

Stephen Toussaint

Lessons from a beloved educator on the 3-Fs: Faith, Family & Fraternity

Ancient wisdom assures that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. But who knew that same teacher would reappear decades later when the student was ready for advanced enlightenment?

Such a blessing was bestowed upon me shortly after my 40th high school reunion when I was reunited with my Hippie-era English teacher: Stephen R. Toussaint.

It was September 2013 – roughly 45 years since I’d received my first homework assignment from Mr. T.

I can no longer recall with accuracy whether the challenge was to probe more deeply into why Thoreau went to the woods or what the Dickens Charles meant when he observed it had been the best of times and the worst of times.

The important thing is that Mr. T inspired me to think, think, think rather than to merely memorize, memorize, memorize and recite, recite, recite.

As per a related essay I penned about Mr. T for the Winter 1999-2000 edition of *Saratoga Living* magazine (reprinted at the conclusion of this chapter) that lesson alone had earned him an A+ in my book.

But as I sit at my keyboard in 2016, I’m grateful that our story didn’t end as the sun was setting on the last century. For I was no more ready on the eve of Y2K than I’d been on the eve of my Class of 1971 high school graduation to ponder and pass along the greatest lessons my teacher had to offer.

Then it happened: The *Saratogian* invited me to prepare an advance story about the fact that Stephen R. Toussaint was preparing to lead Knights of Columbus Council 246 in a crusade to bring “solace to the saddened and sustenance to the poor with love and kindness, consistency and understanding.”

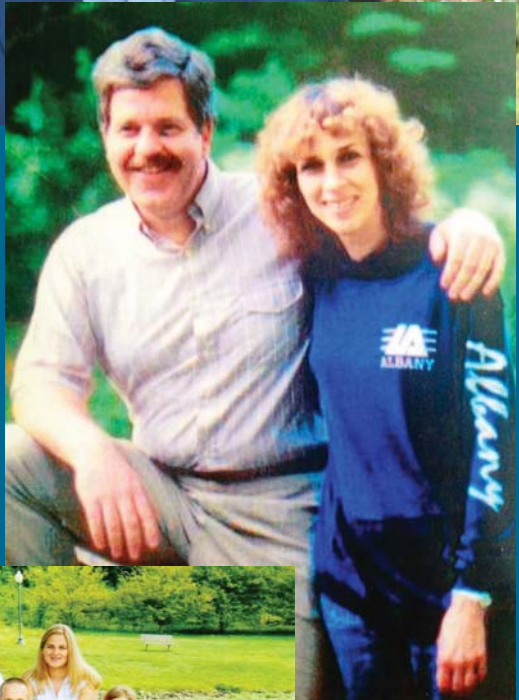
With just days to go before his October 2013 installation as Grand Knight of the 450-member strong Saratoga K of C, Mr. T shared that he would be seeking “new vision, new ideas and renewed energy” to deal with challenges that differ from those that faced his late father William when he had been installed as Grand Knight of the very same K of C Council 80 years earlier.

While the Order’s principles of charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism remain constant, Mr. T had reflected that the work was just beginning in other areas.



MY TREASURE CHEST & MY JEWELS -- I AM A RICH MAN!

Those are the captions Stephen Toussaint penned on the backs of portraits opposite and below. Photo with Registered Nurse wife Suzanne was snapped in 1973 after he earned his Masters in Educational Administration. Priceless picture at bottom includes all 10 of the now adult Toussaint children -- whose names appear in lower right corner. Portrait at top was taken by daughter Ginelle after her father was named Grand Knight of the Saratoga K of C in 2013.



Patriarch Stephen quips he and Suzanne, who wed in 1965, capitalized on the French Toussaint surname "to add another facet to our gems." Front row: Renee L'orient, Collette Marquier, Stephen Robert, Jr., Brigitte Loire and Allisse Rachelle; Middle: Neil Aaron, William Richard and Ginelle Dore; Back row: Marcelle Aimee and Suzanne Jemais.

Although he was only 19 when his father passed away, Mr. T said the example set by the patriarch of the family of seven children had left an indelible impression.

“My father was the primary mentor in my early years. He introduced a sense of values to me for my personal and spiritual life, the understanding of respect and love of life. There have been additional important role models and teachers for me in every walk of life. I am who I am because of the people who have taken an interest in me and my BE-ing,” said Mr. T.

“It is my belief that we are given this life to benefit others. It is most rewarding to actively support the work and effort of others we meet along our way through the years,” said Mr. T, who forged a distinguished career as a teacher and a principal in the Ballston Spa Central School District for three decades before taking an early retirement in 1999.

A member of the local chapter of the Columbian Squires during his teen years, Mr. T didn't become a member of the Saratoga K of C until 2007. This was in large part because he and wife Suzanne, who celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary in 2015, were so busy rearing their 10 children who have since gifted them with 13 grandchildren and a great-grandchild.

Another reason: the former President of his fifth grade class at St. Clement's and three of his high school classes at St. Peter's (now Saratoga Central Catholic) has spent much of his retirement volunteering for secular causes. Primary beneficiaries were The Prevention Council where Mr. T served for 12 years, six as President, and on the Saratoga Community Services Board, five years, one as President.

Since joining the K of C, Mr. T's assignments have ranged “from washing dishes in the kitchen to being an inside guard” to serving as Council Warden and Chancellor. “It has been my privilege to work alongside many dedicated, action-oriented Knights,” said Mr. T, adding he would be doing his utmost as Grand Knight “to be present, in support of, if not working for, everything that Council 246 conducts.”

Mr. T's chief goals as Grand Knight included “supporting the sick and disabled, increasing opportunities for the growth of individual Knights in the focus areas of the order, raising funds to continue supporting individuals and institutions in our community” as well as “increasing charitable and fraternal opportunities for our membership.”

At the time Stephen Toussaint was chosen as Knights of Columbus Council 246's Grand Knight in 2013, District Deputy Rich Gorman said he believed it was “because Steve has a good understanding of people and good organization skills. he is not afraid to move ahead into areas with which he is unfamiliar and strives to realize the best results from situations that arise.”

What was NOT included in the piece I submitted to the daily newspaper three years ago was this delightful excerpt from one of Mr. T's literary pep talks to the Knights he was about to commence leading by word and deed:

“It is with a humble spirit, a full heart and sincere determination that I take on the role of Grand Knight for Council 246 this term. You can expect my very best, persistent and sustained efforts to fulfill my responsibilities on behalf of our



WILLIAM R. TOUSSAINT -- This portrait of Stephen R. Toussaint's beloved father was taken in December 1963 by legendary Saratoga Springs photographer George S. Bolster. At the time it was given as a present to William's wife Marion, neither she nor the couple's seven children had any idea the family's patriarch would pass away at age 61 in January 1964. The photo remains a cherished keepsake of son Stephen who wed Bolster's daughter Suzanne in 1965.

Council. I am confident that I can count on the same from each of you (as) 'Many hands make light work!' (and) 'Too few, doing too much make the brave, well-intended, weary.' Know you are needed. Know that you are welcome to do as much or as little as you can, when you can."

I like to think Mr. T's Dad was smiling from above as his read his son's 2013 words as well as by those shared after Stephen Toussaint was chosen to lead as 2016-2017 Faithful Navigator for K of C Assembly 745.

In accepting his newest position, Faithful Navigator Toussaint vowed to do his utmost to execute his duties in order to achieve the goals of the Assembly -- most of which focus on our responsibilities as citizens and caring for our nation's veterans and their families.



ALWAYS A CLASS ACT -- Counterclockwise from bottom left: Stephen Toussaint instructs a Ballston Spa High School English class in the 1970s; poses for a yearbook portrait as Principal of Malta Avenue Elementary School in the 1980s and bids adieu upon retiring as Principal of the Ballston Spa Middle School in 1999.





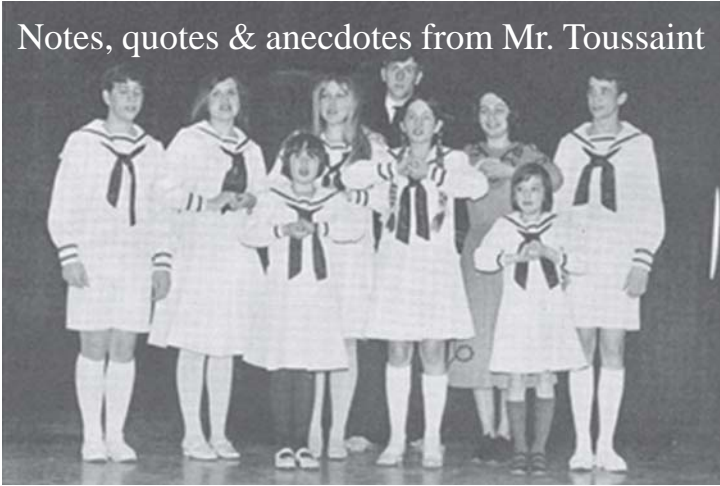
On a keepsake quilt crafted by Humanities Department students: “The absolutely magnificent quilt, which was created with a history museum donation in mind, is filled with squares depicting landmarks in the Village of Ballston Spa, which was chartered in 1807. I like to think that the quilt might be displayed as part of some future exhibit so that a new generation of students might enjoy – and learn from – something that was made by students of a now bygone era.”



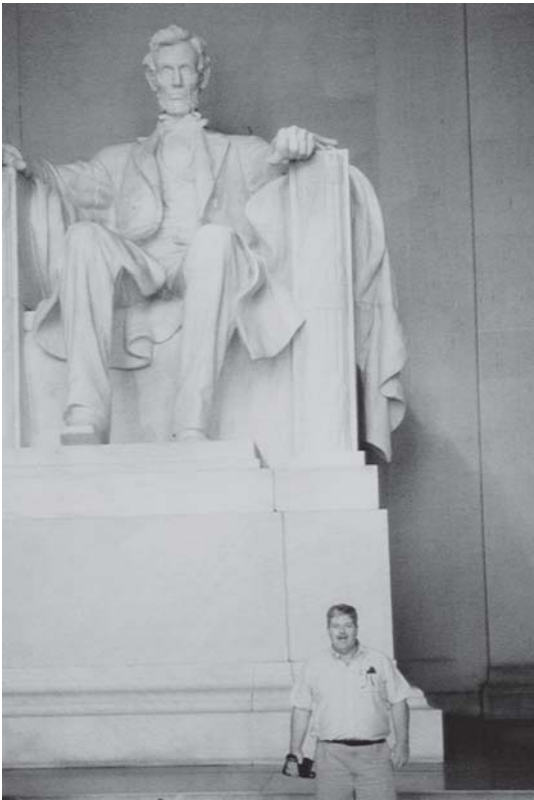
**Notes,
quotes &
anecdotes
from
Mr. T.**

On making and preserving memories: “I enjoyed getting to know Ballston Spa Middle School staff members (clockwise from left: Chery Camerota, Betsey Homer, Janet Ladd, Melva Meade, Anne Amedore, Barbara Neiman and Carol Piotrowski) better on field trips. To this day, I strive to stay in touch with former faculty and staff. And I always enjoy seeing and hearing from former students. It’s rewarding when bonds formed in academic settings last a lifetime.”

Notes, quotes & anecdotes from Mr. Toussaint



On directing *The Sound of Music* at Ballston Spa High School in 1970: “Being involved in a high school musical production was a wonderful learning experience for me. Those kids taught me so much.” (Back row, left to right are: Ken Kilburn, Patti Gaba, Laura Stanford, Mike Petit, Maureen McCanty and Todd Waring. Children in the front row: Margaret McCanty, Brucie Rosch and Jaqueline “Jackie” McCanty.)



On visiting The Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. in 1995: “President Abraham Lincoln was one of the idols of my youth. Lincoln, along with my father and some of the Redemptorist priests at St. Clement’s in Saratoga Springs, all had a profound influence on my young life. I especially admired Lincoln’s ability to retain humanitarian qualities while being a strong leader. So when I had an opportunity to visit his memorial, accompanied by six of my children, while on the way to visit my son Stephen, Jr. (who was then residing in South Carolina), I jumped at the chance. Standing at the base of the towering monument, I was struck by the realization that a man who had been larger than life to me as a young boy remained larger than life to me as a man.”

On playing Santa Claus in the 1980s: “It took me an hour and a half to don that costume, snow white whiskers, rosy cheeks and all. None of the kids at the Ballston Spa Middle School ever recognized me. For a number of years, several teachers from BSMS also accompanied me when I’d visit St. Margaret’s, a facility for terminally ill children in Albany where my wife Suzanne, a Registered Nurse, often rocked and comforted babies. The teachers would be costumed as North Pole characters from elves to Rudolf. I loved every minute of being Santa because of the joy I was able to bring to the kids.”



On downsizing: “It wasn’t until 2014 when Suzanne and I decided to sell the spacious abode in Greenfield Center where we had reared our 10 children that we fully realized how many Christmas decorations we had amassed during our 40 years in the countryside. My sister Judy graciously offered to let us store the decorations in one half of her two-car garage. In July 2015, as part of our 50th wedding anniversary festivities, Suzanne and I invited our children to gather in the garage over the holidays to divide the ornaments and hopefully one day pass them down to their children and grandchildren. I had a feeling we’d have to cast lots for one ornament in particular. It features a snowman riding with a stork. That ornament always flew

near the top of our tree to announce the news of a pending arrival to our family. I got richer and richer each time the stork rode with the snowman. And you know what? It’s such memories that sustain us in our golden years. The big house was a home because of the people who shared it with us. We took those wonderful memories with us to our new home.” (The snowman stork ornament is now in the hands of the parents of the adorable infant below.)



Special Stork Delivery: This little fellow was “delivered” by the Snowman on the Stork (visible just above the baby’s button nose) on December 15, 2015. Cohen Sebastian Greenwood is the 12th grandchild of Stephen and Suzanne Toussaint and the second son of Suzanne Jemais and Kevin John Greenwood. (Readers might enjoy the Raining Iguanas blog by Cohen’s Papa John Greenwood: rainingiguanas.blogspot.com.) The newborn’s proud big brother is Caleb Kevin Greenwood.

As per the downsizing anecdote above, the Snowman on the Stork ornament has been in the Toussaint family for half a century. He also “delivered” firstborn Toussaint child Renee and has been featured on the family’s Christmas tree for every year that it has been appropriate to announce another baby was on his/her way. (News Flash: Neil and Suyanne welcomed second son Aaron Christian in late May 2016 -- boosting the Toussaint grandchildren total to 13.)

This essay was penned by Ann Hauprich in 1999 in honor of her 1970-1971 high school English teacher. The feature was published that same year in Saratoga Living magazine.

Mr. Toussaint: ALWAYS a class act

I don't remember the titles of all the books I read or how many essays I penned while I was in Steve Toussaint's English class at Ballston Spa High School 30 years ago.

What I do recollect was that Mr. Toussaint instilled in me a desire to devour classic and contemporary literary works and helped me sharpen my analytical skills through challenging assignments that often required putting in overtime in the homework department.

While other students may have breezed through his thought-provoking questions about why Thoreau went to the woods or what constituted a Catch 22, I frequently resembled Winnie-the-Pooh, tapping my forehead while muttering "*Think, think, think!*"

It wasn't that Mr. Toussaint would piously pounce on errors or otherwise embarrass a student who failed to make the grade on a given day. That wasn't his style.

Smiling broadly as he entered the classroom, Mr. Toussaint actually seemed eager not only to present the required lesson, but to *be* present. (You can pretend to be happy, but you can't fake a twinkle in your eye!) He deserved to be presented with our best efforts and, with rare exceptions, he got them.

Worth noting here is that despite his remarkably relaxed demeanor ("cool" we called him in those days), Mr. Toussaint upheld high standards of learning — and conduct.

In the process, he earned our respect as well as our admiration.

And so it was with some sadness that I read in the newspapers earlier this year of Mr. Toussaint's plans to take an early retirement.

He was, by all accounts, scoring straight "A's" as principal of the Ballston Spa Middle School as well as enjoying excellent health. Why, I wondered, would such a class act in education want to (pardon the pun) change courses?

Since Mr. Toussaint's English classes had helped influence my decision to pursue a career in journalism, I thought it appropriate to call my former instructor for a special interview. As a full three decades had passed since our last face-to-face encounter, I was both excited and apprehensive. There was, after all, the very real danger that a dangling participle might slip out in between sips of coffee at JeRon's Restaurant in Ballston Spa.

No, I decided. That wasn't it. The reunion scenario I feared most was, well . . . it was that the twinkle in Mr. Toussaint's eye would be gone. Its absence would signify that this extraordinary educator had "burned out" prematurely.

And so it was my heart did a hip-hop when I discovered that even 30 years of giving his all to students, parents, teachers, support staff, school boards and administrators had failed to dim, much less extinguish, the light that so brilliantly reflected the mirror of his soul. What a relief to discover that like Henry David Thoreau, Stephen Robert Toussaint had merely reached a point in his life when he felt a need to "go to the woods."

Instead of Walden's Pond near Concord, Mr. Toussaint wanted to "go trolling" in Upstate New York -- not necessarily reeling anything in on his line, but reflecting upon his life and pondering the possibilities that await him in the new millennium.

"I guess you could say I've done some fishing in my life, but I've never really trolled," says Mr. Toussaint, who learned his earliest socialization and survival skills in a Saratoga household of seven children back in the late 1940s and early '50s. "I always had very clear goals and was fortunate that some excellent opportunities came my way at a relatively early age so that I didn't really have to do much soul-searching in terms of my career."



Stephen Toussaint has spent the better part of a lifetime planting seeds of one kind or another. Seen here working the flower beds outside his home, Mr. Toussaint recalls that his first job (at age 11) was working as a gardener for his neighbors. "It was there," he says, "that I learned to love manicured and weedless lawns, gardens and flowerbeds." He later spent three school vacations in the 1950s as a bellhop and groundskeeper at the Grand Union Hotel on South Broadway. Picture at right was taken for yearbook in 1970. PHOTOS BY ANTONIO BUCCA



Indeed, his years at St. Clement's Regional Catholic School and St. Peter's Academy (now Saratoga Central Catholic) laid a solid foundation for his later learning and leadership experiences at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Within months of earning his degree in 1966, Mr. Toussaint (then just 22 years old!) found himself teaching English for Grade 11 and 12 students in Uxbridge, MA, where he served as Senior Class Advisor. He also founded and worked as adviser of a weekly school newspaper.

By 1968, Mr. Toussaint had returned to his Saratoga County roots, teaching Grade 10, 11 and 12 English classes at Ballston Spa High School. He also served as Junior Class Advisor and directed the annual school musical "The Sound of Music."

Shortly after celebrating his 26th birthday in 1970, Mr. Toussaint was named the high school's assistant principal, a role he capably filled until 1975 when, at age 31, he was promoted to principal of Malta Avenue Elementary School.

"It was there that I learned *how* children learn as opposed to *what* they learn. I discovered there were a million different avenues to get into their heads . . . that good teachers reach young minds in multiple ways. I also learned that kids don't care what you know unless they know that you care."

Calling the Malta Avenue years "a turning point" in his career, Mr. Toussaint tackled his assignment as principal of the Ballston Spa Middle School with a passion in 1977. For the next 22 years, he thrived on "planting seeds" in the minds of students, parents, faculty and staff — then watching people and things blossom around him.

"I can honestly say I never regretted a day of it," he says, adding: "The real reward in education is not in the money, although the pay is decent, but in seeing people flower — or bloom. The vast majority of young students literally grow before your eyes into productive citizens who end up heading in positive directions."

It is noteworthy that throughout most of his 30-plus years as a role model for youngsters in the community, Mr. Toussaint and his wife, Suzanne (nee Bolster) were also busy raising 10 children of their own. The result, says the

“Kids don’t care what you know unless they know that you care.”

newly retired educator, was that his 55th birthday earlier this year became a time of serious self-evaluation.

“It was a milestone and it got me to thinking about things I still wanted to do that I hadn’t done — or wished I had time to do while I’m still able — like gardening, traveling . . . and trolling. The fact that we’re on the brink of a new millennium was also a factor in the sense that I felt the community would benefit from new leadership and a fresh perspective.”

When reminded that vast experience and the insights they bring are nothing to sneeze at, Mr. Toussaint all but blushes. “That’s always good to hear, but I still feel the time is right to step back and give someone else a chance to plant some seeds.”

For every thing, he philosophizes, there is a season — and this is his season to change.

“I loved teaching English when I started out sporting mutton chops on my face in the 60s, and I like to think that I brought a sense of humor and a little heart into those lessons, but there came a time when I felt I could do more outside the walls of a classroom than inside of them.”

While not yet sure exactly which new path he’ll be blazing in the coming months and years, Mr. Toussaint is sure it will have

something to do with helping people — most likely as an educational consultant specializing in safety and security issues.

He also expects to continue in his service as president of the board of directors of the Saratoga Springs Prevention Council. The organization provides school districts with alcohol and substance abuse prevention and intervention services. Council offshoots include WAVE (Working Against Violence Everywhere) and SAP (Student Assistance Programs).

“We need to reach students in the early elementary grades to teach tolerance and breakdown isolation. Perhaps more than ever before, we need to teach individuals to care for their neighbors,” asserts Mr. Toussaint.

As he speaks with the fire that left such an impression during my high school years, I am reminded of Thoreau’s words: *“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away.”*

On a selfish note, let’s hope Mr. Toussaint’s drum beat never takes him too far away from the trails he has worked so hard to blaze here in Saratoga County.

-- Ann Hauprich

Students weren’t only kids in principal’s life!

Blessed with 10 children in the course of their marriage, Mr. Toussaint and registered nurse wife Suzanne insist the rewards of having many offspring far outweighed the sacrifices.

Among the greatest joys has been observing the close bond that exists between Renee Lorient, Marcelle Aimee, Collette Marquier, Allisse Rachelle, Stephen Robert, Jr., Brigitte Loire, Ginelle Dore, William Richard, Neil Aaron, and Suzanne Jemais.

“We’ve just completed 130 years of public education,” laughs their father joking that he plans to wear a sign as he seeks educational consulting work that reads: “Work for kids’ college tuition.”

It’s been rewarding, says their father, to witness the development of each child’s unique personality traits, ranging from facial expressions and sensitivities to individual senses of humor.

Mr. Toussaint disagrees with those who contend parents must give children equal amounts of one-on-one time every single day in order to achieve closeness.

“As a parent, you ‘read’ their eyes. We have both been available and approachable. Anyone could have a quiet time to talk with Mom or Dad in the late evening. There was, and is, constant interaction, discussion, and presence among all.”