

# Teacher, advocate, ambassador, legend: ‘The Ms. Naccach experience’ has made all the difference

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## OPINION

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### THE SOAPBOX

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Stand up. Speak up. It's your turn.

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Central High School is, even with a reduced student population in recent years, a busy place.

If it were a city, it would be a big one – like New York. Its Times Square would be the spot where the ground floors of the James and the Burns buildings intersect. It is from a tiny, windowless office in that precise location that Selma Naccach-Hoff has chaired Central's English department for roughly half of her 45-year career as a teacher and mentor to thousands of Manchester kids. It is from this perspective that she has watched the rich pageant of four generations of American high school students march by day after day.

Next week, that office and her classroom one floor above (where her real work was accomplished and her legacy cemented) will be cleared of nearly five decades worth of memorabilia, and she will enter a well-deserved and active retirement. I have been lucky – blessed, really – to have known Ms. Naccach as a student, a colleague in the Central English department, and as a member of community boards, including the Bean Foundation and the Central Hall of Fame Committee.

The outpouring of emotion evident as the countdown to her *final* final bell begins is a function not of the quantity of her contribution (although, it has to be said, 45 years is a long time) but its quality.

At Central, Ms. Naccach, quite simply, is a legend.



Selma Naccach-Hoff

Very early in her tenure at Central, she achieved cult status among her students. An '80s edition of the school's literary magazine, which she advised for most of the 45 years of her tenure, carried a story entitled "Selma the Libber," which portrayed a crusading heroine as a mythological goddess fighting the patriarchy. (When students write stories about you, it means they really like you.) Some years back, her always tasteful and literally remarkable wardrobe – "Students, this necklace is made of dried banana slices" – became such an object of fascination that a group of students took it upon themselves to record what she wore every day to test the long-circulated hypothesis that she never repeated an outfit. The hypothesis turned out to be valid.

When I was Ms. Naccach's student, her career was just getting underway, but her reputation for high expectations and rigor and her cultivated sense of personal presentation were already well established. To be her student was a bit intimidating for pimply-faced adolescents like me, who regarded admission to her World Cultures class senior year – the Ms. Naccach experience would have been wasted on underclassmen – with equal amounts of anticipation and trepidation. My sister, who had taken the class the year before I enrolled, warned me how closely one had to read assigned works to have any chance on the matching section of her tests. For the first few weeks or so as a student in her class, I regarded her with awe and thought of her like a china doll to be placed on a shelf and admired from afar. As the days in class wore on, however, she revealed herself to be remarkably humane, a trait I would come to fully appreciate as her colleague when she always advocated taking the kind approach to conflicts with students.

I shall never forget – perhaps because she has not let me – one particular lesson in humanity from my high school days.

My class had been assigned Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," a book that features a character whose destitution and desperation forced her into prostitution. Mouthing the pieties of my middle-class upbringing, I suggested the fallen woman might have taken in laundry to make ends meet. Gently but intentionally, Ms. Naccach guided the class through a sensitive discussion of the limitations of women's choices throughout history. I think of this lesson when my students fail to consider man's innate moral frailty before passing judgment – something high school students are wont to do.

As I learned when I served as the school district's coordinator of school and community relations 20 years after leaving Ms. Naccach's class, she was not the focus of just her students' attention, she was often on the minds of upper-level district administrators as well. I sat in on many meetings in which these administrators would ask "What's Selma going to think?" when a new or untested initiative would be rolled out. When one innovative enterprise was going to be presented to the school board, Ms. Naccach was asked to attend the board meeting to nod approvingly when the relevant presentation was being made. To students, colleagues, parents, administrators, and school board members, she was the gold standard whose mere physical presence conferred credibility on an

initiative.

Finally, she has been a wonderful ambassador for public education to the greater Manchester business and non-profit community. Not content to advance its cause from the limited confines of her classroom, she defended Manchester's schools (and Central in particular) and spread the word about their multiple achievements through her service as a trustee and chair of the Bean Foundation, the Visiting Nurses' Association board, the Elliot Hospital board, and Reaching Higher NH.

As she would endlessly tell her classes, Flaubert's "Madame Bovary" is her favorite work. What Flaubert wrote of his heroine so many years ago could easily be written of the heroine of our story, Selma Naccach-Hoff, and the perfect combination of person and place that marked her tenure at Central and defines the lasting impression she leaves on her students, her colleagues, and her school: "She possessed that indefinable beauty that comes from happiness, enthusiasm, and success – a beauty that is nothing more or less than a harmony of temperament and circumstance."

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