

My Career as a Substitute Teacher

In May 1951, I had “graduated” from the ILGWU Training Institute, but because I was now subject to the draft, I was not given an assignment. Arthur Elder, the director of the Training Institute urged me to go into the Army, get it over with, and on my return, I would begin to work for the union. No thanks. I was going to figure something out, and I did, but right now I needed to earn some money.

The year before, I had taken the NY Board of Education exams for a substitute license to enable me to teach Social Studies in Junior and Senior High School. I had passed them both, and in February 1951, I received my Certificate of Salary Differential, having gotten my MA in Education. This meant that I would be paid \$16 for each day of substitute teaching. Not bad for 1951. Now, no longer a part of the ILGWU, I quickly got to work notifying elementary and junior high schools that I was available. I was told that it is almost impossible for a new substitute to get a high school assignment; so I should stick to elementary and junior highs in Harlem and the Bronx.

On May 8, 1951, I received my first call from PS 89 in Harlem. I gave my Substitute Teacher Service Record to the school clerk and was assigned to “HI.” I have no memory of that first class. I apparently survived, and returned to PS89 the next day and given class 3-3. On the teacher’s desk, there was a lesson plan, and the substitute did his (or her) best to follow it, I subsequently heard that many substitutes gave their students busy work and spent the day reading a newspaper.

I see from my Service Record that I had a fairly busy May and June. I taught 19 days, including four days at my old junior high school, 52, and two days at JHS 60, the girls’ junior high in my neighborhood. Though it was less than 10 years since I was at 52 as a student, the composition of the school had changed dramatically. Both JHS 52 and 60 were largely black and Puerto Rican, and most of the students were quite disruptive. Teaching was not easy, and a great deal of time was taken up with trying to maintain discipline.

At 52, there were always a couple of wise guys who would try to disrupt the class. One of the favorite devices was “nodding off.” There had been a lot of publicity about marijuana in the schools, and the kids would act as if they were high. And it was an act. Once in a while, I did get their interest and managed to teach. It seemed clear to the students and to the administrators that very little would be learned when the class has a substitute. As long as you kept them from acting up, you earned your pay.

The toughest two days I had was at JHS 60. In each class, there were several girls who were out to give the young substitute a hard time. On two different occasions, when I had turned to write on the board, some young lady called out, “teacher blows, “ and then, “teacher sucks.” I turned around and said, “pardon me?” The class laughed, and we went on. In the middle of a “lesson” a student got up and walked over to the teacher’s closet, opened it up, stood in front of the mirror and started putting on lipstick. I asked her to sit down. She ignored me. I walked over to her and she said, “If you lay a hand on

me, I'll have your ass." I suspect she was right. I continued with the lesson, and she took her sweet-ass time to amble back to her seat. I closed the closet door.

My three days at PS 89 weren't too demanding. I had a lesson plan for the two different third grade classes to which I was assigned.