The teachers who inspired us, and even changed the trajectories of our lives

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Rita Pierson leads off TED Talks Education, our first televised event, which will air on PBS on May 7. Photo: Ryan Lash

Rita Pierson is the kind of teacher you wish you had. An educator for 40 years, she is funny, sharp and simply has a way with words — so much so that [today’s talk](http://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion.html) feels a bit like a sermon.

[[](http://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion.html)Rita Pierson: Every kid needs a champion](http://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion.html)In this talk, Pierson shares the secret to teaching students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds — make personal connections with them.

“I have had classes so low, so academically deficient that I cried. I wondered, ‘How am I going to take this group in nine months from where they are to where they need to be?” says Pierson, in [this amazing talk](http://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion.html). “I came up with a bright idea … I gave them a saying: ‘I am somebody. I was somebody when I came and I’ll be a better somebody when I leave. I am powerful and I am strong. I deserve the education that I get here’ … You say it long enough, it starts to be a part of you.”

Pierson’s talk will open our first-ever television special, TED Talks Education, which airs Tuesday, May 7 at 10/9c on PBS. It will be an exhilarating night, featuring talks from educators and innovators with bold ideas, plus performances from host John Legend. [Set your DVRs and read lots more here »](http://www.ted.com/promos/TEDTalksEducation)

In honor of Rita Pierson and TED Talks Education, I asked the TED staff: who is that one teacher who just really, truly influenced you?

“The teacher who changed my life was, serendipitously, my English teacher for kindergarten, 7th grade and senior year of high school. Ms. Barbato taught me how to write eloquently (I hope!), and she had this unexplained faith in me that really galvanized me as a student. What she taught me stuck with me through college and beyond.” —**Olivier Sherman, Distribution Coordinator**

“Mr. Eric Yang was only in his mid-twenties when I had him as my AP government teacher, but he was unforgettable. He was the first teacher I had who made keeping up with current events mandatory, forcing us to read news sources on our own time and not just from the textbook. He exuded discipline, and that was contagious.” —[**Thu-Huong Ha**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/1020352)**, Editorial Projects Specialist**

“Mrs. Bailey was my English teacher. I loved her. I was the younger sister of an already very successful big sister, and that was a cloud over my head too. She held my hand and brought me into the sun with her love of the English language. She recommended books just to me, she made me feel special and I just couldn’t get enough of her. I went on a school trip to Amsterdam with her and she brought her husband, who was an artist. She changed my life.” —[**Juliet Blake**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/1142585)**, TED TV** (who executive produced TED Talks Education)

“Mrs. Mendelson, my 8th-grade English teacher. This was my first year living in the U.S. I think she set the stage for future learning and she’s the main reason I have such good English right now, both written and spoken. So, thank you, Mrs. Mendelson.”  —**Ruben Marcos, intern**

“I still recall how awesome my 6th-grade teacher, Mr. Fawess, was. Middle school in general is basically Hades. I was extremely small, super nerdy, and had a unibrow, asthma and glasses — plus I left school once a week to take classes at the local high school. I got picked on a lot. Mr. Fawess came up with all these ways to take my mind off that — he talked to me about bullying and how to let things roll off your shoulder and gave me books I could read outside of class. He got me thinking about college early and what kinds of subjects I was most interested in. I consider myself lucky to have had such an inspiring teacher. If only he had discouraged me from dressing up as the skunk in our annual school play.” —[**Amanda Ellis**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/1018455)**, TEDx Projects Coordinator**

“Robert Baldwin’s class ‘Essay and Inquiry.’ Every day: Walk into class. Sit down. Look at the handout on every desk. Read it. Start writing. Class ends — stop writing. Every day. Except Wednesday, when we’d put the desks in a circle and everyone would read something they’d written. The prompts were everything from simple questions like, “What’s your favorite memory of trees?” to readings from Rachel Carson or W.B. Yeats or Orson Welles. It was a whirlwind of ideas, and the constant writing forced us to wrestle with them, and (tritely but correctly) ourselves. It was like a boot camp in thinking. People I know who took, and loved, that class went on to some of the most amazing careers. Every time we get together, we gush about the quiet, unassuming, force of nature that was Mr. Baldwin. He would have hated that last sentence, because the metaphor is strained. But he also taught us to ignore authority, so I’m writing it anyway.” —[**Ben Lillie**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/675499)**, Writer/Editor**

“My high school band director, Mr. Koch, pushed me to reach my full potential. I knew all along that I wouldn’t build a career around playing the tuba, but he never allowed me to think like that. As I slacked and rebelled, he never let me forget that I possessed a special talent. I hated it at the time but now I’m able to reflect — he taught me self-respect and discipline in a firm but kind way. I am forever grateful to him for challenging me.” —[**Gwen Schroeder**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/1460318)**, Post-Production Manager**

“Mrs. Lewis, my 5th-grade teacher, read to us every week. She made us put our heads on the desk and close our eyes and then read wonderful stories to us: *The Golden Pine Cone*, *The Diamond Feather ..*. It made our imaginations come alive.” **—**[**Janet McCartney**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/59541)**, Director of Events**

“My junior high school science teacher, Dr. Ernie Roy, with his outsized laugh and booming voice, was one of my very favorite teachers. He demonstrated to us how important we were to him by making what were obviously personal sacrifices on our behalf: when the lab needed equipment, we knew he had purchased some of it on his own; when we couldn’t get a bus for a field trip, he took a few of us in his own car (something which could have gotten him into quite a bit of trouble); and when a big science fair deadline loomed large, he opened the lab every weekend to help us with our experiments. At a point in my life when I didn’t have a lot of guidance or positive role models, he taught me a lot more than science; he taught me, by example, the power of sacrifice, discipline and self-respect.” —[**Michael McWatters**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/549327)**, UX Architect**

“Dr. Heller, my 10th-grade social studies teacher, taught me that passion is the key to learning. I had never met anyone from kindergarten to 10th grade that matched his raw passion for the *meaning* behind historical events, and it was so contagious.” —[**Deron Triff**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/852503)**, Director of Distribution**

“Rene Arcilla, a professor of Educational Philosophy at NYU, changed the way I think.  Prior to that class, I hadn’t truly been challenged about what \*I\* actually thought — much of my educational life was about regurgitating answers. Rene was the first teacher who asked me questions that he/we didn’t know the answers to. Realizing that I had to actually provide the answers from within myself, and not look to an outside source, was very difficult at first. It was a muscle I had to build. I owe a lot of who I am today — and even this job — to the introspective, critical and philosophical thinking I learned from Rene’s classes.” —[**Susan Zimmerman**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/1397206)**, Executive Assistant to the Curator**

“Mr. Downey — 7th- and 8th-grade Humanities. Still the hardest class I’ve ever taken!  I’d credit Mr. Downey with helping me think more expansively about the world. Right before 8th-grade graduation, he showed us *Dead Poets Society*, and on the final day of class we all agreed to stand on our desks and [recite ‘O Captain, my captain.’](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJsjNNp0foE)It was all very dramatic and I think there were tears.” —**Jennifer Gilhooley, Partnership Development**

“I took my first painting class my sophomore year of high school and fell in love with it. My teacher, Ms. Bowen, told me I could use the art studio whenever I wanted to, and gave me access to all kinds of new paints and canvasses. I spent almost every lunch period there for a few years, and regularly stayed in the studio after school ended. One day, Ms. Bowen told me that a parent of a student I had painted expressed interest in buying the painting of her daughter. After that first sale, I painted portraits of kids in my school on a commission basis, and continued to do so for the remainder of my high school experience. Thanks to Ms. Bowen’s mentorship, I felt empowered to try to make money from something I was passionate about and loved to do. [Here](http://cs.nyu.edu/cs/faculty/shasha/papers/girlonroof.jpg) is one of the paintings.” —[**Cloe Shasha**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/17014)**, TED Projects Coordinator**

“I had a chemistry teacher, Mr. Sampson, who used to meet me at school an hour before it started to tutor me when the material wasn’t clicking. That was the first class I had ever really struggled with, and he made this investment to help me get through the material — but more importantly learn that I could teach myself anything.” **—Stephanie Kent, Special Projects**

“On the first day of my Elementary Italian Immersion class, I asked to be excused to use the restroom in English. Professor Agostini kept speaking rapidly in Italian as I squirmed in my seat. Since she seemed unclear about my request, I asked her again to no avail. Finally, I flipped through my brand-new Italian-English dictionary and discovered the words, ‘*Posso usare il bagno per favore*.’ Suddenly, she flashed me a smile, handed me the key, told me where to go in*Italian*, and pointed to my dictionary so I could learn how to follow her directions. Even though I only studied with her for one semester, I will never forget that I emerged from her class knowing intermediate-level Italian.” —**Jamia Wilson, TED Prize Storyteller**

“My history teacher in high school, Mr. Cook, challenged us to think hard about what happened in the past and directly related it to what was happening around us. He gave us ways to try and predict what could happen in the future. He was the first person to make me take ownership of what it meant to be a citizen and the social responsibility that came with that. Because he taught ‘World History’ rather than a regionally specific class, we learned extensively about other countries, and I am convinced he is the reason that I went abroad to Ghana in college and I am now still an avid traveler today.” —**Samantha Kelly, Fellows Group**

“The professor who taught me Intro to Women and Gender Studies my sophomore year of college completely changed my framework for thinking about human relationships within a hierarchy. She brought coffee and tea to class for us every morning to congratulate us for being so dedicated to learning as to choose an 8:30 a.m. class. When I emailed her to say I’d be out sick, she sent me a get-well e-card. And when, in a fit of undergraduate irresponsibility, I simply failed to do an assignment, she wasn’t the least bit mad — instead, I received a phone call from her a week after the end of the semester informing me that, because I’d done such good work, she couldn’t bear to give me the B+ I numerically deserved. It was incredible to see how fully she lived the subject she taught; the philosophy of compassion and equality.” —[**Morton Bast**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/1108408)**, Editorial Assistant**

“My high school photography teacher, Susan Now. I’m convinced that the support I got from Susan got me through high school. Two years later, when I was freaked out about transferring colleges, I, without hesitation, called her for advice. She made me feel comfortable and challenged me to speak up and be confident with expressing myself as a student. So valuable!” —**Ella Saunders-Crivello, Partnerships Coordinator**

“Cliff Simon, one of my college professors, taught me that wisdom is the greatest pursuit, our skills and passions are transferable, and that fear will only ever always hold us back.  To this day, he’s a great mentor.  We’re now great friends, and I even officiated his wedding ceremony.” —**Jordan Reeves, TED-Ed Community Manager**

“My 10th-grade biology teacher spoke and interacted with me like I was a grown-up individual and not one of a batch of ‘kids.’ He made us all fascinated with the subjects he taught because he spoke *to* us not *at* us. I always worked hard to match that capacity that he saw in me. He was only in his 50s when, a few years after I graduated, he died suddenly of a heart attack. Lots of sad former students.” —[**Ladan Wise**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/944895)**, Product Development Manager**

“Stephen O’Leary, my professor and mentor at the University of Southern California, showed me that the quality of my thinking could be directly traced to the quality of the authors I referenced in my bibliography. This realization motivated me to both seek and challenge everything I have read ever since. This habit likely played a part in me finding myself so passionate about being a part of TED.” —[**Sarah Shewey**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/171522), TEDActive Program Producer

“My high school art teacher was equal parts smart and silly, and always insightful. Mr. Miller showed a bunch of restless seniors that art class wasn’t just about memorizing which painters influenced which periods. Instead, he taught us that art was — at its core — an exciting way to touch both the head and the heart. Mr. Miller took our  class to the Met in New York one warm spring afternoon, a trip I’ll never forget. Great art, he told us, was about great ideas, and not simply the pleasing arrangement of color, shape and form. Thank you, Russ Miller.” —**Jim Daly, TED Books**

“Mrs. Presley, my 1st-grade teacher, advanced my reading skills to full-on chapter book independence … and for that I’ll be forever grateful! But the most valuable gift she gave me was self-esteem. At my school, we’d bring a brown bag lunch with our name written on the bag. I always wanted a middle name like the other kids, and this daily ritual made me feel the lack. I must have let my mom know, because she started to write middle names on my bag. At first it started: ‘Marla Ruby Mitchnick.’ Then ‘Marla Ruby Diamond Mitchnick,’ and then ‘Marla Ruby Diamond Violet Mitchnick,’ and so on. Mrs. Presley never skipped a single syllable — she just read it straight through, and I felt like a beloved and fortunate person with a beautiful name, surrounded by wonderful friends.” —[**Marla Mitchnick**](http://www.ted.com/profiles/16)**, Film + Video Editor**

“I signed up for Journalism 1 in high school having no idea what I was getting myself into. Marcie Pachino ran a rigorous course on the joys of telling other people’s stories and on the extreme responsibility that comes with reporting news that might otherwise go unheard. She was kind and inspiring, but wouldn’t hesitate to give you an edit of an article that simply read ‘Ugh’ in big red letters. The key: you always knew she was right. I went on to become a journalist professionally and, in all my years of writing, I’ve never encountered a more demanding editor.” —**Kate Torgovnick, Writer** (the author of this post)

“Professor Stephen Commins completely changed my  learning experience at UCLA. He pushed the boundaries of what I thought I could accomplish as an undergrad, and having him as my research professor improved my quality of education tenfold. I’ll never forget in my last lecture with him, he left our class with this piece of advice: to work on poverty domestically before attempting to help those abroad, because you aren’t truly a development professional until you have done both.” —**Chiara Baldanza, Coordinator**

“My high school English teacher Veronica Stephenson went above and beyond to allow me the opportunity to dive into theater and acting in a very underfunded arts community. She saw passion in me, and engaged it by spending a lot of her own time and effort to help me pursue something I loved. I learned so much from her and got more personalized experience than I probably would have from a more arts-focused curriculum due solely to her faith in me.” **—Emilie Soffe, Office Coordinator**