

In the book of Genesis, it says “and Jacob departed from Beer Sheevah and went to Charon. Rashi, a Jewish scholar asked, “why does it mention Jacob’s departure? The fact that he left is obvious from the statement ‘he went to Charon.’ ” Rashi then speaks of the profound impact felt by a community upon the departure of a righteous person. He goes on to say that a righteous man is the community’s pride and glory. As he leaves, the community experiences a profound loss. The community of Hart High is feeling the impact and is mourning the loss of their righteous person: Pete Pew.

I first met Pete when he interviewed me for a teaching position in 1994. I interviewed on a Monday morning with Pete and Laury Strauss and all I can remember from it is making a comment about how tall they were and how short I was. But they still hired me and I returned that afternoon to meet with Pete before starting school the next day. He gave me the textbooks, showed me where my classroom was, and helped me find my way. The following year I moved into F21 where he and I would share a hallway for the next 15 years.

Pete was an amazing teacher. He taught kids organization, essay writing, critical thinking, all skills they could take with them once they left his classroom. He did it by holding them accountable on a daily basis. Students would be expected to come in to class on time prepared to take a quiz on the previous nights’ reading. He would grade them before he started class so he knew who wasn’t prepared. He would then start with the questions, lots of questions. Those who thought they could hide and not answer any soon learned otherwise. Those who did not know the answer or gave a wrong answer got the look. On tests, if a student didn’t write a clear thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph for AP US, he stopped reading the essay. He was a demanding teacher who had high expectations for his students because he believed that they could meet them. On the first day of class he would draw a line across the board and ask his students what it was. He would tell them that it was a bar he set for the class. It didn't move, was never going to move, so it was their responsibility to raise their own standards to meet the caliber of work expected in his class. And they did. Not only that, the students loved and respected him for it. When I sent out an email to former students to raise money to cover his September trip to MD Anderson, the response was overwhelming. Students from 80s, 90s, 2000s as well as their parents sent money and messages telling him the impact he had on their lives.

Pete taught both AP Government and AP US History for many years. And the number of kids who passed those exams is truly impressive. Not many can boast of close to 100% pass rate for their students but he is one of the few. And he did it year after year after year, with both classes. It led to his work with the College Board, where he shared his expertise with other AP Government teachers all over the country and then later helping write the AP Gov test. It’s an accomplishment that causes sleepless nights for the AP teacher soon to follow in his footsteps.

But just like when I was first hired, he was there again with everything: notes, pacing guides, rubrics, quizzes, tests –even the audit paperwork, which led to me getting authorized and him getting rejected at first. He was so mad at the College Board for that. How could the person who had created the template for the AP government audit process get his US paperwork rejected especially when an identical version that he had written had been approved for someone else? But more important than all of the paperwork was the support he gave when I started teaching the class. Even after he went out on leave, he was just a phone call or email away.

But Pete did more than teach AP classes. In his 35 years with our district, he spent one year teaching at Placerita Junior High before transferring to Hart, served as a member of the Association’s negotiations team and then later as the grievance person for our campus, coached the Academic Seminar team, served as a mentor teacher, was department chair for over a decade, and was chosen as Teacher of the Year twice by our faculty. All of us remember him as the consummate professional who generously shared all that he had with anyone who asked, expecting nothing in return. He knew the real reward would be that every student; every level of learner, would enjoy the highest quality of education one could provide. And we who knew him well, and any student who had him as their teacher, watched him do this every single day.

But regardless of the titles he held or the classes he taught, most importantly, he was a friend. I will miss the discussions on politics, history; issues at Hart, the association, and education in general. I will miss the visits to each others’ classroom before school, lunch or even sometimes during class. I will miss the walks to Jimmy Dean’s during fifth period, going to Claim Jumper or Final Score on staff development days, and starting the school year with Deb cooking tacos for a group of us at the house. I will miss his emails that either started with hey partner or ended with thanks partner. And I will miss his quiet acts of kindness: Him doing the lesson plans for me the week my mom passed away, grading papers for Val when she went out for surgery, excusing a student from taking her final exam because her father had suddenly passed away the night before, taking on a home study assignment for a dying student or last year when he wanted to make sure I was okay when I burst into tears in his classroom when he told me of his cancer diagnosis.

He and I had many conversations about this awful disease. How much it takes away from you, how hard the treatment was, but also how much he appreciated the support he was getting from everyone. And while the chemo took him away from the classroom and his work with the College Board, it did give him time. More time with his family – his wife Deb, his two boys, and his siblings. And while he should have had so much more of it, at least he had time for one more trip to Hawaii, Thanksgiving, Brian’s wedding, and thankfully Christmas at home.

To his family, we thank you for sharing him with us. We will remember Pete Pew as a colleague, as a mentor, as a teacher, and as a friend. And while he was taken from us too soon, we are comforted and strengthened by our memories as we hope you are. Last month we began the process of naming the F building after him. It is the building where his classroom was located and thus a fitting tribute to a man who inspired so many. Though he will no longer be on campus to cheer, encourage, or support us, his legacy will live on forever.

So long partner, until we meet again.