



**Joseph Purcell      10**  
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Joseph Purcell came to Brentwood in 1958 and retired in 1992. He taught English and Spanish in the Ross Building. Moving to Library Science, he became Brentwood High Schools Central Librarian and left after devoting thirty four years of his life and service to this District. Like others hired to teach at the Secondary level, he was single when he arrived in the fall of 1958 shortly before wedding Elaine, his lovely wife with whom he committed to building an exemplary marriage and a loving family that eventually included their five children. The very day he signed Brentwood's contract he became twenty-one years young

He came by his own admission, on the rebound. He'd considered applying for a language teacher position in North Babylon but found out that they were really looking to hire a Department Head who could also teach French. Given that he was twenty-one with lots of untested self confidence he was considering taking the position but the Principal and Dept Head shortly changed their minds and said perhaps he should approach Brentwood which was also looking for a language teacher. So he got in his car, 'zipped' out here, walked into the new Ross Building which had been completed a year earlier just in time to see people dressed in a manner that even he couldn't believe. They were without any question the most bedraggled group of kids he had ever laid eyes on. He walked into the main office and said, *"I don't know if any body's interested but I've come this far and I might be interested in a job, but then again, maybe not – I was interested in talking to somebody, maybe the Principal, but I don't know."* Mary Ann Young an absolutely delightful woman met him and said, "Wait right there", as she raced into Fred Weaver's Office. It was the first time they met. Fred came out immediately and said, "You're interested in a job? "Well yes" Joe said. In those days they needed teachers and they used to run up around New England recruiting people. While all the while he kept looking at these kids. Fred said, "Here"! and handed him his entire ring of keys to the building. "Take a walk around Go anywhere you want. Look where ever you want to go. I'll be busy for about the next half hour and then I'll talk with you when you come back." So that was fine, and meanwhile he was going into closets and all sorts of things. He wasted a half hour and wandered into the teacher's lounge where people said hello to him. He walked out and then went back. They started the interview, and Joe said, *"I really think I'm wasting my time."* These kids are... I went to Chaminade and they were kind of strict, and we wore ties and jackets and these kids are...*"Oh no, no, you don't understand". This is senior dress down day.*" Oh, I said. That explains it because they looked pretty bedraggled, at least compared to my experience in my own high school. So I said, okay, fine. So then we went on into another interview. In that interview present were Dr Scheele, Dr Sachs, Bernie Steeber and Fred Weaver. These are the four guys, and they're sitting there and Joe is answering their questions. Scheele says to Joe, What degree did you graduate with? He said I have a BA in Latin American Studies and Spanish. I have a dual major. "Oh, then "You don't have any Education Credits. His response was "Oh I don't think they're very important,

but I'll be glad to go back and pick up any education credits I need. And with that Scheele turns around and looking directly at Sachs who had his doctorate in Education starts to go "Haw, Haw, Haw", and Joe "Oh, Oh, This is going kind of strangely", Bernie Steeber then says to him – Can you teach a course right now? There again. I'm twenty years old. I can walk on water."Certainly I can teach a course," So the five of us get up and march down the hall and right into some guys classroom and with the teacher still in there, Steeber in his usual imperious way with a wave of his hand bids the teacher to sit down – I don't even know who he was but he was gone by the following year – they give me the book and say carry on from here – just as I realized that it's the subjunctive mood and it's the past subjunctive that has two forms and which is esoteric at the very least. I haven't got the foggiest notion in spite of all my training in teaching the Spanish language I said to myself, I have no idea what this is. So I turned around as blithely as I could and asked the class "Who among you would like to try to explain these forms? So this young girl in the front row waves to get my attention and says, "Oh, I can". *"Well I said, you stand right up here and go over it and we'll be here to help you and if there are any questions we'll go over it all together"*. She did a beautiful job of teaching. It was magnificent. *"they were so impressed because I used the students to actually do it. That's how I got the job"*.

*"That was when I realized that honesty and ignorance pay. I also taught two English Classes that first year."* At that point Joe switched gears and began to speak about his first days classroom teaching in Brentwood. He said, *"It was kind of an interesting first day"* "I came in and the first thing I felt that I needed was some text books." "I walked in and Elvira Rebo was our Department Head and she had replaced a Mrs. Cairns who had been promoted up to Dean of Women but who still taught two Classes. So I walked into the book storeroom and Elvira says, *'There are no more texts. I'm sorry.'* And I said, you mean to say I'm going to have to teach this course without even a text book? and she said, *"Yeah! You'll just have to wing it."*

I'm a first-year teacher, and I haven't the foggiest notion. So then she says, maybe Mrs. Cairns has some. She took a lot of books yesterday. So I go over to Mrs. Cairns and she has got closets full of textbooks. She's been teaching two classes and so I ask her, Do you mind if I take some? *"Absolutely! You should have been here when all the intelligent teachers were here – for goodness sake, I hadn't even been signed on as a teacher in the district yet!"* And with that I was escorted out of the room with the advice – You're on your own."

I still didn't know what I was going to do. I had no textbooks whatever. I started to walk down the hall to the classroom and I figured oh well, what have I got to lose and I had this big smile on my face when I almost walk into this big fellow name of Bill Mayo who was walking next to me. He was a young man who had a family who tragically all died in a house fire later that year, and he turned around, and he said to me, *"Wipe that smile off your face."* and I look at him, and he's a big guy. He says, *"Look kid, you walk in you want to keep a strict demeanor. You can always let up later on. You can't clamp back down once you've set the tone."*

Ok, so I'm a little bit more serious, and I walk into the class and I didn't realize that most of the class were from NYC's 600 schools. Six hundred schools were comprised primarily of kids who were emotionally disturbed, incorrigibles, all sorts of things. Well, we had a few Special Education classes but we didn't have emotionally disturbed groups with truant just yet but there were forty kids in this class.

I asked everybody to please sit down. Anywhere at all would they all please find a seat and sit down? Where ever you want to, would you all please be seated - and one kid doesn't. I just kind of ignored him. Just sit anywhere, and with that he walks up – comes closer and closer

– and I ask myself –What’s going on here? He walks right up to me and bumps me with his chest. He was a pretty big kid, he bumps me with his chest and then he says – “*Make me!*”

Oh Lord, I say to myself. The first moment I’m in the classroom I can’t believe this. Oh well I’m saying to myself. I guess teaching - I’m just not cut out for. This kid is going to have to learn that he can’t challenge people like this. I took a half a step back as if I was giving, and then I just jammed him and pushed him and kind of rapped him one and he sailed across the room hit the back of the wall and sat down on his rump. Well, I said to myself –I guess I’m fired now. He’ll go down to the Office and that will be the end of that. And he stands up and says, Hey! You’re okay! He got up and he sits down. I said to myself, Boy! That’s incredible! And we went on, and we got along. Somebody, I think it was Jack Finan said to me, “*You know you’re going to have to do something. Why don’t you just read them Huck Finn?*” BTW that book was approved of by my Department Head at the time even though it later earned for itself the designation of banned book. She only lasted one year. It was crazy. The whole thing was crazy. My notes were crazy too. Read chapter one, read chapter two..... We went on like this for about three weeks, and we supplemented other things too, because I brought in things from home notes that I had from my own experience. Just reading a book was nuts! But I was developing something, “winging it” basically. But these kids didn’t want to learn anything anyway. Most of them were sleeping in class, but they had home lives that were terrible. The two girls were pregnant by the end of the year, and they just went. They were tough kids that were constantly at war with one another.

In the late fifties, early sixties, Brentwood was just about to experience the explosion of the suburbs, and you were seeing a mix of students that included blue-collar working-class kids and the children of professional people who were serving patients at Pilgrim State Hospital, still the largest institution of its kind in the world. Increase in our population and the demographic mix was incredible. You had African-America kids mostly from an industrial area like that around South Elementary that should never have been a neighborhood school and in fact had come to the attention of the Feds after the Supreme Court Decision in *Brown vs Board of Education* put pressure on the Board in Brentwood to integrate an out of balance demographic in the schools of this community after World War II.

Just about three weeks later in the same classroom the door opens and “Boom,” a guy walks in, and he has the motor cycle jacket and jeans, and he waves this sheet of paper announcing that he’s a “new” student, to which Joe replies – alright – you can put the paper here and take that seat over there. The kid stands there and Joe repeats, “the seat right over there will be fine”, to which he replies “Make Me!”- to which the first kid from Joe’s first encounter whose name was Gerry, says, “Hey You! Me and him have an arrangement. “Oh” the new kid says, “I didn’t know, and sits down as politely as can be”.

In those days we were observed all the time. Administrators came in and would interrupt your classroom. There was no protocol what-so-ever. They would interrupt with the squawk box; ten times in one period. It was unbelievable. This was before the Union; before any kind of rights at all, and they didn’t seem to care or mind. It was as if their job was paramount. Ours was kind of secondary. Put it this way, we were visited so often it didn’t seem strange at all when one day one of the kids came running in. “*Mr. Purcell*” he said, *you’re getting visited this period.*” I didn’t know it of course. Oh, boy, this is quite a group to be visited.” *Oh,” he said.*” *We got a deal worked out with all the kids.*” “*We’re going to raise our right hands if we know the answer. If we don’t know the answer it’s the left hand.* So, I say “Oh, thanks, I guess” And (Fred Weaver)

walks in and we start the lesson. So, Fred sits down, and there are hands going up all over the place. Where is Madagascar? – and some kids forgot which is the right hand and which is the left. So, I'd ask a kid, and he didn't know the answer at all and he'd cringe --- "*Ohhh!* But we had enthusiasm see? When it was all over Fred loved the class participation. I got a beautiful review, and I thought this is Never, Never Land.

I taught English and I taught Spanish, and Bernie Steeber observed me for about twenty straight days in every class that I was in, and he also wanted lesson plans on a minute-by-minute basis. So every minute I had to write down what I was going to do that minute and the next minute and the next minute. And he wanted to follow that all the way down. It was the most rigid kind of plan I have ever had to create. I don't know how I lasted.

Teachers in those days did not last. The turnover was unforgiving from year to year. People would come to the district and after a couple of years of getting their experience and then they would move on to another district. One of the biggest struggles was to get people to remain with us. If you went to ask for help, it too often turned into a betrayal. Even many years later - twenty years later - when members of our staff participated with Dr. Gerry Edwards from Adelphi University, in the University's National Training Institute, learning how to cope in a group situation, Dr Edwards himself said at the end of the ten day workshop that he had never before met with a group of teachers that were so independent minded as the people he had met from Brentwood. The reason why we became that way was because unless we adopted that mind set and became one with family – or we self selected out and moved elsewhere. Part of the culture of Brentwood was created by the amalgam of submergence in all these early experiences going as far back as to the idealism of Modern Times and knowing FIRE of Maslow-Toffler (Faith, Intuition, Reason, Experience). You either drew from within yourself or you were nowhere. You couldn't expect to get help from anyone anywhere. If you went to ask for help it turned into a betrayal. I can remember that I was so upset with my Department Head Bernie Steeber one time. I went to another Department Head in Brentwood in the hope of getting some advice. The only result of that was that he immediately ran to another Department Head and the Principal and said that this teacher was causing problems. I was called down and asked, "What are you doing"- that sort of thing – and I also attended the Teacher Association Meetings in those days. The Teachers Association was dominated by the Administrators and I remember that one Assistant Superintendent used to sit in the back of the room and take down names and what we said. It didn't bother me because I was too young to really be annoyed by it. But I remember one time there was a suggestion that was made, and I thought, this is terrible, I don't remember what it was anymore, but I remember I was appalled by it, and I can remember my fellow teachers shaking their heads while nobody was saying anything. So, I raised my hand and I opposed it. I was called down to the Superintendent's Office the very next day and warned if you do this again you will find yourself in over your head. Think twice the next time or you won't remain here or we'll bring charges against you. Faculty meetings were a regular occurrence, and they would last hours. Meetings would be called at least three times a week, and Fred would talk literally from about 2 pm until 6 pm non-stop. And most of it was a repeat of a message that he had put in your box. So it got to the point where people would come in, see the message and throw it right in the trash because they knew they would have a meeting that afternoon and repeat everything that was in the message. There was no point in wasting your time twice.

I was in the Ross Building most of my years until the library was consolidated. I was here five years and decided at the end of the fifth year there were three things that came along simultaneously. One, was to leave teaching entirely, and Ray Fournier and Vincent Presno were

two fellows that had moved out of the teaching ranks and were now Administrators, and Ray in particular had asked me if I would be willing to join him for a year in developing something in association with a Ford Foundation Grant that the district had received. I felt that was a very short-term kind of a thing, and I really didn't see any future in it for myself. So I said no.

Meanwhile Bernie Steeber had left the district and returned. I had been teaching full time language, and then Bernie came back and walked in and as was his prerogative took all the very best students for himself from every language class and put them into his class, and every language teacher said he took all the best kids. The end of the year of course what Bernie would do is that he would compare his record with your record in the Regents, and then he would berate you for not having done as well with your students as he had with his having already cherry picked the best students available to him. At the same time, they cut down on the number of Spanish classes I had, and in the middle of the year Bernie took two classes, and I was left with three they decided to create two new English Classes and I would get them. Next they spoke to the English teachers and they said we want you to pick any three students from your classes and give them to Joe. Well you can image the class that I ended up with. Every one of those kids was a "Class A" and had all sorts of problems. They were incredibly difficult classes. Actually because of my youth and enthusiasm, but we got through it and then at the end of the year Bernie offered me a full-time job teaching Spanish in the Junior Highs and Bill Greany. Those two 'off the wall' English classes that I had – I brought them down into the library because I found out that they had absolutely no ability to do any kind of research. They had no familiarity at all with culture or looking things up. So we did an exercise in using reference material. I was always interested in the library – I felt that this was the key to education. I finally had definitively decided that the teacher in a box with thirty students is not education. It's a training program that makes it easy for administrators to say, I know exactly where your children are, they're right here and this is what they're learning and we have it all boxed up for you so that nobody can complain. But real education doesn't take place there and every teacher knows it. In fact your brightest students learn in spite of us. I can remember I had two extremely bright students, in a Spanish Class I had the first or second year. Jef Raskin (He was the older brother) later on went on to become a power in the emerging computer field. He earned the title of 'Father of the Macintosh' computer. He used to come in and say, "You know Mr. Purcell I really know the Spanish. I really don't want to participate. I have important things to do but I'll join in if I see I can be of help but otherwise I have much more important things to read and to complete. He would sit there and read the NEW YORK TIMES or some esoteric mathematical article but I felt that this was fine. He wanted to know everything He always wanted to participate because bright kids always do. He always had his ear open and knew what was going on. Well, one day an administrator was passing by and looked in the window and said. No! We can't have this. Suppose a Board Member or visitor from the State Department were to see a student reading the newspaper in class instead of paying attention to the teacher in front of the room? What's the difference? Joe asked. Tell them that's just the way it is.

What did he miss most? The kids. It's funny. You have this peculiar relationship to kids. I enjoy kids. I have five of my own and they force you to rethink everything all the time. They do not allow you to get in a rut with your thinking and all of us come from certain influences whether they be ethnic or generational or whatever you want to talk about you come with certain set ideas and then you spread these ideas out and the kid immediately stands up and says, "No! That's false or, I don't believe that." It forces you to pause and ask - "Well, where are you coming from? And you find out the kid is coming from an area that in many cases --- I like to think of myself as a person who tries to encompass most every kind of thought and think about it

but kids always come up with new things, new ideas, new challenges and answering those new ideas and challenges and trying to reconfigure your whole thinking – now kids aren't always right, of course not, but that's not the point. The point is – they have a different perspective, they're coming from a different place and you should be aware of it.

Where I see the greatest contrast is where I see my generation, the kids I grew up with in my own neighborhood all became fairly successful and they of course had their own teenagers and talking to them when we all got together, it's like – “ugh—I don't understand this kid, they were all screaming and yelling, I don't know where he's coming from”—of course not, because during the day these guys only talk to other men who essentially share their point of view. Here in education we don't have that handicap. Therefore, you are constantly revising it and I can find it easier to deal with my own kid – except with the last one, you get a little arrogant because after the first four I really thought I had learned how parenting went knowing how they all caused a little bit of a problem. Then I really thought I had it down pat until the last guy threw a bit of a curve ball. He was an Honors Student at one point and then decided after two years he was going to quit school. Well, I went bananas. This was nonsensical. I went in and talked to an Educator – I spoke with a Guidance Counselor. He said, *“You know? You're too close to it. I came from a family of achievers and I'm the youngest one. My family fought me. I didn't go back to school until I was twenty-six years old.”* He said *I'm going to tell you something that is very hard. You're going to ignore this kid. You're going to let him say and do anything he wants. He's a good kid. He's not going to go off the wall. He's a bright kid. He's not going to do anything strange*”. But my son really thought he was going to be Vice President of something within six months, that sort of thing, and he had some bad experiences with employers; gypping him out of money and he had realized that the world at large out there did not think of morality in the same way that he did. I kept my mouth shut. I'd say hello to him. We had cordial relationship by that time. He'd been out of school about five months. It was almost May when he came in one day as I was sitting and reading the paper when he came in looked me right in the eye and said, *“pretty stupid, huh? I said Oh Lord! Keep me quiet.”* Now I'm stupid?” *“Oh no, Dad,”* he said. *“Not you. Me.”* *“I'm going to go back to school.”* I didn't say a word. If that's what you want, that's what you'll do.” He did go back to school, he went on to college. He did well; is doing fine and it was always his time table, and not mine.

I don't miss the stress of every day that a teacher has put on them. That stress is extremely high. You never know where it's going to come from. You begin to become very wary of parents. Kids accuse you of doing things that aren't possible I remember in one year a student came in and he got into trouble in the library and he was behaving very poorly. He came out and the first thing he said to the Administrator was “This guy called me a bad name and he referred to my ethnicity and called me a bad name and he cursed at me and that's why I got angry with him. The administrator immediately called me and said, *“You're going to have to come down here and defend yourself.”* “Defend myself? The accusation is completely untrue.” “Well, we're bringing the parent in here and you're going to have to defend yourself.” Oh, I said to myself. This is great. I have only a couple of years to go and I have to defend myself?” This could be ridiculous. So I walk in to this so called meeting and see a woman there who could be about forty years old. I had had her as a student back in a Spanish Class. So I said Olga – How are you? It's great to see you. She said to me, *“Oh, we're waiting here for a teacher to come down. “It's me.”* She said, *“It's you? Not only were you a great teacher, but I enjoyed you very much. You got me a job after this. Do you remember that?”* Well yeah, kind of vaguely. Did it work out? *“It certainly did. I'm the aunt of this boy over here. Is he accusing you of doing this?”* So by this time the kid is really shaken now. *“Well, he may not have said all of those things”*, he said – *“He*

*didn't say any of those things", Olga said. "Well now suddenly the Administrator says, "well you see, now that's fine". But until then you had the distinct impression that the Administrator was not going to be supportive of you at all. – he was not going to be in my corner." And this is constantly the situation. It was rare going into a meeting like that that you felt that the Administrator was on your side.*

Of course Administrators had their own problems too. They are the least protected people on staff and are caught in the squeeze too. They are the least protected people, at least the building administrators, in the District. The nicest thing that happens though every once in a while, you'll be walking in a mall or some other place and some grown person will take me aside and say, *"Hey, do you remember me? I did so and so and you did this – Thank You!"* It doesn't happen very often. It might happen once every six months or so. In the library you met a great many kids. You might not have had as close a relationship with them as you would in a classroom but frequently it came at a crisis in their lives. They had to get a report in or they had to get certain types of information and therefore they will remember you because you satisfied a crisis need and frequently you wouldn't see the kid again. Ahh, but he'd remember you. And it would be difficult sometimes when I'd meet these people, and they had children with them. Oh this was my HS librarian, and I couldn't remember their name, The outside world sometimes thinks of teacher's as being sort of monolithic, they all think the same way. That certainly wasn't my experience here where people thought in every conceivable direction. And that was very stimulating to me. I enjoyed that very much.

As an educator it's good to get rid of your idealism as quickly as possible and get real. And that means being completely honest with yourself. You have to be willing to do the things that are necessary so that the student benefits by your presence. That doesn't mean that you're not idealistic. You don't react to things in an idealistic way. You react to them in a realistic way. You must always take into account all the pressures that are on all these other people and thereby deal with the whole real world. Too frequently very young teachers deal with the world in such an idealistic way that they don't come up with real solutions to real problems.

*"Do very young teachers expect too much when they first enter the field?"* Yes, I think that's part of it, because they really do think they are going to change the world. They're not going to change the world, but – on the other hand when the dissolution sets in, that's not correct either. We are actually all influencing a great many more kids in a very positive way and in ways that you can't necessarily quantify. You don't even realize you're doing it until much later when the people are old enough to come back. It's like I used to say to my own children in their early teens, when they'd say, I want to do this or I hate you! And I'd say to them. I really don't care if you hate me now. I will however, be extremely concerned if at the age of thirty-five you say you hate me. When you're an adult and if you still hate me that's when I'll know I did a bad job. In the process you are changing yourself and you are also changing the world. Exactly! Exactly! It's a process too and you have to recognize it as a process,

Joe, thank you so much for being with us.