

Biography

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During icebreakers when asked to describe myself, I've traditionally gone with the reveal that "I am a very good dancer," because it garners a warm laughter, funny for its baldness. What I would rather say, would it not make others uncomfortable with its inappropriate intensity is that "I am my father's daughter."

That simple statement means much to me. Dr. Anthony J. Vilhotti (1930-2003) – or the narrative I have shaped around what I knew to be him – comprises the basis for my internal compass.

The value of his life was never more apparent to me than on the day of his funeral. My father was a marital and family therapist, and his patients facilitated the ceremony. He was neither famous nor published, but the room was packed, and as each of his patients spoke, I realized that my father had a gift that made those with whom he worked feel imminently special, as though no goal were more urgent than the manifestation of one's potential.

I recall being struck most by one woman, whose intensity as she spoke seemed to peel the yellowing wallpaper from the room. She was petite, prim, coiffed - but she pounded her chest in the midst of a sentence: "What I mean to say is this - Dr. Vilhotti *saw me*. And because he saw me, *I began to see me*. And, though no one ever had, I began to love me. That was his power, and it was effortless."

His funeral took place in the November of my first year teaching and it was then that I first understood my vision of what it means to lead a life well lived.

Three years ago, on our last day together, my students surprised me with a "Socratic Seminar" they'd prepared for me rather than the other way around. They told me we were in for lunch as well, and boxes of Pop Tarts were passed around as provisions. Channel assumed the role of moderator and took to the front of the oval with aplomb to say: "At this time, each of us would like to share how you affected our life, Ms. Vilhotti."

The next 70 minutes are something of a blur. Each student spoke, some read poems they'd prepared, one girl shared a comment I'd written on one of her early papers from our first year together, and some couldn't speak at all. As a class, we tore through two tissue boxes and quite a bit of one of those enormous standard-issue toilet paper roles.

That class period marks what I consider my finest hour. That day, however, was supplanted by another when one of my brightest students, Jolyssa, someone who had been unable to speak that day in class, wrote me about a year later.

Jolyssa was a student I had immediately recognized as motivated and intelligent. In our second year together, she was earning straight A's in the AP course, a 3 on the exam, and is currently completing her third year at Villanova University on a full scholarship. Because my father made me appreciate a life well lived in service of others, I would like to end my bio with Jolyssa's words, which I hope best tell the story of me.

"If I were to talk to someone about you as a teacher, I would say that I think you take your responsibility towards your students seriously, that teaching is your mission, a calling, and not merely your job. That part of educating students is fostering in them the ability to see for themselves a vision of the future, and being able to do this is a gift. You have done this for me. It came naturally to you."