

One educator's journey into and through our public schools.

**PUBLIC SCHOOL ADVENTURES:
One Educator's Unusual 36 Year Journey Into and
Through Our Public Schools**

by Tom Caruso

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into and through our public schools



Tom Caruso

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Chapter 1 – The Interview

As a senior at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, I was anxious to begin my student teaching experience. I had always wanted to teach, maybe because I was successful in my early school years, enjoyed being good at it, and maybe in part because my dad was a teacher. In any regard, teaching is what I had always wanted to do and what I envisioned as my career. Nothing else was ever seriously in my mind and it had been a given for as long as I could remember.

Unfortunately for me, I had no definitive understanding of how to get from point A, wanting to teach, to point B, actually becoming a teacher. I knew I had to take education courses, and did so, but I had no appreciation for those courses which seemed so theoretical and impractical. They just didn't seem grounded in the real world. I gained little from all that coursework and actually resisted what was being taught. It all seemed so disconnected from the reality of schools as I believed them to be. I also knew a mandatory internship or student teaching task lay ahead, but again had no real

understanding or appreciation of how important that experience should be and how much I could learn from that experience. I seemed to be wandering and somewhat directionless as I moved toward a vaguely defined location.

With that attitude and mindset, my journey to become a teacher was a rocky one with a convoluted and often interrupted itinerary. I was still young, immature, and a bit dazed and confused about life and how to enter my career path. Unfortunately for me, my early success in education as a student was not duplicated when I landed in college. The new found freedom and control over one's life, plus beer, pot, and sex was an intoxicating mix that was hard to resist. Too much time was spent on these diversions and not enough time spent on going to class and studying. Joining a fraternity did not help my cause, nor did my infatuation with my girlfriend Marie. She was smart, beautiful, strong-willed, and for some unknown reasons, willing to put up with me. I couldn't wait to be with her and took every opportunity to do so. Life was good. Coursework, studying, and planning my path into a career of teaching, while always on my agenda, was not a top priority. Again, I

was just too immature to recognize and deal with the big picture.

At that time and since then, I knew this time in college was special. I knew that this freedom and carefree life would never again be duplicated. When and where else would I be basically subsidized to this extent with so much freedom and so little responsibility? So I very much enjoyed those 4 years. However, as I approached the end of those fabulous 4 years, I began to fear and worry about what I would find on the other side. Thoughts and worry started to frequently creep into my consciousness.

I did okay with my coursework, nothing to brag about, but I certainly did not give it the attention it deserved. This coursework seemed so vague, theoretical, and detached from the real world. I took delight in challenging what I perceived as lofty, pie in the sky, and unrealistic approaches to instruction. Given my lack of buy-in to the accepted philosophies being taught, I was very lucky to land a choice student teaching assignment. All of which brings me to the interview that changed my life and got me on the right road, at least initially. There would still be many more bumps along that

road, but for now I was headed in the right direction, or so I hoped.

At the University of Massachusetts, there were many opportunities for placement to do one's student teaching. One could land in the town of Amherst or another nearby town such as Pelham, Belchertown, Hadley, or Northampton. In addition to these local options, one could land a choice spot in other cities within our country, or abroad in the United Kingdom or Germany. One such U.S. city which hosted out of state student teachers was North Miami Beach in Florida. The 4,000 student North Miami Beach Senior High School, with a principal originally from Massachusetts, was looking for twenty interns to bring that northern, liberal perspective into its already diverse mix.

What made this assignment even more attractive to me than the lure of southern Florida was that it paid! Very few student teaching assignments at that time paid and that \$55 per week paycheck back in the early 70's made this internship the first choice of many students. Why not try for this choice assignment? This was a classic example of dreaming big with little to back it up, but I was cocky and threw my hat into the ring.

The principal of NMBSHS came to U. Mass, spent a long week, interviewed almost ninety students, and would eventually invite 20 to come south. I signed up for an interview, thought nothing more of it, was totally unaware that I should prepare, and anxiously sat down with him as he began peppering me with questions. I could tell right away that he was exhausted, and probably bored to death with the repetitious replies he received to his standard set of questions. Not having the best school record, not even having solidly grounded answers to his questions about educational theory and instructional methodology, I sensed I was doomed. He wasn't even making eye contact with me after the first few minutes. There was nothing I could do, I was done. Then the next question he asked me and the answer I gave him changed everything.

"What's the best thing you've read recently?" he asked in a rather rote and detached manner.

Without really thinking it through, knowing I was dead in the water, not caring anymore, and being somewhat of a smart ass, I responded, "The last letter from my girlfriend who is studying at the Sorbonne in Paris."

I'm sure he was expecting and probably prepared for some insightful comments about the latest educational innovations, which was the typical response. However, that's not what he got, and what came next surprised me as much as my response appeared to surprise him.

He paused, lifted his head, looked up at me, casually tossed his clipboard up onto the table, and said, "That's the most refreshing thing I've heard all day."

I was stunned. I thought he would be angered that I was not being serious and that I didn't give him some five minute dissertation about Dewey, Bloom, or Horace Mann. From that point on, we were off script. He didn't pick up that clipboard again and we talked for another 15 minutes like we were old buddies. I left the interview not sure what had happened and not sure if I was in or out. Yes, we seemed to connect, but on the other hand, quite candidly, I was a weak candidate, competing against serious students way out of my league.

Although I had no reasonable expectation of being selected, the unusual turn of events at the interview gave me some ray of hope. So, at the end of the week, I, like all the other applicants, went

back to the education department building where the interviews had been held and searched for my name on that single sheet of paper hanging on the bulletin board. There it was – Tom Caruso. I couldn't believe it. I was one of the lucky nearly two dozen students who would be doing their internship in North Miami Beach, Florida in the fall.

But wait, remember that rocky road? For some inexplicable reason, I did not go, I just blew it off. Instead, having spent the summer up in New Hampshire working on a construction job with my dad, I just continued on. Why did I pass on this opportunity? To this day, I'm not fully sure. I do know that I didn't have a plan to make this move and wasn't sure how to proceed. I think I was scared and just wasn't ready to strike out on my own. I took the easy road rather than taking the risky one. I just didn't have it together and didn't realize what I was passing up. When I look back at that time, I'm amazed at my stupidity and immaturity.

So instead of heading south that fall, I remained up north and continued to work. All was well, but uneventful. I was living with my dad rent free, bill free, and making some decent money. Unfortunately, Wilmot Flat, a

small rural town in central New Hampshire doesn't offer much in the way of diversions, so things were a bit too quiet. Then fall turned to early winter and second thoughts began to creep into my thinking. As I shoveled off the snow from the roof we were shingling, freezing my derriere off, light dawned on me, and I realized this wasn't for me. I wanted to teach. Was there any way I could reconnect and still do my internship at NMBSHS?

After some tricky maneuvering with the folks at U.Mass, I was able to jump back into the next round of interns for the January to May schedule. December finally came, I packed up my beat up 62 Chevy and off I went. The New Hampshire to Florida trip took two days, and involved one highway accident that left the driver's side of my car smashed in with both door windows gone. I arrived in Miami tired, with a battered car, without any specific plan, and no place to live. Unfortunately, I was still in a state of cluelessness. Doubts about this whole endeavor flooded into my mind. I actually considered skipping this assignment one more time and seeking employment elsewhere in the sunshine state. Fortunately, I

did not succumb to my fear of the unknown, and I plowed ahead.

Not wanting to spend a second night sleeping in my car, I searched the newspapers and found a small, cheap house to rent in a salt and pepper, low income neighborhood of older and run-down CBS (cement, brick, and stone) homes. It was dark when I met the owner, a big, tough looking guy, and I was scared out of my mind. He took me inside for a look at this dark, dreary, beat up dwelling and I just hoped it would look better in the morning. I also thought this guy could beat the daylight out of me, take what little money I had, and I'd be totally screwed. None of that happened. I gave him the \$145 first month's rent, and timidly asked for a receipt. He paused, gave me a disgusted look, and then tore a page out of the telephone directory. He scribbled 'paid \$145' signed it and in an annoyed manner, handed it to me. He left, I began breathing normally again, and I began unpacking my few belongings.

That first night was a difficult one for me. I was alone in a tough neighborhood, didn't have a phone, and the back door located in my bedroom was a flimsy, glass, jalousie type structure that I could have pushed in

without much effort. I heard every noise that night – loud voices out in the street, cars going by, doors closing, dogs barking, and the many other random noises one hears or imagines. Needless to say, I didn't get much sleep. That night made a deep impression on me. I was alone, frightened, feeling very vulnerable, and unsure of what might happen. Memories of that night still pop up every so often.

The new day finally came and it quickly became obvious to me that my new home didn't look much better in the morning light. Plain and simple, the place was a dump. Nonetheless, I had a place to stay and it was off to the nearest Howard Johnson's to eat and maybe get a part time job. Having worked at Ho-Jo's in Hadley, right near the U.Mass campus, I was lucky to be offered a job right away at a Miami Ho-Jo's. I needed money and the free food at the restaurant was a welcome bonus.

A few weeks later, now with a couple of bucks in my pocket and a place to live I started my internship. I felt totally out of place. This high school was involved in a program that brought students from the disadvantaged side of Miami to the upper middle class suburb of North Miami Beach. It

was a strange mix of cultures, with poor minority students in shabby clothes mixing in with the predominantly well off, white locals which made things interesting. Students with Haitian, Dominican, Cuban, and Columbian backgrounds were melded in with the Liberty City Afro-American students and then mixed in with the white suburbanites. It was a true melting pot. Some students came in on the buses from downtown Miami while others drove in with their Mercedes. Classes were made up of students who would go on to elite colleges and students who could barely read. Of course, all of this was unknown to me at the time, but certainly made for some eye opening experiences. One such experience came early after my arrival. In the teachers' lunch room one day, I noticed a large, tall, well-dressed man, whom I hadn't seen before, walk in and I thought, he doesn't look like a teacher. Then when he took off his suit coat and I saw the pistol strapped to his body, I realized I wasn't in Kansas anymore. It was a tough school with some tough young men and women, and an armed security guard was both troubling and reassuring.

I entered my assignment fearing I was out of place, lacking confidence and very much

afraid to fail. I didn't have nice clothes to wear, but fortunately that didn't seem to matter and was the least of my issues. In a word, I was still clueless and hopelessly terrible. I didn't prepare properly, again not giving the necessary attention to what was important. To make matters worse, I hooked up with two other U.Mass interns who had been accepted and we rented a small apartment close to the high school. Moving out of my ramshackle rental was a great relief. Unfortunately, neither of my two roommates was committed to teaching as a career and they too neglected their teaching responsibilities. Once more, diversions took hold. Beer, wine and the ubiquitous presence of pot were hard to resist. My supervising teacher had a thankless task – he was patient and tried to redirect me, but my immaturity and lack of commitment made his job almost impossible. Mr. Gutting, thank you for all your efforts, and please know that I'm sorry. I'm also sorry for spilling that glass of red wine on your grade book! Drinking wine and smoking pot while correcting papers and entering grades wasn't exactly good form. When I look back, I'm painfully reminded of my behavior and again amazed at my immaturity and

stupidity. How Mr. Gutting put up with me is totally beyond belief.

I survived, my supervising teacher survived, and my students carried on without too much harm being done. During the entire 5 month internship, the U. Mass education department intern supervisor never met with me, nor had any meaningful contact with me. My only contact with him was a brief exchange of hello, how's it going, in the teachers' lunch room on his one visit. So much for assisting me, guiding me, and evaluating my work. U. Mass is a great school, but this was not its finest moment. Nonetheless, I 'successfully' completed my assignment and now decided to stay on in Florida. Over the next year, I would substitute teach, work nights as a bartender, and convince my girlfriend Marie to come join me.

All three of those endeavors did not work out well. My substitute teaching was mediocre at best – again, not giving those assignments the attention they deserved. Substituting is difficult work as you are thrown into all different types of classes, sometimes with few or no plans being provided. A substitute doesn't know the kids, may have little background in the subject, and of

course is subjected to a good deal of harassment from the kids. However, regardless of those factors, a good sub will overcome those difficulties and make every effort to conduct a successful class. I didn't.

My bar tending was very lucrative, but I found the work hard, the hours long, and the prospects unfulfilling. Starting work at 9pm and occasionally working straight through until 8am the next morning was exhausting, even if very lucrative. Bar tending was a strange occupation for me. Each portion of the night was clearly divided into distinct segments. The 9pm to midnight segment saw us serving the date crowd – younger individuals and mostly poor tippers. Midnight to 3am saw us working with other service providers – waiters, bartenders, and others who were much better tippers. Then came the sweet spot in the night, in terms of tips, the 3am to 8am crowd. The working girls and their clientele, and the other night people were very generous. \$20 tips for \$5 drinks were not uncommon. Nonetheless, I just couldn't continue in that line of work. It was way too demanding and difficult to deal with all the different people. Dealing with the public in that type of an environment was eye opening for me. People can be very

rude, aggressive and unpredictable especially after several drinks. Telling one patron I couldn't serve him a sandwich after 8pm caused him to go over the edge and threaten to shoot me. The money was great, but sorry, this wasn't for me.

And lastly, poor Marie; I just wasn't ready, again, too immature and directionless. Working nights while she worked days at a local insurance agency made for an unusual and difficult relationship. After 6 months, she had had enough of me and decided to go back to Massachusetts. With no prospects on the horizon and no desire to stay, I too decided it was time to head back home. So we packed up my newly acquired VW beetle that I was able to purchase with my bar tending money, loaded the U-Haul trailer and off we went up Route 95. A few days later, I dropped her off at her parents' house in Arlington, MA and I headed for my dad's place in New Hampshire. After a short visit there, my poor brother Frank, his wife Gail, and their daughter Stacy would be the unlucky recipients of my company. They graciously allowed me to stay with them for the next several months. How they ever put up with me is still a mystery. However, the thing I remember most about my stay was

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very much enjoying my playtime with Stacy who was about 2 years old. My stay wasn't long. There was another brief bar tending job to bring in some quick money and then another one of those life altering events that got me back on the right road.

Chapter 2 – The Boston Globe

During my brief stay at my brother's home, reading the Sunday edition of the Boston Globe, I found a story about a struggling congressional candidate in Maine. Mark Gartley was a Vietnam War hero, a pilot who was shot down, captured, and held as a prisoner of war. Home now, he was taking a long shot run at unseating the popular Republican incumbent William Cohen in Maine's second congressional district. (William Cohen would go on to become a U.S. Senator and then serve as Secretary of Defense)

I had always been interested in politics, and given that my teaching career was going nowhere fast, I imagined this might be an entry point into this new field, and thought why not? Once more, I was caught up with big goals with little to back it up. With nothing to hold me at my brother's, and no other good prospects, I hopped into my VW and up to Maine I went. I found Mr. Gartley's Bangor office, which was empty and closed, not a good sign, and sat on the front steps waiting for someone to come. A short while later, Mark approached and I offered to

help. Soon thereafter, I was part of his team, his \$50 a week administrative assistant managing his Bangor office. I use the term 'managing' very loosely for there wasn't much to manage, and I was unsure of what actions I should take. It was one of the many steep learning curves that I would encounter throughout my life. I did the best I could, got a good deal of help from others, and muddled along making every effort to help Mark succeed.

Another steep learning curve was my longer than long shot run for the state senate seat in the Bangor area. While I was working for Mark, the current state senator for this seat was running for reelection unopposed and the Democrats needed a sacrificial lamb to at least on paper challenge him. Why I volunteered for this hopeless effort is still beyond comprehension. Nonetheless, I was the Democratic candidate for this state senate seat. With little experience, a meager campaign fund, and no strong ties to the community, I knew the odds only too well.

It was an eventful 6 months which I very much enjoyed. I learned a lot, but long story short, we both lost the election badly and got crushed. (Mark went on to become the State Secretary in Maine)

OK, now what? I'm up in Bangor, not much money and living in a rundown apartment. Oh of course, I'm a teacher, I'd better look for a teaching job. So into the Bangor Superintendent of Schools office I went.

The secretary there took my paperwork, gave it a quick scan, and asked, "Would you be willing to do some substituting at the elementary level?"

My certification and limited experience was in secondary social studies, so I responded somewhat unenthusiastically, "Sure, I guess so."

"OK, then go upstairs and see Mr. Martin, the principal. I'll call up there and let him know you're coming."

Puzzled, I meekly replied, "Thank you."

Mr. Martin took me in, quickly looked over my packet, and we started to talk. After about 5 minutes of perfunctory Q & A, he asked one last question, "So, do you want to try some work at the elementary level?"

Once more, I responded half-heartedly, "Sure."

"OK, take a right out this door, then go down the corridor to your right to room 305 and relieve Mr. Smith."

"You mean now?"

"Yes, if you want to give it a try."

I was certainly surprised, and managed an unconvincing, "OK."

Off I went and there I was in front of 22 unruly 5th graders who were tormenting poor Mr. Smith. It was a scene right out of some over the top comedy about a misfit classroom. Mr. Smith had an effeminate manner, and seemed like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. Students were milling about, some sitting on the radiators, others sitting on their desks, everyone talking, and no overall order or teaching going on. Mr. Smith was so grateful for being relieved I thought he was going to hug me as he beat a hasty retreat.

It didn't take long to get things in order and over the next two weeks that class resumed its normal activities and course of instruction. Other daily and short term assignments followed and without knowing it at that time, I stumbled into my career as an elementary teacher. Before I knew it, I was off to the U. of Maine at Orono for the coursework I needed for my elementary certification.

Mr. Martin rewarded me with a long term substitute position and now I began the difficult journey toward becoming a true

teacher. My 4 month assignment at the Down East Elementary School in Bangor was really the beginning of a slow climb up one more steep learning curve. Those poor kids; I was raw, unskilled, and learning as I went. I survived and I'm sure the kids did too, although they didn't get what they deserved. Nonetheless, I realized this was for me, and now with my elementary teaching certificate in hand, I thought I was on my way.

Slowly I began to learn the craft of teaching, kept substituting, got a part time job teaching adult education at night, and began to realize that I needed to step up to the plate and get serious about putting in the work necessary to be a successful teacher. For some strange reason, it took me a long time to realize that one needed to work hard to plan, prepare, and provision for each class. It seems so obvious, but it took a while for that light to dawn on me. I guess I was under the mistaken impression that I could wing it and be successful. Even as this obvious requirement dawned on me and I started to gear up, I was unable to land a permanent full time job. I was alone, scrimping by on substitute pay and the little I made with the adult ed class. I came to the

realization that I really didn't want to be in Bangor, Maine. Bangor experienced long and harsh winters, had little night life, and generally was an economically depressed area. Each to their own, but this wasn't for me. No offense Bangor.

Thankfully, Marie took me back and we resumed our on again, off again relationship. Marriage followed shortly thereafter, although she had some prerequisites before the deal was done. Number one, we would not be living in Maine. Check, no problem there. Number two, she would always have a car. As she put it, 'I need to have a car for when I need to get away from you'. I agreed to both conditions without hesitation. As agreed to, we settled in Massachusetts, she's always had her own car, and we've been together for 40 years so far!

Married now, living in Massachusetts, and basically broke, we weren't sure what would come next. Thankfully, Marie got a teaching position in Wilbraham, and several days before the start of a new school year, I got an aide position in the Hadley Public Schools. I got a whopping \$3.75 an hour and was totally used and abused. Nonetheless, I was thankful for the position, but they had me running ragged. I picked up the school

district's mail on the way in and delivered it to the two schools. My schedule was chock full with small groups needing remedial assistance, lunch duty, recess duty, and bathroom/hall duty. But at least I had a position, was making a few bucks, was gaining some additional experience, and securing some much needed references.

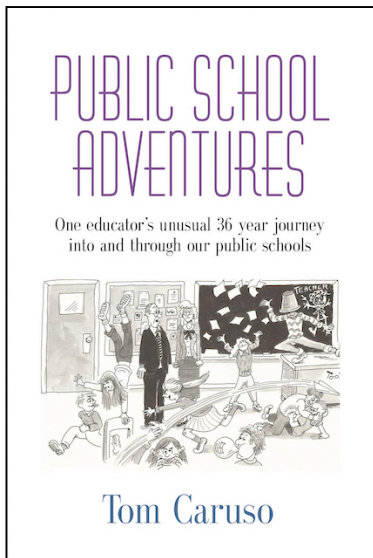
The next year, thankfully, I landed a 6th grade teaching position at the Wales Elementary School in Wales, MA, part of the Tantasqua Regional School District. (Many of the regional school districts in MA are named after Native Americans – Algonquin, Narragansett, Mohawk, Minnechaug, Nashoba, Nipmuk, etc.) My new position was similar to a position in the same district that I had applied for and lost out on the previous year. That position had been awarded to Joe Prestes, who would go on to be my good friend for almost 40 years and counting. We still laugh about that turn of events.

My new position was as a teacher in a self-contained classroom, responsible for instruction in math, language arts, science, and history. I was totally committed and dove in with all my energy. Unfortunately, I was basically on my own. There was no

mentoring or guidance, but I sorted things out, learned as I went, and continued my coursework which now seemed to make more sense. I certainly made mistakes, but loved it, the kids were great, and I was starting to really become a professional teacher, albeit, a very green one. In my second year, only then did I fully realize how green I actually was during that first year.

Looking back, I realize that going to Maine on a whim, accidentally stumbling into elementary education, lucking out in finding a position in Hadley a few days before the start of school year, and thankfully reconnecting with Marie, were all improbable circumstances that I still can't believe. As a former superintendent and old friend would always tell me, 'sometimes it's better to be lucky than good'. That old saying was certainly holding true for me.

Now, with that circuitous and convoluted initial journey completed, it's time for a few stories about the strange and wonderful world of public schools.



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