



In Loving Memory: Janet Mory

The school year started with excitement and enthusiasm—seventh graders learning their way at North Kirkwood Junior High School. The year was 1970, my second year of teaching. The class was a mix of really bright seventh graders along with a few students who hated mathematics—I predicted they would all do well—eventually. I called roll the first day of school—there were quiet responses, giggles, outright laughter, and three times a response of silence as the students raised their hands—two smiled, one really frowned—seriously, both sides of the student’s lips curved downwards!

She sat in the first row, the second seat. Her eyes—almost mahogany—not brown, but darkest brown, flecked with gold. Her complexion was flawless—a little tan, gentle pink on the top of the outline of her cheekbones. Her eyes showed intensity uncommon for her age of 12 years. Her sandy blonde hair, sunshine-streaked, side wisps and bangs gently framing her face. She was about five feet tall—when she stood, the straightness of her body reminded me of a slender fashion model. She was one who quietly raised her hand when her name was called.

Mathematically, Janet was the perfect student—detailed-oriented, curious, questioning, wanted to understand *why*, rather than be satisfied with *how*. In early October Janet began missing each Tuesday—an odd behavior for a seventh grader. Although there was a pattern of predictable absences, the quality of her work was exceptional. Mid-November, the pattern extended—every Tuesday and Wednesday. I wondered; I worried—nothing from Janet indicated any problem, no calls from her parents, no messages from her counselor. Her eyes—

still intense, but I saw flashes of something—not sure what—Concern? Fear? Sadness? I tried calling her parents—no one returned my call. Her homeroom teacher noticed absences, but not the pattern. Her counselor did not know about the absences and did not have any information to share. Was I the only one who worried—the only one that thought there was something to worry about?

Winter arrived in St. Louis during December. Snow dusted the gentle slope of our front lawn; the wind bent the cedar trees along the boundary of our yard; dreary gray clouds filled the sky—day after day. The temperature was not cold, but dampness permeated the air—the type of dampness that makes old athletic injuries constantly ache. Maybe the season change was a harbinger of what would come. I had not seen Janet for a week—the week turned into two weeks. Homework was dropped off at the attendance office and delivered to me for grading. Still—no one had heard anything. I had a dream. I saw myself searching, talking to people, asking about Janet. Concern. Worry. Almost panic.

It was the third week of December—still no word. I remember standing in the hallway talking to colleagues, smiling at my students as they came to class. Janet’s homeroom teacher leaned over to whisper something to me. “Janet really does not want anyone to know, but chemotherapy has been discontinued.” I stood silent. I just stared at the teacher’s face, my face flushed—I can’t cry, not here, not out in the hallway! I ran to the bathroom—all I could remember was trying to gain control. Twelve years old. Chemotherapy. Absences. Her eyes. Is there more?

Saturday morning Janet called me at home. She and her mom were going shopping. Could she stop by and bring me a Christmas present? Wonderful! Come! I heard myself making the typical polite reply: “I look forward to seeing you!” I was excited. Maybe I would finally find out what was going on with this great student. At eleven o’clock, I looked out our picture window to see a lady watchfully escorting a frail young girl moving up the sidewalk, a cane in each hand. Yes, it was Janet. I opened the front door to look into those intense dark brown eyes I remembered, but this time I saw sadness. It took a couple of tries to get up the step into the house, but she made it. Her complexion was still

flawless, but her face seemed thinner, and her color was pale. Her sandy blonde hair was not sunshine-streaked; the texture looked different. What was different? Her slender frame had “matured” to thin—she wore a short red skirt that highlighted the bone structures of her knees and the lack of muscle in her legs. Was she wearing a wig?

Janet asked me about Kristin and Erich, our Dobermans. When were we going to have puppies? Would we sell them? Would we keep them? Would we be with family at Christmas—had we picked out our tree? Did I have my holiday shopping done? I asked about her brother—her smile was so sweet. Her mom just listened, carefully watching her daughter. As our conversation slowed, Janet reached into a bag producing a brightly wrapped package. She handed it to me, almost demanding I open it immediately. As I untied the ribbon a bright red, six-foot scarf, the fashion of the day, fell into my lap. Janet explained that, as the cheerleaders’ sponsor, I had to have a warm scarf in one of the school colors. She made it herself. She was so proud. She said it was simple and offered to teach me how to make one. We talked for a little while longer. I told her how much I treasured the scarf. When she felt it was time to go, she hobbled to the front door without the use of her canes. Once out on the sidewalk, however, I watched her gently lean into her mom for strength while at the same time using one of her canes for more balance. I stood in the doorway and waved; she rolled down the car window and waved. We continued to wave at each other until we were out of each other’s sight. In some way, it seemed like a final goodbye. I spent much of the day thinking about our conversation and her exit from our home.

The following week Janet’s homework assignments for Monday and Tuesday were dropped off, as usual, at the attendance office. I noticed a few careless mistakes as I graded her work, but there were no indications of any major misunderstandings. I knew she was not feeling well, but her work did not seem to suffer. Wednesday morning brought another gray dawn and a periodic cold rain showers. The temperature hovered at 40 degrees. Although the day had a rather gloomy start, at 10:20 a.m., as I walked between buildings, the sky completely cleared—no clouds, and the sky was clear blue. The gloom had

changed to bright, seemingly endless sunshine. I returned to my room to start the noon class. As I began to check for absences, I was handed a note from the attendance office. The message: Janet Mory died of leukemia at 10:15 that morning.

Thirty seven years later—every winter, I lovingly take out my bright red, six-foot scarf and remember my student, Janet Mory. I only hope I can pass away having shown the strength, tenacity, and sweetness that Janet shared with others. Janet Mory inspired me in 1970 and continues to inspire me today. Thank you Janet!

—*Sue Ehlers, Dean of English, Humanities, and Speech-Communication*