

Mr. P's lessons reached minds, hearts

BY JASMINE DENT FRANKS

Staff

Middle school education in Marion will never be the same.

Students and staff at Marion Middle School were left in shock last Wednesday evening at the news of the passing of beloved civics teacher John King Purifoy.

MMS Principal Kim Williams described the 57-year-old Purifoy as an amazing teacher who touched the life of every student he met.

"As an educator, we all want

"He could break barriers and tear down walls of failure to make his students succeed."

Ethan Veselik

MMS student

to make a difference in the lives of our students," Williams said. "Mr. Purifoy touched the lives of countless students, families and educators."

Purifoy, known to his students affectionately as "Mr. P" was in his 20th year of teaching. Fourteen of those years were put in at MMS, where he began teach-

ing civics in 2006. He quickly became a favorite among students.

"Having him in class was great, it was fun," said former student Charm Batts, now 25. "He always kept us engaged. He was very straightforward—he didn't sugarcoat anything with us—



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John King Purifoy

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and he was just an all-around great person and great teacher.”

Purifoy had a knack for keeping students interested, creating games and lessons that kept students on their toes and thinking.

“Even if you hated the subject, he would make it fun for you,” Batts said. “It was definitely a great experience and I love Mr. P for that, I really do.”

Grief counselors were brought in at MMS on Thursday to help students and staff cope with the sudden loss. Williams said students have spent the last few days reflecting on the impact Purifoy had on their lives, and making cards, banners and other tributes to show their admiration, respect and appreciation for their beloved teacher.

“He taught with passion and with power,” reflected eighth-grade student Ethan Veselik. “He could break barriers and tear down walls of failure to make his students succeed. He was a man of kindness and knowledge, a man who brightened my days in more ways than one.”

Purifoy was a passionate teacher who cared deeply for his students.

The impact he had on his students’ lives was so great that even those he taught nearly two decades ago in another school system still fondly remember his lessons, both in the classroom and in life.

“We all idolized him,” said Josh Testerman. “He was the definition of respect.”

Purifoy taught Testerman at Mount Rogers Combined School in Whitetop, where Purifoy molded the minds of young students before he came to Marion.

“He was the most kind-hearted teacher I’d ever met,” Testerman said. “He taught me to stay humble, honest and to always have hope.”

Both Testerman and Batts recalled Purifoy’s ability to connect with students.

“He cared about each of us individually and connected with us all, not just as a teacher but as a friend,” Testerman said.

Batts moved to Marion from Newport News while in middle school. Back at her old school, the majority of her classmates were black. When she came to Marion, it was a little difficult to adjust, she said.

“But Mr. P was one of those people who didn’t make you feel out of place because of your color,” she said. “He made it feel like

you mattered. When you came in his class, he made sure that you mattered and that your voice was heard.”

Purifoy imparted more than just academic wisdom upon his students. Testerman said he also introduced him to some of his favorite bands, including the Grateful Dead, Phish and Widespread Panic.

Outside the classroom, Purifoy was a music man. Guitarist in a small band of friends, he often jammed out to those old favorites.

“We slipped in some Grateful Dead any chance we got,” said longtime friend and former classmate Dan Holland.

Purifoy was a 1984 graduate of Emory & Henry College, where his father, the late Lewis “Mack” Purifoy taught history for several decades.

Following his graduation from E&H, Purifoy went into restaurant management for several years. Holland said cooking was another of Purifoy’s favorite pastimes.

“He loved to cook and he was very good at it,” Holland said.

In recent years, he could be found tending the bar at Bonfire in Abingdon and then later at Morgan’s, where his wife, Sharon, is manager.

Holland said he believed

Purifoy’s admiration for his father led him to go into education himself. He returned to school at Radford University, where he earned his master’s degree and then began teaching in 2000. Holland said Purifoy inherited his charisma with students from his father. Both men were exceptionally inspirational in the classroom, he said.

A Bristol, Virginia, resident, Purifoy remained a fixture on campus until his death.

“You’d find him in the stands of every home game and even a few away games, too,” Holland said. “Emory was really deep into his blood.”

After his father’s passing in the early 2000s, Purifoy sat on the board for the Lewis M. Purifoy Scholarship at E&H.

News of Purifoy’s death reached Northwood Middle School on Thursday, where students there expressed concern for their Marion friends.

NMS teacher Angie Eller said she told her students to pray for their friends because they had lost an inspirational educator. Eller and Purifoy teamed up to teach grades 4 through 7 at Mount Rogers before each of them came to teach in Smyth County.

“Anybody that John met, you just had to like him,” Eller said. “Whether he

was teaching or not, he was a kind-hearted person and he left a really good impression on anybody that met him.”

She recalled how excited her students would get when Purifoy recognized their work with a golden carrot sticker. He would often award the golden carrot whenever a student’s writing caught his attention.

“I remember them coming in and saying, ‘Look, Mrs. Eller, I got the golden carrot.’”

Mount Roger’s Combined School closed in 2009. Purifoy was invited back to the school to deliver its final commencement speech. Holland, who attended with his friend, noted that Purifoy stopped during his speech and hugged each of the three graduates that year.

All agree that Purifoy’s absence leaves a large void to fill. His former students expressed sadness that future students won’t get to experience “Mr.P’s” lessons.

“It’s definitely not going to be the same,” said Batts.

“I’m saddened by the fact that he will no longer be teaching any more students,” Testerman said. “It’s tragic, honestly. There’s no better teacher to have at that point in their life while they begin to transition into teenag-

ers. It breaks my heart to even think about the students he was just working with.”

Williams agreed. “He was a wonderful, wonderful teacher and man and there is no way we can ever replace Mr. Purifoy. He was an asset to the school and he will be tremendously missed.”

“Today we celebrate the gifts he has shared with us with determination to touch lives in whatever way we can,” Williams said. “Remember his warm smile, his fist bumps, his extensive vocabulary, his intellect, his passion, his leadership, his culinary talents, but most importantly his love. Thank you, Mr. Purifoy, for touching each of our lives and leaving your impact on our hearts.”

Purifoy leaves behind his wife of 25 years, Sharon, and children Will Purifoy and Adam and Ashley Nottingham. Both Holland and Eller noted how much Purifoy cherished his family.

A memorial service for the influential educator was held at the Memorial Chapel at Emory & Henry College. In lieu of flowers, donations may still be made to the Lewis M. Purifoy Scholarship Fund at E&H.