**Who Mentored Whom?**

**Prominent Americans Recall Their Mentors**

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Excerpted from *The Person Who Changed My Life: Prominent Americans Recall Their Mentors*. Matilda Raffa Cuomo, Editor.

**Walter Cronkite: My Mentor, My Teacher**  
“I went to San Jacinto High School in Houston, Texas, in the 1930s, and was fortunate to come in contact with a man who would inspire me to become a career print and broadcast journalist. Fred Birney was a pioneer in high school journalism. Very few high schools at that time even taught journalism, and many schools didn't have their own student newspaper.

“Fred talked the Houston Board of Education into allowing him to teach a journalism class once a week at three local high schools, one of which was San Jacinto. He was a newspaperman of the old school and taught us a great deal about reporting and writing. He also became a sponsor of the San Jacinto High School newspaper, the Campus Cub. Under his tutelage, we published it monthly, whereas it had previously been published in a casual manner, just three or four times a year. During my junior year, I was the sports editor of the Campus Cub and its chief editor in my senior year...

“He was well-connected with the three newspapers in Houston. During the summer of my junior year, he secured his interested students jobs as copy boys and girls with the *Houston Post*.

“We exchanged several letters until his death, shortly after my high school graduation. He taught me so much in those high school classes, and by securing me those early jobs, he cemented my desire to be a reporter for the rest of my life. He was my major inspiration. I always credit Fred Birney for my career.”

**James Earl Jones: My Mentor, My Professor**  
“I was raised by my grandparents, and I would say that my grandfather was, and still is, my hero. Outside of the family, my most influential role model was a high school English teacher, Donald Crouch. Professor Crouch was a former college teacher who had worked with Robert Frost, among others. He had retired to a farm near the small Michigan town where I lived, but when he discovered that there was a need for good teachers locally, he came to teach at my small agricultural high school.

“Growing up, I had a hard time speaking because I was a stutterer and felt self-conscious. Professor Crouch discovered that I wrote poetry, a secret I was not anxious to divulge, being a typical high school boy. After learning this, he questioned me about why, if I loved words so much, I couldn't say them out loud. One day I showed him a poem I had written, and he responded to it by saying that it was too good to be my own work, that I must have copied it from someone. To prove that I hadn't plagiarized it, he wanted me to recite the poem, by heart, in front of the entire class. I did as he asked, got through it without stuttering, and from then on I had to write more, and speak more. This had a tremendous effect on me, and my confidence grew as I learned to express myself comfortably out loud.

“On the last day of school we had our final class outside on the lawn, and Professor Crouch presented me with a gift--a copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Self-Reliance*. This was invaluable to me because it summed up what he had taught me--self-reliance. His influence on me was so basic that it extended to all areas of my life. He is the reason I became an actor.”

**Tim Russert: My Mentor, My Teacher**  
“In the seventh grade at St. Bonaventure School in Buffalo, New York, Sister Mary Lucille, a Sister of Mercy, was both impressed and yet concerned by--shall we say--my excessive energy in class. She expressed that in her words, ‘We have to channel that energy, Timothy,’ because I was prone to mischief. One day she told me, ‘I'm going to start a school newspaper and you're going to be the editor. This means that you have to give out assignments, you have to edit the copy, you have to write your own articles, you have to go around and interview students, teachers, and administrative people, and publish the paper. You have to distribute it. You have to decide whether you're going to charge for it, or if you're going to have a fundraiser to underwrite the cost.’ It became this extraordinary project that I threw myself into and so did all my friends. It left us little time to get in trouble because we were so devoted to the paper. Then she said, ‘If you don't keep up your grades, we're not going to be able to do the second edition of the newspaper.’ That made us all committed to studying harder.

“On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated. We did a special edition of the paper and sent a copy to the new president, President Johnson; to Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy; and to Robert Kennedy, the attorney general. Some months later we received personal responses from all of them, which changed our lives. Here we were, only months ago with nothing and wondering whether or not school was worth our while--whether school could be fun, whether school was meaningful--and along came this young nun who created this entity called a school newspaper that we became deeply involved in. We learned how to report, how to communicate, how to write; and then, on top of all that, people we watched on television, people who were so far removed from our ordinary lives, suddenly acknowledged not only our existence, but our work. From that day forward I was determined that I would have a career in journalism/public service.

“We continued our newspaper in eighth grade. I was going on to high school and Sister Lucille suggested I go to Canisius High School, the Jesuit school in Buffalo. I said, ‘Sister, its downtown, where all the rich kids go, sons of doctors and lawyers.’ My dad was a truck driver and left school in tenth grade to fight in World War II. Sister Lucille insisted that I take the entrance exam, which I did. I won a partial scholarship that helped with the tuition because we couldn't afford it.

“I know that if I had not had the intervention and support of Sister Lucille and Father Sturm, I would not be the moderator of *Meet the Press*.”

**Martin Sheen: My Mentor, My Pastor**  
“Father Al arrived at Holy Trinity for his first parish assignment when I was 14. He was an energetic young man with an innate wisdom who believed our personal relationships were reflective of our relationship to God. It was not long before he was having a noticeable effect on every family in the parish despite his lifelong struggle with shyness, which endeared him to us all the more. I served mass for him regularly, and he was my confessor.

“Even as a boy I dreamed of going to New York after high school to pursue an acting career, but my father was determined that I attend college. This became the most contentious issue between us for a number of years. Unfortunately, I was never a good student, and when I flunked out of high school in my senior year my father was disappointed and angry. Father Al advised me to go to summer school and graduate. He also suggested that to appease my father I agree to take the entrance exams to the University of Dayton. I did both.

“Unknown to anyone, I purposely failed the exam, scoring just 3 percent out of a possible 100. My father got the message, but still would not bless my dream. Perhaps he wanted to see some proof of my talent or determination. Father Al stepped forward again and, careful not to offend my father, he loaned me enough money, out of his own pocket, to get started, and soon I was on my way. Several months later, when I was settled in New York building a life for myself in the theater, my father very lovingly came around and became my biggest supporter.

“Over the years my relationship with Father Al matured and his friendship became invaluable. Although my journey took me far away and at times I became lost, he was always there like an anchor reminding me to continually ask those two key little questions: Who are you? Why are you here? As long as I can answer at least one of them, I always know where I'm going, and Father Al will always remain with me.”