

Written by TJ Palmer for Brewster Connections in 2014

The Hand I Most Remember

I met a student called Trey Whitfield in the fall of 1987.

The first reason I knew Trey is because he was Brewster's best basketball player. The second reason was because he was never alone but always high-fiving and back-slapping and laughing with all kinds of students. It wasn't strange to see Trey eating lunch with a contingent of Korean students, or attempting to play soccer with a collection of guys that were in 9 and 10th grade when he was an upperclassman. He was the BMOC. He was always the center of attention.

He was also an African-American from Brooklyn, NY. I had never met anyone from Brooklyn or even been to Brooklyn. I was the new teacher who looked younger than he did. I might have weighed 155 pounds. He was well over 240. All this, I can admit now, made Trey very intimidating to me. I was brand new to Brewster as a new teacher and I looked younger than he did.

He walked into my U.S. History class and he was the biggest student I had ever seen. He was huge!

But all that intimidation almost instantly melted away from my body when he introduced himself to me, "Hello, my name's Trey," with his hand stuck out to shake mine.

Wow, I was blown away. It might be true that his hand was the first black man's hand I had ever held. It certainly has become the hand I most remember.

That year I taught him a few things about American History, and he taught me a few things about becoming a Brewster basketball fan, and a few things about life.

One of the beauties of Trey is that he was really good at having a good time. He could make something out of nothing and I still have so many vivid memories of that part of him. I can recall a dozen stories – about how he almost single-handedly defeated Cushing to win the basketball championship, or how he came to my dormitory door and said that he needed *my* help because there was a fight outside against a group of local kids [as if I could help him!], or how he loved to come over and chow down my buffalo chicken wings with his buddies from Spencer House.

Perhaps one of the better stories is when I took his U.S. History class to Lexington, Massachusetts to see where the American Revolution took place. Standing next to the van that I was going to drive, Trey came walking up with the silliest, craziest looking jeans I had ever seen. He had taken a pair of scissors, and all by himself, decided to slice into the jeans, making horizontal cuts all the way down both legs. Suffice to say, they looked ridiculous. I couldn't help but laugh.

He adjusted his big glasses, stated "they're cool, Mr. P" in a serious tone, then looked down at each leg, and thoroughly laughed at his own pants. I laughed too, again.

“Do you think these will sell?” he said, or something to that effect, after regaining his composure. I said something about how they weren’t quite as bad as maybe I first thought.

Then he jumped into the front seat next to my driver’s seat [in the ol’ days before we had microbirds, there was a spot for a student in a Dodge van] with his school textbooks to study on the ride, but that intended studying never happened. Instead we laughed our way through a non-stop conversation that lasted the entire 2-hour ride.

He was smart. He was funny. He was goofy. He accepted anyone. He was always himself. Talk about a person without a “mask.” He was the genuine, authentic article.

He was so positive, so outgoing, so full of fun and life that it was all just too much to be told that he had drowned in a nearby lake, only a week before his Brewster graduation in 1989. When I tried to tell eighteen Sargent 2 boys that he was gone the words just stuck in my throat and wouldn’t come out. Nobody wanted to believe it. Not Trey!

For those who knew Trey, like myself and Mrs. Palmer, we consider ourselves lucky to have known him. His legacy lives on – the huge frame, the huge glasses, the huge heart.

Quite a legacy I’d say that after twenty-five years the young man can still make me cry – and can still make me laugh.

That was Trey Whitfield, #34.