retired Huntington music teacher and active college professor at CW Post and NYU. She boasts that she has never worked a day in her life, and I can assure you that she has never stopped loving her choices. My sister, Pattie Falber, and I are only 11 months apart. We tend to run this parallel life, we look alike, we talk alike and we're both principals who love what we do. She has always supported and encouraged my

choices, even though she didn't always agree or even pretend to understand them.

I am blessed with two amazing daughters. My oldest is Amanda, who's continuing the family tradition of teachers as an elementary art teacher, I see that same passion and dedication and when she speaks about her students. And my youngest daughter, Megan, met a milestone just yesterday. She graduated from Hunter College as a language arts and literature major. I know that she will also make her mark on the world. So if there are any publishers in the audience, Megan is one talented writer, not to mention cook and baker. Their faith and encouragement has helped me to strive for my personal best.

But, who was cheering me on every step of the way while holding up scenery, accompanying me to every PTA meeting and PTA events, driving Todd Hiscox dressed as a gorilla and me as a safari guide hanging out of the back of an open jeep, driving Kim Myers, who was dressed as a giant mouse on the back of his Harley, but my patient and dedicated husband, Ralph.

Finally, I'd like to thank Southdown Primary School, MY school, a place where the students, the parents, the teachers, the aides, the monitors, the custodial staff and my buddies, Gail with the office staff have created a little piece of heaven. A truly Invitational School, where everyone who walks through the doors is encouraged and supported to be the best that they can be. It's a place that we're all proud to call home.