



12 Ways to a Ha

Love to Learn!
Respect Each Other!
Do Your Best
Be Patient!
Take Time!

Still Mr. Sonnier

FOR DECADES, STUDENTS KNEW HIM AS MR. SONNIER, THE JANITOR. NOW, HE'S MR. SONNIER, THE TEACHER. •

BY SARAH SPELL PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP GOULD

IT IS A MONDAY AFTERNOON in March. After a rainy weekend, the grounds at Port Barre Elementary are a wet, muddy mess. And the Port Barre Lil Red Hots are living up to their name. Recess was cancelled today. The puddles were just too tempting.

“We tried,” confides the school receptionist with a sigh. “But as soon as we let them out, they headed straight for the water.”

About 570 students, in pre-K to fourth grade, attend the school in the small St. Landry Parish community. At the end of the school day, buses are queued up near the front gate. A steady stream of kids wearing backpacks pours out of classrooms onto covered walkways. The din nearly drowns out a tinny voice on an outdoor speaker, calling out bus numbers. The on-duty teacher is trying to be heard, too. “Don’t cut!” she yells. “Stay on the sidewalk!”

Joseph Sonnier is swimming against the tide, heading to his classroom at the rear of the campus. He is a big man with a ready smile. Six-foot-one and broad-shouldered, he towers over his charges. As he passes them, his students call out to him: “Hey, Mr. Sonnier!” “See you tomorrow, Mr. Sonnier!”

Sonnier has worked on this campus since 1981. The older students remember him as Mr. Sonnier, the janitor, the title he held for 26 years. Now, he is Mr. Sonnier, the teacher.

“When I was still a custodian, they were just in kindergarten and coming up, said Sonnier in a recent interview. “You think that kids are not going to respect you because, ‘Oh, he was just a janitor.’ Those kids respect me more because they see what I’ve done and what I’ve accomplished.”



Joseph Sonnier greets school custodian Raymond Narcisse.



Joseph Sonnier speaks with students Madison Barron and Gracie Tilley.

A FIRST-YEAR EDUCATOR, Sonnier teaches math, science and social studies to two groups of third graders, 50 students in all.

Sonnier points out the colorful signs and messages he has posted in his classroom. One reads, “Come prepared.” Another, “Lend a hand.”

“I’ve created an environment where they can come into the classroom and feel welcome. I wanted them to know they have a caring teacher, to see a male teacher as a caring individual,” Sonnier said.

Some of the students’ best papers are tacked up on a bulletin board titled, “Double A Club.” “It stands for Awesome Achievers,” Sonnier explained. “I tell my students, ‘Always strive for your personal best.’”

Higher education has been a lifelong dream for the 47-year-old. It took him eight years, while working full-time, to earn his bachelor’s degree in elementary education.

Neither of Sonnier’s parents completed high school. His father left school in the eighth grade and his mother dropped out when she was a junior in high school, both because of family obligations.

Even though his parents lacked diplomas, “they stressed the importance of education,” Sonnier said. Yet, the familial pattern of sacrifice would repeat itself.

Sonnier ran track and played basketball until his sophomore year, when he began working nights, helping his father clean office buildings. But he never neglected his studies.

A bright and able student, Sonnier was elected vice president of his senior class and graduated fifth in his class at Le-onville High School in 1979. The following fall, he enrolled at

Southern University, majoring in electrical engineering.

His parents separated. His mother, who worked as a housekeeper, was in financial trouble. After one semester, Sonnier, the eldest of five siblings, dropped out of school and went to work to help support her.

Sonnier worked on construction sites, at a sawmill and a grocery store. In 1981, he became a custodian at Port Barre Elementary, accepting the job offer from his former principal, the late Wesley Jones.

“He was my first inspiration,” Sonnier said. “After a couple of years, he and I got to talking. He sat me down and he said, ‘I taught you. I know what you’re capable of doing. You have more to offer the students than just cleaning up behind them. You can lead them.’”

Even though it would be many years before Sonnier acted on those words, he took them to heart. “It stayed with me,” he said. He became a catechism teacher. “I started doing that first to see how I would like it.”

Sonnier kept working — and learning. On the elementary school campus, he not only served as a custodian, he became the go-to guy for technology. “When computers came to the school, I was asked to put them together and install several types of software.” When teachers ran into computer problems, they turned to him for solutions.

“I was involved with sports and with kids,” Sonnier said. He was a basketball official for 22 years, a baseball official for 16. He also coached Tee Ball and Little League. He oversaw the baseball and softball programs for the Parks and Recreation Department in the nearby town of Opelousas. “I was in charge of a lot of things. That was a way to supplement my income as a custodian.”

At home, he and his wife, Felicia, emphasized education — by their words and by example. While their sons, Shaun and Maurice, were in high school, Felicia earned a degree in accounting from Louisiana Technical College. After both boys had graduated from high school, Sonnier said to himself, “Well, I think it’s my turn.”

He enrolled at UL Lafayette, but was able to attend most of his classes in Eunice, La., thanks to the 2 + 2 elementary education program, in which UL Lafayette instructors teach courses on the LSU-Eunice campus.

He began in August 2000 as a part-time student. He attended night classes, slowly earning college credits. By the spring of 2005, however, the remaining classes he needed were not offered at night.

With the approval of St. Landry Parish school officials, Sonnier began a grueling schedule that would last for the next two-and-a-half years. His workday began early each morning. “I would come to work at 5. I’d work till 7. Then I would leave and go to classes. Most of the time my classes ended at 8 at night. So, I had to come from class and come back to work, finish my eight hours.” Most nights, he got only two or three hours of sleep.

Weekends brought little relief, but did give him a chance to spend some time with family. Shaun attended a junior college in Texas. Maurice was a student at the University of Louisiana at Monroe.

Both played football, which meant Sonnier and his wife often attended out-of-state games. “Their teams would travel to Alabama, Tennessee, Florida, Utah. Wherever they went, I was there. I would take my homework with me.

“I didn’t see it as a burden, because I knew it was something I wanted to do. I wanted to become an educator.”

There were personal challenges, as well. In December 2006, Sonnier’s father died of complications from Lou Gehrig’s disease. “I was in the middle of finals, but I didn’t want to have to retake any courses. It was kind of rough, but I got through it.”

Finals rolled around again the following May and Sonnier would suffer another loss. His mother died of cancer. Again, he pushed through, taking his final exams in the midst of grief. He earned a perfect 4.0 grade point average in each trying semester.

“There were times when I was so overwhelmed with the work, but I never had the attitude to give up. I didn’t have that attitude, because it was always my motto, ‘God brought me to it, He’s going to take me through it.’”

He credits his family, especially Felicia, for supporting him. He’s also grateful to “great professors who stood by my side when I was going through all of this. They kept me going, they kept inspiring me.”

In pursuing his education, Sonnier developed a new identity. “People looked at me not as a custodian, but as a person who’s being educated by the university.

“It wasn’t the idea of me being a custodian and going to college, it was that somebody, no matter how

‘I never had the attitude to give up. I didn’t have that attitude because it was always my motto, ‘God brought me to it, He’s going to take me through it.’’

old he was, took the initiative to go back to school to make himself better, and the university supported that.”

The 2 + 2 elementary education program that made it possible for Sonnier to take upper-level classes close to home was created in 1998 through a partnership between UL Lafayette and LSU-E. Most 2 + 2 participants are non-traditional students who live in rural areas served by LSU-E and would find it difficult to commute to UL Lafayette, McNeese State University in Lake Charles, La., or LSU at Alexandria, La.

Alice Voorhies, a UL Lafayette instructor and coordinator of 2 + 2, said that when they graduate, those students usually take teaching jobs in

the small, rural communities where they live.

“We have provided about 250 certified teachers to areas that just would not have had them otherwise,” she noted.

In May 2008, Sonnier graduated with a 3.85 grade point average, the sixth highest in his class. In the fall, he traded in his custodian’s coveralls for a shirt and tie and returned to Port Barre Elementary School. But he hasn’t left his previous job behind completely.

“I clean my own classroom. I tell the custodians, ‘Y’all don’t even come in my room. I got this.’ My room’s going to be cleaned by myself and my students. ... That’s part of

learning, too. Teaching them how to be responsible, how to clean up after themselves. I look at it as a part of teaching, so I don’t mind doing it.”

Along with a sense of responsibility, Sonnier shares something else with students: humor.

“I told them, ‘Guess what, you made history.’

“We made history?”

“I said, ‘Yes, you’re the first class at Port Barre Elementary to be taught by a custodian.’” At this, Sonnier laughs aloud.

But he is not done “making history.” Once his two required years of supervised teaching are done, he intends to re-enroll at UL Lafayette to pursue a master’s degree in administration and supervision. “I want to become a principal ... That’s my ultimate goal.

“I believe God has a way of using people for certain things. And I really feel that I am, I guess, a messenger that you can do anything if you set your mind to it.

“It’s not where you start, it’s where you finish.” ■



Sonnier plans to continue his education to become a school principal.