

Teacher Stories

Everyone Has One. What's Yours?

Teacher Story Podcast Episode

Interviewee: Don Dumas

History Teacher, Bonita Vista High School in Chula Vista, California

Interviewer: Ken Futernick, Founder and Host of Teacher Stories

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Ken Futernick:

Hi, everybody. This is Ken Futernick, your host with another episode of Teacher Stories. Today my guest is Don Dumas, who is now a high school teacher, but someone who had a pretty remarkable and challenging set of experiences growing up and as a student himself. He was recently honored as one of five teachers of the year in San Diego in the 2019-20 school year. Don, welcome to Teacher Stories.

Don Dumas:

Thank you, Ken. I'm happy to be here.

Ken Futernick:

Don, before we talk a bit about growing up and your path to becoming an educator, please tell our listeners where and what you teach.

Don Dumas:

I teach AP US History and US History at Bonita Vista High School in Chula Vista, California, which is in San Diego County.

Ken Futernick:

Seems to me based on our prior conversations and an article I read about your approach to teaching now, that the experience you had as a student yourself is not exactly what you would want for your students. Talk a bit about what it was like growing up and being a student in school yourself.

Don Dumas:

Okay. Yeah. I didn't have a great time in school, particularly high school. It was a place where I didn't feel like I mattered too much. The curriculum wasn't exactly geared towards people of my background and experiences. Many times I always felt that the knowledge and experience that I brought to the classroom was not valued. And so my experiences in school was definitely more of... I was kicking and screaming my way towards graduation, lashing out, not really learning anything that I thought was valuable. And I felt like school was trying to change me from who I was and force me to sort of conform to perhaps some ideals that I didn't have, that I didn't share.

Ken Futernick:

When we spoke before you mentioned something about feeling that the school experience was kind of fake and that you felt invisible in that environment.

Don Dumas:

Yes. What I mean by fake is that, it seemed to me that school didn't really serve to help students solve any of their own problems. School wasn't designed to help students realize their own aspirations, and instead it seemed to serve to try to make us conform to a value set that they valued, hyper competitiveness. Of course, we're reading Shakespeare and we are reading F. Scott Fitzgerald, it's a bunch of brown faces in the class and we're just like, "We're not responding to this." So that's what I mean by school being fake. A lot of us were from economically disadvantaged homes and maybe even single parent homes and maybe... But school didn't seem to want to address any of those things. It just wanted us to learn Moby Dick, and I guess like fit that mold. And so, we didn't... Well, I'll speak for myself. I didn't really respond well to that.

Ken Futernick:

So, I want to hear, and I think our listeners will really enjoy hearing about what you try to do as a teacher now. And I'm sure not making the school experience fake, but making it authentic for your students, and we'll get to that in a minute. But was there a teacher that you had along the way that made a positive difference for you that made schoolwork a little bit better for you?

Don Dumas:

Absolutely. Her name was Joyce Suber and she taught AVID and she taught English and I was fortunate to be placed in her class in ninth grade. She was forced to teach us the standard sort of texts in English. But she knew that those things weren't reaching me in particular, and so she would pull me to the side and say, "Listen, this is the game. This is the way it is and for you to succeed...you're going to have to succeed in this arena that you don't like being in. But use that as a means for your own elevation and your own self-realization for who you are and who you want to be." And so she would give me books that the rest of the class didn't read to make me and my experiences feel valued and relevant and important and something that I could build upon.

This is in the '90s, and of course this was a time of intense gang activity. The drug war was really in full swing, and so those sorts of things affected us outside of the school, maybe even inside the school sometimes. She gave me the Autobiography of Malcolm X, such an important work that every American should read, really. She gave me Manchild in the Promised Land by Claude Brown. She tried to feed that curiosity, that hunger that I had, that where she knew that Shakespeare wasn't going to do it. So, she tried to keep me engaged with other things to read and keep my mind growing in that way. So, Ms. Suber was a fantastic educator and I'll always love her for taking an interest in my development.

Ken Futernick:

Did you have a chance to talk with her about those books that you were reading, and did other students in your class also have an opportunity to read some of those same books?

Don Dumas:

Well, some of them did, not in my class. I went to a school that was probably 90% Hispanic and maybe 2% Black, and so there were very few Black classmates. At a school that might've been lucky to have, I mean, maybe 70, 80 Black kids period, and Ms. Suber being one of the few Black teachers, of course. So being in her class, there wasn't any other Black people in that class. I mean, she had other Black people like in other periods, but that's just the way it was. But after the fact, I learned from other friends say, "Oh yeah, Ms. Suber did that for me too." "Ms. Suber did that for me too." And so I know that she did those things just not to the same kids in my class.

Ken Futernick:

Did you ever have a chance to say something to her about some words of gratitude or later reconnect with her and let her know what an important difference she made in your life?

Don Dumas:

Yes. When she retired, her daughter reached out to some former students of hers, including me. And by that time I was a teacher already. I hadn't won Teacher of the Year or anything like that yet, but I was a teacher and was asked if I would say a few words at her retirement party, so of course I jumped at that

opportunity. And so I went to her retirement party and I was able to thank her and tell her all that she meant to me and so many others and tell her about how I still had that copy of Malcolm X's autobiography that she gave me. I mean, the exact copy that still had the school's library stamp on it. You know what I mean? Like I kept that. I still have that book.

Ken Futernick:

Wow.

Don Dumas:

This is like 25 years later now. But yes, I still have that book. So, I was able to thank her and that was one of my greatest memories as a teacher, being able to express my gratitude to her at her party. It was great.

Ken Futernick:

So, you had a pretty difficult time as a student. You had this really terrific experience with Ms. Suber, and then you decide to become an educator at some point, and we're going to talk about that. But did Ms. Suber have something to do with that? Did she inspire you in some way to think that the difference she made in your life as something you might be able to emulate yourself for other students?

Don Dumas:

Well, my experience being a student of Ms. Suber certainly has helped guide my professional practice as an educator, but I did not decide to become a teacher in order to walk in Ms. Suber's footsteps. When she was teaching me, I had no interest whatsoever in being a teacher. When I left high school, I had no interest whatsoever in being a teacher. And even when I started college, I wasn't so sure that I was going to be a teacher as well. But once I became one, I certainly have tried to take the wisdom imparted on me by Ms. Suber and pass that on to my students.

Most importantly, Ms. Suber's...her belief in all of her students. She never gave up on any of us. And we are in there, we're getting suspended, expelled. Myself I even went to Juvenile Hall. We're getting arrested, all kinds of things, but she never quit on us. She never let us believe that we couldn't achieve more and do more than what our circumstances may have dictated to us. So, I try to do that myself. I'll look at a kid and I don't care what that kid's GPA is, I don't care what that kid's background is, I see potential in every single student no matter how they're performing in any given moment, or anything else. Any other misfortune they may have, I always believe that a student, every student can make it.

Ken Futernick:

Don, one of the themes that's emerged from my interviews with really great teachers or people telling stories about great teachers, is that these teachers care deeply about their students. And I mentioned that to a writer named Alfie Kohn, who's written a lot about teaching and learning. I asked him what he thought were the characteristics of a great teacher, and I mentioned this theme about teachers who deeply care about their students. He says not only that they care unconditionally about all of their students. And I hear you saying that, and it's something that she did for you, Ms. Suber, and is something that you're doing that regardless of their behavior, regardless of their life experience, regardless of their academic standing, or maybe because of those things, there is a deep commitment to paying attention to them and making sure that they are not invisible. And that sounds like what your

experience was with at least this one teacher and it's what you're committed to doing as a teacher yourself.

Don Dumas:

Absolutely. Right. That's a good way of putting it. That sort of unconditional support and belief and care for your students. She certainly cared about us. I have a friend, dear friend of mine, we're still very close friends. He was a year behind me in school, because I know we were teammates and everything. He had Ms. Suber. He wanted to stay playing ball at our school and his mom moved away and Ms. Suber took him into her home so that he could stay at our school, and she clothed, fed and housed him for his senior year so that he didn't have to leave. And so that's the kind of woman that Ms. Suber was. She just would do anything for her students.

Ken Futernick:

I'm sure you've run into colleagues who have a different attitude, and I certainly have in my work as an educator working in lots of different schools and particularly schools some in LA that were really struggling and I have encountered teachers more so at the high school level, who had this idea that my job is to come and teach. That if students want to show up and learn, great, if they don't, I really don't want them in my class, and I don't have any time for them. I am committed to those who want to be there to learn, but it's not my job to babysit, to pay attention and go out of my way and spend extraordinary amounts of time with people who aren't really there to learn, or worse who want to disrupt my class. I suspect you've run into that and I wonder if you have thoughts on what you would say to a teacher that had a point of view like that.

Don Dumas:

Yes. I've had many teachers when I was a student that felt that way. And as a teacher now, I have colleagues that have expressed ideas like that. I would say that they are wrong, and this is my point that I make to them. You're not teaching a subject, you're teaching people. So, no matter how important you think it is that your students learn how to properly conjugate a verb in Spanish or learn what whatever biology or history such as myself that I teach, that really is secondary. First, your job is to teach these people how to recognize within themselves their own potential. I think that's our number one job no matter what our subject is. And there are so many different avenues to do that.

For some students, it is the academic work, that sitting in the library, hitting the stacks. For them, that's enough. That's all they need, but there are many students that need so much more than that. They need to feel validated and important because in many cases, they're not getting that anywhere else. And so, I would say it is our job to motivate. That's our most important job, I would think. It's to make that human connection with the students no matter how it is. I teach history. Of course, that's not a very popular subject when the kids come in on the first day. By the end of the year, I hope to convert many of them over to loving history, but I tell myself most importantly is that, I have to make a connection with the students. And if I could do that through history, that's great. If I could do it through sports, if I can do it through video games, if I can do it through music, if I can do it through in whatever way, that's my goal, is to make that human connection. Once we have the human connection. Well, now maybe they'll care what I have to say about history. So, I totally disagree with those teachers.

Ken Futernick:

Don, I'm going to ask you in a moment to talk about your approach to teaching history, but can you recall a story about a connection you've made with a student you've had recently where the last thing they were interested in was history. Maybe a story similar to your own story about being a student, but just a story that you recall about a connection that you made with a student too probably didn't want to be in your class in the first place.

Don Dumas:

Yeah, sure. Well, I had a kid and in a World History course whose father had recently been locked up within the last year. This kid was kind of going on that wrong path and he needed an adult male to connect with. In San Diego, there's a park called Chicano Park. It's a historical landmark in our city, but they have these handball courts. So, me and this student got to talk and he was talking to me, "Hey, Mr. Dumas, you ever play handball?" And I haven't. Now that's a big game amongst the Latinx community, the handball. I've never played handball, but he was like, "Oh, you know there's this tournament over at Chicano Park." He's like, "Yeah, I play a little bit, but I'm not very good. And you know it costs 25 bucks to get in or whatever." So, we're just talking about it and then it's a Doubles though. It's Doubles Tournament. So, I said, "Oh, you want to play in the tournament?" And he's like, "Yeah, but I don't got the entry fee and all this. But I'll tell you what, man, me and you we'll both play in it." And so, I said, "But I've never played so you got to teach me." So, he was like, "Okay, cool." So, I said, "All right. We have like two months to prepare for this tournament." And I know, I have this '78 Cadillac right, like my little custom dream car or whatever. I knew he would dig the car and I said, "I'm going to pick you up on Saturday and we're going to go practice."

So for about six straight Saturdays, I picked him up in my Cadillac and we drove down to these handball courts and we practiced and he taught me the game. So, we go to this handball tournament, and this is big thing, they have the barbecue out and they're serving carne asada and you get these t-shirts and all that for participating. And so we went and we played and...I wish I could tell you that we won a game or two, but we didn't. We were out in the first round, but nevertheless, we had a great time leading up to that tournament and then being at Chicano Park and eating the carne asada and playing in this handball tournament. It was great.

I just wanted to be there for that kid and all the stuff that he was going through. I got my t-shirt and I took it to the classroom, and I pinned it up in the classroom. And so he comes in that Monday, he's like, "Oh, yeah." And he's telling everybody in the class, "Me and Mr. Dumas played in that tournament." Pointing to the shirt. Now, that was about eight years ago, probably. And so now that guy, he's a contractor. He's gone past high school. He has a wife and kids and we're Facebook friends. He's doing well and I like to think that I helped him through a difficult time in his life.

Ken Futernick:

So Don, talk a little bit about your approach to teaching history. I gather it wasn't at all like what you experienced as a student when you were learning history, except maybe from Ms. Suber. I'm not sure if she taught history, but talk a bit about your approach to teaching history. And as you alluded to the fact that it's maybe hard to win some students over when they think, "Oh, I've got to take US History. That's not something I'm looking forward to." But I think you do something that's probably different. Talk a little bit about your approach.

Don Dumas:

Yeah. I've always liked history even when the only history I was taught was the history of dead, rich White guys. Personally, I still liked it. I was always fascinated by it. But I wasn't exposed when I was in high school to any other historical perspectives beyond the standard textbook version of history, and so I didn't know. I liked history, but I didn't know the power that history had until I was long gone from high school when I was exposed to Howard Zinn's book, A People's History of the United States. That was really the first history book that I read that wasn't the standard textbook. I had a co-worker that was in college, I was not, and that book was assigned to him and so he brought it to work to read during the downtimes, and I started reading the book because it was just sitting there on the counter.

I mean, totally, I was just couldn't believe what I was reading because I had never read history that actually cared to talk about the perspective of Native Americans against the oncoming Spanish and French and English settlers. I had never read anything really about the experience of slavery from the eyes of the enslaved. And so, this was like my first exposure that people other than dead, rich White guys make history, or are historically noteworthy or worth learning about.

And so, once I read that book, I had to get more. I had to get my hands on more and more perspectives. That's what I did, and so I decided to major in history. I decided to go to school. I read that book and then I also read while I was in college, we were assigned Lies My Teacher Told Me by James Loewen. So then that said it right there, I was going to teach history. I had Zinn's book, I had a James Loewen's book and I decided that because those books and many others opened my eyes to the way that the United States was shaped. It's exploitive. It exploits the land, it exploits people. That's what this capitalist democracy does. For me, once I learned that this is not an accident. That so few people hold so much wealth and such a large group of people don't have a lot of the same opportunities as others, once I learned that that was kind of by design, I wanted to learn more and more about it. And so history to me, it empowered me to resist the station in which I was born and to overcome the hurdles that had been placed in my way.

And so, it was very empowering to me to read about abolitionists, to read about civil rights workers. And not Dr. King only; we always learn about these top-down heroes, but there's so many other people that put in the work to make change. So as I learned more and more about these people, that's the kind of history that I want to impart on my students. A history that is going to empower them to overcome the obstacles in the system that they are forced to live in that makes their success extremely difficult. And so history to me was so empowering, and that's the way I try to teach it as well. I try to use it to empower students.

Ken Futernick:

I wonder what your students think about history as they experience it in your classroom. What feedback, what sense do you get from your students about the history that you teach to them?

Don Dumas:

I overwhelmingly get positive reviews from students by the end of the year. Whether it's teacher appreciation week in the spring or just the end of the year finals week, kids will drop off cards or letters or notes to me or in my mailbox saying how much they appreciate me teaching them about so much more than just the standard textbook. I mean, I use that textbook as a tool to rebel against really, for my students. But they tell me that... For example, there's a high Filipino population in my class and so we

will talk about the Filipino experience under Spanish colonialism, and then later under US colonialism, and what the Filipinos did during World War II for the allies and thereafter.

We talk about the Spanish American war and the psychological effects of being a colonized people, which of course, it's not just in the Filipino experience, it's in everyone, but we use that as sort of like a jumping off point. I have Filipino students telling me, "Oh, my gosh, my grandmother tells me stories about this and it's just so nice to have that be validated here in your class." And so, giving those students an opportunity to bring in their own family histories and stories, and to validate what they've been told at home, I mean, you can't really put a price tag on that. It means so much to students. Particularly to students of color, to have their perspective featured in the class.

And not just a small little paragraph as you blow right by that and then continue to heap praise on. Someone like McKinley or before him Polk, or before that Jackson. It's important to talk about those American heroes that are... We give credit for the expansion of the America empire, although some people wouldn't even like to use the word empire. But to teach about the other people those that expansion either deprives them of their life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. It means a lot to the students. And I end up converting many of them to liking history. I can't say they all decide to major in it, but they definitely have another more of an appreciation for it.

Ken Futernick:

Don, I want to ask you about getting this award as Teacher of the Year, one of five in San Diego County last year, and what that meant to you and what happened when you got the award.

Don Dumas:

There's of course, I don't know, 20,000 maybe even more teachers in San Diego County. So, to be nominated was already quite the accomplishment. So once I'm down to the final 40 or so, part of the process is they ask you, "What would you do if you were awarded San Diego County Teacher of the Year and now you're on this big stage and you have this voice that people will listen to, what would you do with that voice?" One of the things that I mentioned to them was my interest in recruiting more people to this profession. Particularly more Black indigenous and people of color to this profession, because students of all colors, we know the Black and indigenous and people of color students are going to benefit from having a teacher that looks like them.

But even White students are going to benefit tremendously from having a different perspective. From having someone standing in front of them as an expert in a particular field and as someone to encourage and inspire them. It's important for our students to have their teachers be from all these different backgrounds and ethnicities that we have in our society. As it stands now, I believe it's somewhere around 75% of teachers in America are White women, and God bless them for joining this profession, but I think our schools and all of our students' experiences will be enriched if we had more Black, indigenous and other teachers of color. So that's something that I hope to do in the future. Spend a lot more time recruiting people to become teachers.

Ken Futernick:

Don, in my previous work with the California State University, I was headed up a recruitment effort and one of the things that we really focused on was recruiting teachers of color and particularly Black

teachers. They are really underrepresented in our schools. The numbers of Black teachers coming into the profession, particularly Black males, is far fewer proportionally than the number of Black children in our schools. Do you have any thoughts about why it's so difficult to recruit Black students into the profession?

Don Dumas:

Well, I think the Black students hear the same things that everyone else hears about teaching. They hear the pay is bad, they hear the horror stories of troublesome students making life difficult, and so ultimately... Obviously one of the ways that you can increase interest in the profession of course is higher pay. I mean, there's no doubt about that. But the pay, I don't think people understand. I mean, it varies by district. But the pay isn't that bad. I mean, I'm doing okay. My wife she's also a teacher. We own a nice home in San Diego, and so we're doing all right. So, there's that. There's the pay and there's a horror stories about the teachers.

But I wish I had more answers as to how we can get more Black teachers. But I think one of the things we have to do is really emphasize how this work is... It's so beneficial to the community. So, we have to talk about how this is a... It's almost like a rebellion in a sense. It's like getting paid to be an activist in a way. I think that's one of the things that we should focus on when we're trying to recruit Black people, is that being a Black teacher it's like walking side by side with Bayard Rustin or with Dr. King or with... I mean, you are mobilizing your community to achieve and you're doing it day in and day out, and you're getting paid for it. It's not volunteer work that you have to do outside of your normal job.

And so, I think that's one of the things. Because, I don't know, I'm sure you've heard this, but there's whispers in the Black community, not even whispers necessarily though, about how schools don't serve our kids, and that we send our kids to school, to learn to worship and value White people and their experiences. And so, me being in the building it's like a counterweight to that, and so that's one of the things I think we should emphasize. It's like, "Hey, if we want our schools to serve our kids, we got to get more of us in our schools. And addition you're going to get a pay raise." That's how I would do it.

Ken Futernick:

Well, thanks for those comments about that. I'm hoping that this Teacher Story along with some others where people have expressed similar thoughts about the importance of a more diverse teacher workforce, I think hopefully if these stories are heard by people that are thinking about what they want to do, and a question I would often ask undergraduates is, What mark do you want to leave on this world? And I find for many of them, it's not a question they've been asked before. They don't think about it. It's sort of what am I going to do when I graduate and what sort of lifestyle do I want. But actually, many undergraduates really do care about their communities. They really do want to make a difference. And perhaps now more than ever people are concerned about what sort of world we live in and how can I make a difference? There are a lot of ways to make a difference, but none more powerful potentially than becoming a classroom teacher. And I think your story and those of many others illustrate why that's true. So I just want to thank you for sharing your thoughts about that.

Don Dumas:

As I said, Ms. Suber, she's Black and so... If I would just have a White woman for my English teacher, I don't think I'd be here. I really don't. You're almost like Harriet Tubman, going back into the wilderness and saving people, one, two, 30 at a time in your classroom. That's the way I look at it, and so it's very

important. It's important to us. And then you may have seen like Twitter trends or something on Instagram where people will say, "How old were you when you had your first Black teacher?" And there are so many responses, "I've never had one, I've never had one, not until college, not until college or not until senior in high school." And so that's problematic and it's not just problematic for Black kids, as I said, I think it's problematic for our entire society that we don't... So many White kids never had a Black teacher. That's a problem, I think.

Ken Futernick:

Listen, Don, I really want to thank you for being my guest on Teacher Stories and for sharing your stories about your life, both as a student and now as a teacher. Teacher Stories listeners we invite you to share the stories that you might have to share about the teachers that you've had, and you can do that on teacherstories.org. And if there are teachers you want to thank for something they did for you, you can also do that by submitting a written appreciation to them on our teacher appreciation webpage. And if you include the email address for these teachers, we'll notify them about your notes of gratitude. Once again, Don, thanks for being part of Teacher Stories, and listeners, thanks for joining us today to hear about Don's teacher story. Be well, everyone.