

Deborah Roberts

Mrs. Hardy—a small gesture of confidence can ignite a fire in a child

When I was a kid growing up in small-town Georgia, the seventh of nine children, I was a bit shy and insecure. It's tough to find your voice in a house full of strong personalities, including a few creative and restless spirits who sometimes challenged my parents and their strict rules. We were also making our way through the fog and uncertainty of desegregation. Georgia had finally accepted the changing nation's times, and for the first time children of all races were going to school together. After attending an all-Black school for the first three years of my education, I was now about to sit next to white kids in the fourth grade. Like many of my friends, I had played school at home with my younger siblings, even making tests for them, using purple crayon to make a homemade mimeo machine. I was excited about learning. I felt like a big girl in elementary school. But I wasn't completely confident. I hadn't attended kindergarten like many of my friends. Back then you had to pay for it and with such a large family it was out of reach for my parents. When I took my seat I was convinced that the other kids knew more than I did and understood the lessons better. It didn't occur to me that many of us were equally anxious about reading, writing, adding, and subtracting.

So, when we changed schools midstream to integrate, I was even more nervous. I liked my teachers at the Houston County Training

School. They were mostly women who dressed impeccably and wore stockings, and had coiffed hairdos. The same was true in Perry Elementary School. Only most of the teachers were white. I was surprised by how easily I settled in and enjoyed my new classes. There was some anxiety among all the kids, no doubt. This new landscape could just as well have been on the moon. Still, I was excited to go to school and found myself slowly gaining more confidence.

Then in sixth grade I was assigned to Mrs. Hardy's English class. She was stern and proper and very no-nonsense. She had a neatly cropped head full of gray hair and wore tailored dresses and heels. Her signature look was matching red lipstick and polish on neatly manicured nails. Mrs. Hardy terrified many students. There was no gum chewing in her class, tardiness, or talking out of turn. Any infraction would prompt her to send you out of class to sit in the hallway or to the principal's office if she deemed it serious enough. She demanded proper grammar and taught us to diagram sentences and gave everyone a poetry book of American writers and assigned poems to be learned and recited before the entire class. Mrs. Hardy rarely smiled and graded papers with a red-ink pen. Red circles on a homework assignment spelled trouble. Usually a bad grade.

One day, after returning our essay papers, Mrs. Hardy complimented my work and told me that I was smart and had potential to go far in life. I was elated. Never had a teacher told me that I was smart or that my future looked bright. Now this strict and demanding teacher had seen something special in me. In ME! Suddenly I was like a blossoming flower that had received a precious watering. Mrs. Hardy believed in me, and now I was beginning to see myself differently. I wanted to write more fluently, speak properly, and ace my spelling tests. I felt seen and valued. It had never occurred to me how empowering it could feel to hear a teacher—someone outside my family—say that you are different and have what it takes to soar. I watched Mrs. Hardy intently and was determined to make good grades and to please her. I basked in the glow of her occasional