

Remembering Nurse Szyman

Remarks by Principal Swanson on January 22, 2022

Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Rick Swanson, and I'm the principal at Hingham High School. It's an honor to have this chance to speak with you this afternoon and to share some reflections on one of the most well loved people our school has ever known.

When I first came to Hingham High School fifteen years ago, as an assistant principal, Nurse Szyman was already a legend; already one of the most recognized and admired members of the school community; already a sage, loved not only for her wisdom and expertise, but even more so for her endless generosity, her compassion, and her constant willingness to serve as a champion of those in need. To work alongside Pat Szyman for a full decade was a genuine privilege. And although she retired the same year I became principal, I can attest that her spirit continues to infuse not only the nurse's office but also the broader culture and climate of our school.

It goes without saying that the past two years have been incredibly difficult for everybody, and especially for those who work as school nurses. Pat's successors, Kristine O'Keeffe and Kristina McManus, have proven to

be worthy inheritors of her legacy. They show the same kind of devotion that Pat once brought to the humble office at the end of the long 290s corridor. I've often thought: "They stand on the shoulders of a giant." A person who showed all of us exactly what a school nurse *could* be and *ought to* be. Their work, always challenging, was made even more difficult this past week because, since Monday, when we learned the sad news of Nurse Szyman's passing, the entire faculty of Hingham High School has been plagued by watery eyes and a collective lump in the throat. The news generated an outpouring of grief and more than a few tears throughout our school. But at the same, for the many of us who knew her, the sad news also prompted the retelling of stories and the retelling of her most famous jokes, some of which will no doubt be retold here again today.

The sad news also sent Denise Stanley, a member of our counseling staff, into the archives in search of Pat's school records. There, Denise found priceless artifacts, which I will soon present to Pat's daughters. These faded documents, hidden away in a file cabinet for more than a half century, help to resurrect the young Patty Hoar, daughter of Francis and Elizabeth, who lived first at White Horse Road and then moved to Downer Avenue; who entered kindergarten in the fall of 1955, impressed her teachers at Foster Elementary, and later did the same at Hingham High. I'll

be honest: Some of the teachers' comments surprised me. Especially the fifth grade teacher who remarked on Patty's "shyness" as a potential hindrance to achieving her full potential. We did not see much of that "shyness" at HHS in later years, and I have to wonder now if the teacher thought she was writing on the card of some other quieter student.

The documents contain other nuggets, most of them handwritten, and some have proven to be nothing short of prophesy. The A in advanced biology during her senior year, is one good example. Or how about her attendance record? Pat was tardy exactly one time during her four years of high school. As would be the case later, when she served the same school so well as a nurse, she could be counted on. Not just to be present, though her presence alone was enough to lift those around her, but to do her job with a marvelous combination of skill, humor, and grace.

As a former history teacher, I enjoyed studying Pat's school records as a primary source with something to teach us about our past. One of the things I noticed on the high school transcript is that Pat's graduation in 1968, a most turbulent year in American history, coincided with the date of Robert Kennedy's funeral. As many of you already know, Senator Kennedy was running for president that spring and, just two months after the assassination of Martin Luther King, RFK was also killed, only moments

after declaring victory in the California primary. Imagine being a high school senior, like Pat and her classmates, at that moment in history and imagine dressing in your cap and gown on June 8, 1968, the very day that Senator Kennedy would be laid to rest. Some of you will recall that day and others, like me, may not be quite old enough to remember it, but have read about it and perhaps been moved by the words of Kennedy's eulogy, delivered that day by his only surviving brother. In closing, I'd like to paraphrase those famous words here because they express perfectly what would also be said today about our friend, Pat Szyman: "She need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what she was in life. She should be remembered as a good and decent person, who saw wrong and tried to right, who saw suffering and tried to heal it... Those of us who loved her and who celebrate her life today, pray that what she was to us, and what she wished for others, will someday come to pass for all the world."