As part of our year-long celebration of NYSTRS’ 100th anniversary, we have been gathering stories, reflections and photos from our members about their teaching careers. Here is our second installment for your enjoyment!

Visit NYSTRS.org/100 for more issues of NYSTRS Centennial Stories and information about our centennial.

Emma Spruill-Howard

“I became a teacher because I was surrounded by teachers. My mother and my four aunts were teachers. Even when I wasn’t old enough to attend school, my mother and aunts took me to school with them. I looked up to my mother and aunts as role models and wanted to follow in their footsteps to impact the lives of young children.

I would advise new teachers to have a love for all children. They should know that students are not adults but are adolescents who experience four major types of changes: physical, intellectual, emotional and social.

If a child misbehaved in class, I would advise the teacher to speak to the child in private – not in front of his or her peers. If the problem persisted, I would contact the child’s parent. Teachers should respect their students at all times, and students should always respect their teachers.”

Emma Spruill-Howard taught home economics for 28 years in Brentwood schools before retiring in 1991.

Linda Little

“My husband, Paul, and I started teaching in 1965. He taught science 9 and went on to teach earth science and biology. I taught fourth and sixth grades and then substituted while caring for our four children. We both have two early memories that are truly history now!!

The attendance register! What a nightmare! I only remember using blue ink and red ink and two columns had to agree!! We had to fill it out maybe four times during the year. I’m not sure when that was eliminated but it was sheer torture!

The mimeograph machine! I think we only had one for all the teachers in our small school and maybe one in the main office. The purple/blue ink got all over everything – hands, clothes, etc. And what a unique odor!!

Linda Little retired in 1998 from Johnsburg Central Schools.
Nilda Carmona-Rivera

“Since I was a young child, I played being a teacher. As I grew up, I maintained that passion and decided to go to college to get my teaching degree.

I enjoyed working with early childhood children the most because it was amazing to see how much they progressed and began using the skills and knowledge they had acquired throughout the year. And, as a bilingual education teacher, seeing students learn in two languages was incredible.

But I most loved seeing their joy while we played, painted, and more!”

Nilda Carmona-Rivera retired in 2019 after working 30 years as a bilingual kindergarten teacher in the Rochester City School District.

Ann Katsaros

“After a 10-year marriage and four sons, I decided to return to college to obtain my bachelor’s and master’s degrees and become a teacher.

I did my student teaching at the location closest to my home so I could be there when my children returned from school. This facility was Eastern Suffolk BOCES, which served students with learning disabilities in elementary school. This was the best decision that I made!

After my student teaching, I was hired at BOCES as a teacher assistant and a year later as a teacher for students with emotional disturbances. I later had a class of students with Tourette Syndrome in the first program devoted specifically to these students in New York state.

In the last 10 years of my career, I became a curriculum teacher. In this position, I was able to share my expertise with my colleagues by creating and teaching professional staff development workshops, conducting research, and seeking grants for much-needed resources.

I’ve always enjoyed teaching and found my niche with BOCES. I was given the opportunity to teach both children and adults, the best job I ever had.

One very proud experience I had was with a student named Nick, who was very interested in meteorology. I made him our weatherman who informed his classmates about the daily temperature, barometric pressure, fronts, etc. Nick went on to graduate from a very well-known university with a Ph.D. in meteorology! He sent me an email and thanked me for my earlier support in his education.

My advice to new teachers is to become a life-long learner and to always dedicate yourself to enabling your students to reach their full potential. Some of my worst behaved students became my best students after giving them my support and encouragement.

I’m not saying that it’s an easy job, but it can be the most important and most rewarding job to ever have!”

Ann Katsaros was a special education teacher and curriculum teacher for 25 years at the Eastern Suffolk BOCES. She also taught at Dowling College and SUNY Stony Brook. She now teaches painting to children and adults.
Mary Humphrey

“Teaching is in my genes. My mother was a teacher. My second great-grandmother, Ann P. Dickinson (a cousin of poet Emily Dickinson), was a teacher in New York state.

My teaching experience began in Charleston, S.C., in 1970 while my husband was stationed there in the military. For my first job I was hired to teach reading in a segregated elementary school in the deep South in slowly dying Jim Crow days. I was one of three white teachers in the school and all of our students were Black.

Our school was very impoverished, lacking the basic amenities, such as new textbooks and writing materials. Our building was very basic—walls were cinderblock, light bulbs hung from ceiling cords, classrooms were unpainted. We had no playground for the children and the neighboring hogs roamed wild across the schoolyard.

The most significant event came the following year when President Richard Nixon ordered the Southern schools to integrate. Under forced integration, the school gained a few more white teachers, but white parents would not send their children to our school and enrolled them in private schools.

This first integration attempt failed. I taught in a very racially hostile environment, and the following school year the newly hired white teachers fled for better jobs. I returned with the original staff I taught with in my first year and continued as best as I could. Due to a federal wage freeze, as a Title I teacher I received no wage increases from 1970-1973. My annual salary for each year was $5,900.

I later moved to New York state where I worked as a school librarian in Rochester and a teacher in the Clyde-Savannah and West Genesee school districts.

I went back to my first teaching assignment, Jennie Moore Elementary, in 2006 while on vacation in Charleston. It was a successfully integrated school then with a high performance rating. Over these many years, great improvement has been accomplished. When I was there in 1970, my classroom was a mobile trailer unit.”

Mary Humphrey retired in 2009 from the West Genesee school district. She lives in Oregon and now spends her time gardening, doing volunteer work and traveling.

Kermit Ackley

“In June 1968, I graduated from SUNY Brockport with one of the worst student teaching recommendations in history. My college adviser said I would never make it as a teacher, and I had to do a punishment assignment. Show up on the SUNY campus school for one class at 8 a.m. and, if I missed a day, I would fail student teaching. (It didn’t matter what or how I did there.)

In July 1968, I was hired to teach seventh and eighth grade social studies and science at the Meco Union Free School by a person who had just been fired by the board. (I was his act of revenge on the school.)

In 1969, Meco was annexed by the Gloversville Enlarged School District and I came with it. At this point in my life I was just happy to have a job which didn’t pay minimum wage. However, this inauspicious start soon turned into a long and fulfilling career.

In 2008, I retired after 40 years of successfully teaching seventh grade social studies and having people acknowledge my efforts.”

Kermit Ackley retired from the Gloversville school district and now enjoys spending time with his granddaughter and traveling.
Debby Loucks

“I never intended to go into teaching. I was going to be a psychologist. But after my bachelor’s degree, I ended up working for an institution for special needs students. I worked with autistic students and found I really enjoyed it.

One of the most significant events in education was at the beginning of my career. They were just starting to bring autistic students out of institutions and private schools.

I applied to teach in one of the first public school autistic programs in the country. I got hired, and the teachers wrote the curriculum. Then I went back to grad school and got my certification.

I taught at Mill Road Elementary and Red Hook High School in Red Hook, N.Y., as well as at BOCES and a private school in Kingston, N.Y. I also taught in Virginia and Pennsylvania.

My teaching career changed so much over the years. Initially our classes were segregated in one wing of the school, and we ate lunch alone in the cafeteria with our students. We had time-out spaces in our rooms. Only a few of the teachers in the school wanted to associate with me or my students. It was a very difficult and awkward time.

One year I had a student run out of the school and off the playground. No one could find him. We did eventually find him holding onto a bush next to the school. We never knew what challenges we would face day to day!

Eventually my students were included more in other classes. As time went on, my students became more accepted and integrated. They participated in school assemblies, art, gym, and music. We also were included in social studies with another grade-level class.

When advising new teachers, I would encourage them to learn from more experienced teachers. I would also say to be creative with your approaches and lessons. Make sure you prepare for your lessons and use written materials to reinforce their learning and the importance of real life application.

It is also important to engage students with all of their senses in the learning process. Don’t be hesitant to ask for suggestions from more experienced educators!”

Debby Loucks retired after more than 40 years as a special education teacher.

Lou Cuglietto

“After playing professional baseball in Italy for one season, I became a teacher. My experience as a young athlete living in Florence, marrying my wife, and being on the other side of the world all influenced my teaching, the way I viewed things, my language, my work ethic, and my leadership. I spent 42 years in education, including 25 years as a principal.

My wife, Elaine, has also had a long career in education and is a member of NYSTRS. Her career has been far more interesting than mine, as she rose from a school secretary to an assistant superintendent in Rye, N.Y. She did it without making enemies or selling her soul.

Just a good story worthy of sharing. She raised a family and has been the glue that binds us together still.”

Lou Cuglietto retired in 2015 after working in Mount Vernon, Mount Pleasant, and Port Chester-Rye public schools.

“...I taught foreign languages in elementary school in the Mahopac school system (in Putnam county). My own children were part of the program, and I enjoyed teaching them along with their friends.

My daughter later married one of my former students, and they have given me an especially wonderful family.”

Beverly Hartwell retired in 1981 after 26 years of teaching.