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Dear State President:

I'm out to pasture, 72 years old, too long retired to really even know what's going on inside my union (I'm life member of both state and national Associations.) Nonetheless, this is what I'd like to say to today's younger teachers who might be waiting for someone else to do the heavy lifting to help their association survive.

### **AN OPEN LETTER TO "YOUNG" TEACHERS AND UNION MEMBERS**

I am at an age where admitting I'm getting old is no longer an issue. Having a daughter who's already a veteran suburban middle school principal is a piece of reality therapy...so is being retired for a dozen years, a veteran retiree on Medicare who still cares, deeply...so is having eight grandchildren in public school, and another one near 26 years of age.

But this is an important musing, about your present and your future. Succinctly: the future is **yours** to make or break; not they (whoever "they" happens to be).

Recently a friend, still active, made some comments that lead to this recollection/reflection. These were the exact words, recalling the comments of a retired teacher, now a regular substitute in another state: "***Young educators are dividing from mature educators over benefit splits. Young educators say "sure, enjoy your retirement. We will never get one." Many young educators truly have buy-in to the mind-set that nobody cares about them. Nobody would be the EA. And at the same time they are too busy to be engaged in the EA. Therefore too busy to create an environment in which they can care for themselves and their profession.***"

Those words troubled me. They caused me to think back to a day 47 years ago, July 21, 1965, when I signed my third teaching contract in the Superintendents office at Anoka Senior High School (the same school from which Garrison Keillor had graduated five years earlier; the place that helped birth his "Lake Wobegon" stories.)

I was 25 that summer of '65, and had two years of teaching in another state. I had never lived in Minnesota before. I knew no one.

Three days later, July 24, my wife died at University Hospital in Minneapolis. Her illness - kidney disease - was the reason we were in Minnesota. She'd begun our marriage as a teacher, too. Illness ended her career after two months.

I began the 1965-66 school year deep in debt, working two jobs, and caring for our 1 1/2

year old son.

It could certainly be said that I was "too busy" and I was.

Things stabilized, but I was still a single parent and too busy and poor. Then, sometime in 1968, came an event I vividly remember.

Ours was a large Association even then. Today the school district is Minnesota's largest.

In those days, there was no such thing as 'staff', nor contracts or bargaining, at least as we now know them. Everything was volunteer.

This particular year the Association president was a teaching colleague of mine, Ron Swanson.

I don't remember a lot about Ron, but I do remember that he often hauled around a cardboard box, which held the AHEA (Association) files, and that he was having serious trouble with migraine headaches.

I was "too busy", of course. There were assorted complaints in the teachers lounge about why the 'EA wasn't doing this or that. The 'EA we knew was Ron Swanson.

Finally, something tripped in me. I made a decision that either I would be part of the solution or part of the problem, and I became active, first as a faculty rep, then as Association Public Relations person, then as President-Elect, then as Association UniServ Staff four years later.

My first year on staff happened also to be the first year of collective bargaining in Minnesota - 1972. NEA's UniServ program was in its infancy, but exploding. None of us knew much about anything, but we forged ahead and made the kinds of gains that 40 years later many teachers now take for granted: maternity leave, sick leave, and on and on and on. Twenty-seven years later I retired.

Today is not the best of times for the organized teaching profession. Public sector Unions have been demonized for years - a very conscious and deliberate strategy - and it is pretty easy to divide and conquer by ginning up resentment, from inside and outside the public school. Veterans are getting pensions that young teachers think they'll never get; paying dues seems to be considered more a cost than a benefit.

All I can say is "been there, done that".

IF the NEA and its state affiliates and the union movement go away, as is the dream of some very powerful people, everyone, including those powerful people, will wonder why things in this country got worse, rather than better.

Complain if you wish, but complain from a platform of being active in your local, state and national union. You are the Association.

Have a great 2012-13, and work hard in election 2012. Dick Bernard

