



Mr. Majewski, a Reflection

Eighth grade in a junior/senior high school is a definite nightmare, especially for a shy, quiet, fearful, somewhat immature, and smaller-than-average boy who struggled with his academics. And this boy, who knew little purpose in school, especially around the older and much bigger high school students, lived too much in his head, with a ripe imagination and a belief in magic as only children can know. Eighth grade, a time when rumors of scary teachers and stories about them would make for a great Halloween tale, stories that were not only accepted, but believed beyond their wildest expectations, rumors that would flow like wildfire from one grade to the next, with never a reason to doubt their veracity.

Mr. Majewski was a teacher with a wide and dangerous reputation. It was common knowledge that he was not just mean, cruel, and vicious, but that he was the meanest, cruelest, and most vicious teacher one would ever know. It was widely understood that he had a particular penchant for letting eighth-grade boys know that he was the toughest hombre they were ever to face. They were just lunch to him. **NOBODY** messed with Hank Majewski!

So to Mr. Majewski's art class I went with great trepidation, knowing I would not survive to the ninth grade. Ah, but little did I really know of the world about to be opened up to me!

I still remember the first time I entered his class. Wow, no desks, but instead a room set with easels and large tables at various and odd angles to each other. And objects of all sorts, some made by students, but most this early in the school year the general detritus of life, spread around the room in a state of

organized chaos. No desks, no sitting in alphabetical order, a practice which always placed me at the back of the room, opening up the possibilities of both goofing off and being uncondusive toward concentrating on the academics at hand, academics that were primarily word-centered for a young mind that saw in pictures and lived in smells and touch and taste.

The art room was set with large tables, easels, and best yet, gave students the ability to work standing up. A room in which we were allowed to move around with freedom and with the encouragement of Mr. Majewski. A room I can still see now as clearly as those many years ago. A room in which I began a journey of immense proportion that I am still deeply involved in today. A journey begun under the guidance of Mr. Majewski, that most wonderful art teacher.

Contour drawing, gesture drawing, laying in a wash of watercolor, and the raw beginnings of handling that most magnificent of instruments, the paintbrush. We would all take turns standing on one of those large tables as he introduced us to the magic of drawing the human form through drawing each other. We did self-portraits and built things from an immense range of materials. We carved wood, shaped clay, and did projects in plaster. It was all so magical. The freedom was such a relief compared to shop classes, where we worked with a template, and academic classes, where I felt so inadequate and angry.

Mr. Majewski took a special interest in my artwork. He was always deeply curious and encouraging about what I was doing. He gave me the confidence to go deeper and deeper into the projects. Only with the hindsight of an adult can I realize that he gave me permission to let anything that was inside come out into the art projects.

I did come to know where his stern reputation came from. He had body language and a tongue sharp as a knife, and he used it with always the implication of much more waiting in reserve. This part of him was apparent when anyone acted the bully or in any way picked on or treated someone else as inferior. Mr. Majewski was egalitarian, and in his presence, all were equal from the first to the last. To suggest otherwise was to raise his wrath, and it

could be intense. It was not seen often; I never experienced it directly, but his passion about treating all with respect was something to behold and not to be toyed with.

Toward the end of the school year, I did a sculpture using a piece of wood with numerous nails. The nails were of various types, lengths, and sizes, and I started out tentatively following a preset pattern. Mr. Majewski pushed me to do more. I began obsessively pounding those nails into the wood in a random and abstract pattern. It felt good. He pushed me to do still more. I thought about those nails and then coated them in plaster. I can still feel that wonderful warmth of the mixed plaster slowly flowing out of my slightly clenched hand, dripping over and down the nails, forming lumps and puddles, like stalagmites, in that stark, matte-white plaster finish. It felt better. He pushed me again to do more. After the plaster dried, I painted the whole piece flat black and mounted it on a piece of museum board. It had a Giacometti-like feel to it, a dark piece from the recesses of the confused and angry heart of an eighth grader. It made me think about war or forest fires, ashes from which something will grow. Mr. Majewski was with me the whole way. He was pleased as the piece progressed, and I knew he liked it. He asked me if he could keep it for a while. Sure, why not.

At the end of each year the eleventh and twelfth graders had an art show in the hallway near the auditorium. I remember my absolute shock when I walked into school one morning and saw my piece hanging on the wall in that show. Not only was it there, where the work of an eighth grader should never be, but it had also received an award.

And what a reward for me after having my best school experience ever to be honored in an upper-class art exhibit. I was ecstatic. Mr. Majewski opened a door for me into a beautiful garden, and I have been there ever since, cultivating, smelling the roses, weeding as necessary, and enjoying the fruit. He taught me techniques in art that I still use today, but mostly he taught me to just be myself and embrace and trust that. Thank you, Mr. Majewski. You made a difference.

—*Kenneth Wenzel, Art Instructor*