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The Homework I Gladly Did for Bus Class

When I was a child, I loved to write stories. Soon, I wanted my "books" to look like published ones, typewritten and bound together, if only with Scotch tape.

So my dad let me use the typewriter, a heavy old Underwood that I could barely lift as I hauled it from my dad's desk to the floor. Relatives said I was using the "hunt and peck" method. After I had typed a few stories, though, I wasn't hunting. I knew where all the keys were. Using my one-finger method, I could type almost as fast as my dad could using all 10 fingers. I was still very small, and I sat hunched on the floor, my one finger dashing over the keys, my big toe hitting the space bar.

As a home-schooled child whose parents encouraged creativity, I had a lot of time to write. At age 9, I wrote "Thorn's Gathering," a fantasy novel that bore a strange resemblance to my favorite book, J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit." In the succeeding years, I followed my first book with four sequels, typing like lightning with one finger.

During my year of public high school, my parents wanted me to learn to type the proper way in case I ever wanted a typing job. I highly doubted I would ever want to type for a living, but I enrolled in a keyboarding class. The teacher doled out rote assignments, such as copying secretarial letters. I found no interest in this kind of work, so about halfway through the quarter, I still hadn't learned to type "properly."

My bus driver was a role model and mentor. Unlike many bus drivers, who seemed to suffer through their routes, Gary knew every one of the rowdy teenagers who rode his bus, as well as the shy ones like me. He knew all about our grades, our teachers, our families. He encouraged us to excel in our schoolwork. It seemed appropriate when one teenager absent-mindedly referred to him as "our bus teacher."

Gary wanted to know how my grades were. "As and Bs," I said, "except I'm flunking keyboarding."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because it's boring," I said. "We just copy memos and letters all the time."

"I want you to bring your grade up in that class," Gary said. He knew I liked to type stories with one finger. "I'll give you an assignment: Type me a story every week ? and you have to use all 10 fingers. I know it'll be slow at first, so the first story can be one page. But the second one has to be two or three pages. I want a longer story every week."

Soon I knew how to type properly. After a few stories, I was pretty speedy, too. My grade went up in keyboarding. Every Monday, when I boarded the bus, Gary asked, "Where's my story?" Every Monday, I handed him a new one. He said, "When you have your first book-signing, I'm going to be there."

I had reached my goal for keyboarding class. I was now a proficient typist, and had renounced hunt-and-peck. That was good, because I was now too big to comfortably hit the space bar with my toe.

We kept on copying letters and memos for the class, however, doing the same kind of work over and over. I already knew how to type, so I didn't see the point. One day, I asked to be excused for a drink of water. I walked out into the hall and never went back to that class.

In spite of Gary's best efforts, I flunked keyboarding anyway. Gary was disappointed. He knew my other grades were high, and I had been accepted into college. But he told me that it was important to do quality work in all areas of my life, not just the areas that were the most interesting to me.

I didn't see Gary again after that year. Looking back, I hope he realizes that he did help me attain larger goals. He motivated me to write more stories, and one of the stories I wrote for him won a national contest and was published. And after college I supported myself for several years in jobs that utilized my typing skills. So when I sit down now to write a story, or sit down to eat a meal I bought for myself because of a long day's typing work, I'm happy that I did my homework for "bus class."

The author's father also wrote an essay mentioning his daughter's unorthodox typing style. It ran May 9. See "The old typewriter worked at just the right speed," by Jon Remmerde.