

Because of Teachers – Because of Students

By Betty Dotson-Lewis (*left*) with Kathleen Colley Slusher

Authors of *The Girl From Stretchneck Holler: Inside Appalachia* (2012)

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Like the rest of the world my mind is locked on Dec. 14, 2012, Newtown, Conn. Every time I go for a walk, get tired, pray, see a happy child, a child crying, a school bus, watch a teacher's eyes light up when her students learn a new word or understand long division, or for no reason at all, my mind flashes back to the tragedy of 20 elementary students shot -- and the brave teachers and school staff who gave their lives attempting to save the lives of their students. The stories of heroic actions by teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary made me think of the impact teachers have had in my life and the lives of other students I know.

I grew up in a coal-mining community on a one-lane road in the remote mountains of rural West Virginia. Our school and church were the center of our lives. Religious activities took place in church; all other community activities were held at our school, including club meetings, dances and voting. Teachers were the leaders of our community.

I remember my first days of school. My mom helped me onto the big yellow bus. The bus driver, Mr. O'Dell, was the husband of my teacher, Mrs. O'Dell. He seated all of the little kids up front so he could keep an eye on them. I was scared and nervous being away from my mommy for the first time. During the first weeks, I cried and each time I cried my teacher, Mrs. O'Dell sat me on her lap and hugged me and told me I would be just fine. She always made me feel better and soon I didn't miss my mommy so much. In the days and weeks ahead Mrs. O'Dell became my mommy at school and my mommy and my teacher became inner changeable. Soon I was calling Mrs. O'Dell "mommy" and calling "mommy" Mrs. O'Dell. That is how important a teacher became to me.

And the more time I reflect on the role teachers have had on my life and the lives of others since this tragedy, the more I realize the impact teachers have on our lives, our communities, and our world.

And so, I was not surprised by the stories of sacrifice and bravery at Sandy Hook. Teachers and their students are truly family to each other; it is because of each other that they stand hand-in-hand even in the face of the unspeakable.

Because of Teachers

By Betty Dotson-Lewis

Because of Teachers: I went to college

Because of Teachers: I learned to read, write and love books

Because of Teachers: I learned to do math

Because of Teachers: I learned the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States and the importance of the Constitution

Because of Teachers: I became a member of Clubs like 4-H and became a State Public Speaker Champion

Because of Teachers: I was involved in sports and made my body strong

Because of Teachers: I had a ride to church

Because of Teachers: I learned French and German

Because of Teachers: I had a nutritious breakfast and lunch, even in the summer

Because of Teachers: I received toys at Christmas

Because of Teachers: I had a warm jacket for winter

Because of Teachers: I got a hug when I needed it

Because of Teachers: I'm alive

Because of Students

By Kathleen Colley Slusher

Because of students: I found a purpose in life

Because of students: I answer to "Teacher" morning, noon and night

Because of students: I smile at eager faces when I'm tired at the end of a long day AND bus duty

Because of students: I cry at their graduations and rejoice when they come back to see me

Because of students: I stay young at heart

Because of students: I see myself through their eyes and I am stronger and better

Because of students: I strive to learn more so that I can teach them more

Because of students: I remember myself at their age and I relate to remembered dreams and aspirations

Because of students: I run to them when they fall and need help getting up

Because of students: I found extra money in my pocket because one of you needed a cheerleading uniform

Because of students: I learned the meaning of blind faith

Because of students: I tell their stories and I learn from them

Because of students: I willingly put my life on the line