

# Mr. Forbes, More Than A Teacher

By Chelsey Mears

Pitch-perfect toddlers inevitably grow up to be singers. Tip-toeing preteens go on to dance pointe at Julliard. Following this logic, it appeared to be, from an early age, that a certifiable screw-up was the only outcome ever meant for me.

Even when I was young, I knew I was different. I didn't have the same perspective as other kids and always felt out of place. It felt like my brain was wired differently. I was bright and a quick learner, but I often found myself bored in class, which led to trouble. If I couldn't talk during lessons, I wouldn't attend; I skipped my first class in 4th grade. Coincidentally this is also the first time I ever stole something: candy from the rewards jar, and I got caught on both counts.

Stealing was not my thing, but I was smoking regularly, and by 6th grade, I was skipping class. My permanent record read like an oxymoron: Talented writer but refuses to participate in English, excels at testing but regularly misses test days. This failing student frequently fights with known bullies. The truth was I was too smart for my own good and interacting with others was not a natural thing for me.

Occasionally someone can come into your life, and entirely alter your projected path laid out before you. An approach from a person that determines who you are and what your destiny is.

In 7th grade, I met Mr. Forbes. I'd wound up in his technology class because I'd skipped the day we got to pick our electives for the term. My decision to ignore the opportunity to choose my preferred courses might seem bizarre, anyway, so the school put me in his class because it wasn't full. Within 5 minutes, I knew that this teacher was different. Mr. Forbes came off a bit odd, but he seemed to embrace it, which I never knew was an option. He didn't speak to us like students. Instead, he spent the first week getting to know us, and he talked to us like young individual people, each with our own lives and minds that didn't work just like everybody else's. I thought, "Is his brain wired differently, too?"

He'd broken the coursework into modules, and we got to rotate and learn something new in the technology field every month. In his class, we got to design houses and bridges, build race cars, host a radio show, and more. But more importantly, we each got to be ourselves. I never missed a class.

Mr. Forbes also introduced me to Technology Students Association (TSA). This after-school club participated in local and national competitions. Not only did I attend

the weekly meetings, but I became the secretary and eventually the vice president of our chapter. For four years, I was an active member of an actual club.

We road-tripped hundreds of miles to Nashville, Tennessee, for one national competition. Two particularly amazing things happened on this adventure. Knowing I was struggling at home, Mr. Forbes invited my mother to chaperone. My mom, who I swore did not understand me, took a week off work and drove several other teens and me to compete in tech-based events she could not have cared less about. But she cared about us, and I gained a lot of respect for her. I watched as she sat for hours and listened to us practicing the delivery of our reports which probably sounded like utter nonsense to her. I realized that my mom worked hard to understand me, though it would take having a child of my own to understand and empathize with her genuinely.

The second enlightenment came much sooner as Mr. Forbes taught me how to fail with grace. I had grown accustomed to consistently placing first in smaller competitions. Imagine my surprise and anger when I failed to get placed in any national events; I was adamant that Nationals was rigged and threatened to quit. My teacher, never missing an opportunity to impart wisdom, helped me examine and work through my feelings while acknowledging the facts. I was upset because I felt I'd done my best, but the point was that other students had been more prepared and performed better than me. They earned the recognition, and I learned a valuable lesson.

A year later, I couldn't believe that when I transitioned to high school, Mr. Forbes moved up too! Technology classes continued. And while my grades, participation, and attendance had improved, it's important to note that my home life had started to crumble around me. Mom tried, but I didn't have a stable home, and by 16, I was living with a boyfriend and working a full-time job to pay bills. A few teachers knew and severely judged me; I can't say if Mr. Forbes knew because he simply continued to teach me. He used my interests to pique my curiosity about different techy subjects.

In 10th grade, I became Mr. Forbes's teaching assistant. By this time, it was pretty apparent that I had a natural affinity for writing. Mr. Forbes helped me hone this talent by giving me incredibly technical subjects to write about and having me simplify the information for the rest of the class. I also wrote technical reports for TSA that actually won competitions! Things were going well. Maybe too well?

Unfortunately, a series of events led me to drop out early in my junior year. I struggled a lot for the next year and a half. I tried not to let it show as I continued to visit Mr. Forbes's classes, but he saw through my act. When nothing in my life made sense, he never considered me a lost cause. He and his wife took me into their family and helped me with food, gas money, and frequent reminders that if I needed a safe place to sleep, their door was always open to me.

With time, Mr. Forbes transitioned from the role of teacher to mentor. He told me about his time in the military and how he had paid for college by serving our country. The idea intrigued me, and I spoke to a recruiter. Within months, I was a soldier in the US Army National Guard. A year later, I was in college and once again needed Mr. Forbes, who, by this point, was no longer a teacher but a dear friend. College was tough, but as we talked about the difficult road I'd traveled, he helped me see that I was tougher than I realized.

I'm grown now. Kurt Forbes has been a consistent part of my life for nearly 20 years. I still turn to him for advice; just this week, I ran a work-in-progress by him for input. I regularly seek advice from him because I highly regard his ability to open my mind to other perspectives I wouldn't usually see. There's mutual respect between our weirdly wired brains.

I learned much more from my technology teacher than I can ever describe. He taught me about finding my place in the world and how to use the gifts God gave me. He taught me about acceptance and that love really can be unconditional. Most importantly, he taught me that it's okay to be different and that I can accomplish great things because I, too, am perfect as I am, and I'm 100% certain that I wouldn't be who I am today if I'd been placed in a different elective class all those years ago.

Mr. Forbes was more than a teacher and mentor; he was and still is, my friend.