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“It Has Been a Constant Adventure” A Fixture in Idaho Public Education is Retiring

By Matt Freeman, Executive Director, Idaho State Board of Education

Over a half-century ago, Byron Yankey embarked on a career path that would lead him to work at nearly all levels of public education in Idaho - as a teacher, a principal and as an advocate helping countless students prepare and chart their own career course after high school. A decade ago, Byron joined the State Board office serving the past several years as college and career program manager. He played key roles in developing programs like the Next Steps Idaho website and informing continuous improvement of Idaho’s signature Direct Admissions and Apply Idaho programs. “The college and career work has been so rewarding,” he said. “I have learned so much during my time in this role and I’ve been able to put to good use the skills, knowledge and connections I’ve made over a long career.

That long career is drawing to a close. After 51 years, Byron Yankey is ready to retire. Again. For the third time. The journey started shortly after he graduated from Weiser High School. “My first job in public education was in 1971 at Idaho State University working in its laboratory school,” he said. It was a work-study job that paid 92 cents an hour. I worked 32 hours per week around my classes.”

Something else happened during those early days at Idaho State that really made that long career possible. “I met my wife Lynne during the first week of an honors English class in Room 214 of ISU’s Liberal Arts building,” he said. “She has been a consummate supporter all the way through. She’s my sounding board, often asking ... ‘do you really think that is a great idea?’ She always keeps me grounded.”

Like her future husband, Lynne wanted to become an educator but special education was her area of interest. In those days Idaho State University didn’t have a special education program, so the newly-married couple transferred to the University of Idaho where Byron served as director of the institution’s first campus day-care, while earning his degree in early childhood education.

From Moscow, the couple moved to Queensland, Australia to work in a school with a headmaster and very strict rules. “There were between 40 and 60 kids in the classroom on any given day,” Yankey said. “There were no textbooks, just a chalkboard and chalk and the kids spoke a multitude of languages but it was a great experience.”

After two years Down Under, the Yankeys returned to Idaho where Byron worked in the Boise School District as a first, second and fourth grade teacher before becoming a principal in the Nampa School District in 1981. He would go on to serve as a principal in two other districts and in several schools over the next 34-years. Nearly all of those schools were populated by high-need, low-income students.

A school nurse named Hazel Chapman showed him how he could make a difference in those students’ lives. “Hazel was fearless and she had a big red pickup. One day she told me to get in the truck and we did home visits that day,” Byron recalled. “We went to visit families who were living in shacks next to the railroad tracks. They were very poor and they had great needs. I learned from Hazel that everyone has the need for some type of support and the caring and commitment that you would like to have for yourself,” he said. “That started a career-long practice of going out and meeting kids in their environment and finding ways to help and support them.”

Board Member Dr. Linda Clark worked with Byron for most of his career, at one point serving as principals together in the Meridian School District where they collaborated on several projects. “As the years passed, I came to appreciate Byron more and more – for his heart for his students; for his commitment to continuous

improvement; and for always asking, “What is the right thing to do?” before making a decision,” Dr. Clark said. “Byron’s attributes paid big dividends, as evidenced by the results as he and his staff transformed one of the district’s lowest achievement/highest poverty schools into academic highflyers.”

Byron’s approach of reaching out to students or potential students on their own turf continues today. For instance, he’ll quiz a colleague’s teenager about their education and interests or he’ll ask the barista at the coffee shop about her plans after high school and suggest she visit the Next Steps Idaho website. He also encounters former students regularly – interactions that are very satisfying. “Just last week we had a problem with our heat pump and I called a service guy and we got to talking and he said to me, “you were my principal back at Lincoln Elementary,” he said. “I also see my students now as parents and many are with grandkids ... that is humbling.”

As he prepares to retire - at least for now - Byron is thinking a lot about Nurse Chapman and other mentors he’s had over the last half-century. “My career has been built on a saying from Blanche Dubois in the movie *A Streetcar Named Desire* when she says, ‘I relied upon the kindness of others,’ and I have done that my whole career. It has been great work and it has been just really terrific.”

On behalf of the State Board of Education, and thousands of students and educators Byron worked with and inspired during his remarkable career, I want to thank him for his many years of student-centered service and the compassion and passion he brought every day to this life-changing work.

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