

Deal with teacher gave Pryor first audience

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Marguerite Yingst Parker and Richard Pryor had this deal which they never forgot. It was such a big deal that Mrs. Parker would be moved to say 30 years later, "Richard came through for me."

Then she would sigh, proud that Richard came through for her long before he came through for Ed Sullivan or Johnny Carson.

Though Mr. Pryor mentioned her two weeks ago on nationwide TV, Mrs. Parker has neither seen nor talked to Mr. Pryor in ages. That helps to explain why, when the comedian caught fire and nearly died two years ago, Mrs. Parker felt like shaking her finger and saying, "Oh, that little dickens."

It takes a certain type of person to think of a 41-year-old Hollywood star as a little dickens.

"I don't think of Richard as an adult," says Mrs. Parker. "I guess I don't think of him as being grown up."

Ninety-fifty-two and -three was the school year when Mrs. Parker, now a retired Peoria schoolteacher, and Richard, now a retired sixth-grader, made the deal that would lead Richard to reflect decades later, "The only time I would express myself was when I

was being funny. So my teacher made a deal with me."

The deal was made because morning roll call during the first few months at Blaine-Sumner Grade School in 1952 went something like this: Richard Pryor?

Richard?

Nobody usually answered. The nobody who one day would be a somebody was sound asleep on a city bus rolling down Adams Street. He'd missed his stop all right.

Half an hour after the morning bell, Richard would amble in to the classroom and plop himself down at a desk in the first row. He looked like he'd been up half the night, which, Mrs. Parker speculates, he had.

"Richard," she would say, "you leave home early enough to get to school on time. Just why does this tardiness continue day after day?"

Richard would fold his hands on his desk and yawn, "Well. You see, Mrs. Yingst. It's like this. (YAWN) I get on the bus. The ride makes me oh (YAWN) so sleepy that

(YAWN) I just shut my eyes and ride on. And. On. When the busman comes back to my corner a second time, he tells me to get off and get to school (YAWN)."

Pryor's routine had to be stopped. A child's education was at stake.

Mrs. Parker remembers him, not as a wise-cracking funny guy but as a perpetually exhausted, sometimes lonely, always likeable 12-year-old kid who tactfully avoided using any of the profanity that would later help make him a big star and lots of money, too.

"Never did that boy use a foul word in the classroom," says Mrs. Parker, who has avoided seeing any of her former pupil's movies because she disdains profanity in theaters as well as classrooms.

Had young Richard let a foul word slip, Mrs. Parker would have risen to the occasion. ("I would not have embarrassed him in class. I perhaps would have detained him after school and told him it was not acceptable in society.")

Mrs. Parker never sent Richard to the principal's office because she never had to. He wasn't a showoff. He didn't distract others with his goofy antics. He was not, says Mrs. Parker, what fans would expect of Richard Pryor the kid.

She remembers him as an average student who, "had he applied himself, could have been a very good student." He was a poor black kid in what then was a predominantly white school who didn't "mingle" with his classmates on the playground.

"I felt so sorry for him," says Mrs. Parker, who is white. "He wouldn't appreciate me saying that."

In those days when Eisenhower was in the White House, Richard was into playground pantomime. His silent dramas — slurping steaming hot soup — was a funny one — was for anybody who wasn't playing kickball or swinging upside down on a jungle gym.

"Oh my, he could roll those eyes back," remembers Mrs. Parker, who decided Richard deserved a captive audience.

She offered him his first contract: get to school on time and you can do your little acts for the class on Friday afternoon. It sounded good to him.

From the winter of 1953 until the end of school in June, the kids in Mrs. Parker's class got to watch a 10-minute performance of "Richard Pryor LIVE" every Friday for free.

Muses Mrs. Parker mischievously, "It was bribery on my part. It was great for Richard. The other pupils loved him. And Richard kept his promise. Got to school on time."

His arrival times improved but the end of Richard's bus-sleeping episodes weren't entirely over. He was still late occasionally. Mrs. Parker'd put her hand on his shoulder and say, "I don't know, Richard, if you'll be able to perform this Friday."

Pryor hasn't forgotten Mrs. Parker, whom he knew as "Mrs. Yingst." He brings up her name when the news media (it happened again two weeks ago on TV's "Today" show) wonder who nurtured this aspiring talent.

"Mrs. Yenks did," Pryor told a Chicago reporter six years ago and Mrs. Parker hasn't forgotten either. Flattered as she was that he remembered her, she was dismayed that a former pupil flunked a spelling quiz.

Getting the teacher's name right was a priority in sixth grade, where the teacher cleverly explained that 'Yingst' is as easy as spelling 'sing' with a 'Y' in place of the 'S' and tacking the abbreviation for 'street' on the tail end. The old newspaper article led Mrs. Parker to question her former pupil's attentiveness during this particular lesson.

"That day, if Richard was in class — he was probably sleeping on the bus — he missed out on how to spell 'Yingst.' Phonetically, of course, I've got to give him a good grade."

In June 1952, Mrs. Parker promoted Richard to seventh grade at Trewyn Junior High. She continued teaching until 1973, by which time Richard Pryor was a famous person. Mrs. Parker and Richard never saw each other again.



Photo by Tom Carter

MARGUERITE YINGST PARKER