

## **Inspirational Teacher Richard Golenko** **A Story by Darleen Totten**

Being a teacher is a responsibility I don't take lightly. I realize that I frequently impact lives in ways I never could imagine. I know that each student brings their own baggage into my classroom, and I have the power to help ease their load. I know these things because as a student forty years ago I had a teacher who inspired me to keep living when I thought things could never get better.

I had the usual struggles in school. I didn't get picked on too much, but enough. Things went from bad to worse when my father died and my mother decided I needed to move out. My life was spiraling downward and just waking up in the morning was painful. I didn't want to face life, much less high school. I felt totally isolated from the world, and the taunts at school stung even deeper.

Mr. Richard Golenko was a new teacher. He always had a smile and was my favorite teacher long before my dad died. He seemed to know just what to say to make me feel important. Going to school was getting harder for me living on my own. He must have sensed this because he asked me to help him grade papers. It is such a simple thing. Each day I got up and went to school because Mr. Golenko needed me. He gave me a purpose.

As graduation approached, everyone else was so excited. They had family and friends there to watch the big day. I had nobody. I was in the parking lot alone and crying. I heard my name and turned to see Mr. Golenko standing there with his big smile and outstretched arms. I will never forget his words, "You are an amazing person. You have overcome so much and are such an inspiration. Your dad would be so proud of you. Now, you must go to college and continue to make him proud."

The summer after graduation, I decided that I didn't want to go to college. I didn't want to do anything. I would just continue to work at the movies and try to make the best of things – search for happiness. I had very vivid dreams about my father. In each dream he was urging me to change my course in life. After the third dream I remember sitting up in bed and crying. Suddenly, a familiar voice came to mind, saying, "Now you must go to college and continue to make him proud." It was at that moment that I knew I wanted to go into the education field and not only make my dad proud, but to make a difference in the lives of others.

Mr. Golenko gave me a new purpose in life with those words: spreading hope and encouragement through teaching. He saved my life in so many ways. Each day, I do my best to emulate Mr. Golenko and to remember the awesome responsibility I hold in my hands.