

Hillsdale Stories:

S U S A N B E D F O R D



Susan Bedford at Hillsdale High School, 1977

Hillsdale High School is able to offer award-winning programs like our Small Learning Communities because parents, alumni, and community members give generously to the Foundation Fund. This month, we're bringing you the story of a tribute gift and the woman who inspired it: former Hillsdale teacher Susan Bedford.

Powerful Moments at Hillsdale High School

Susan began her thirty-year stint as an English teacher at Hillsdale High School in 1970, after earning degrees in English and German from Stanford University. Sometime during the 1988-1989 school year, Greg Jouriles, who taught Social Studies at Hillsdale, started getting complaints from his students: they were frustrated because he and Susan were assigning projects that came due at the same time.

Susan's class was in the middle of studying William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, which tells the story of a group of boys stranded on an island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean after an airplane crash. Greg's class was learning about the rise of fascism during World War II. Because Greg

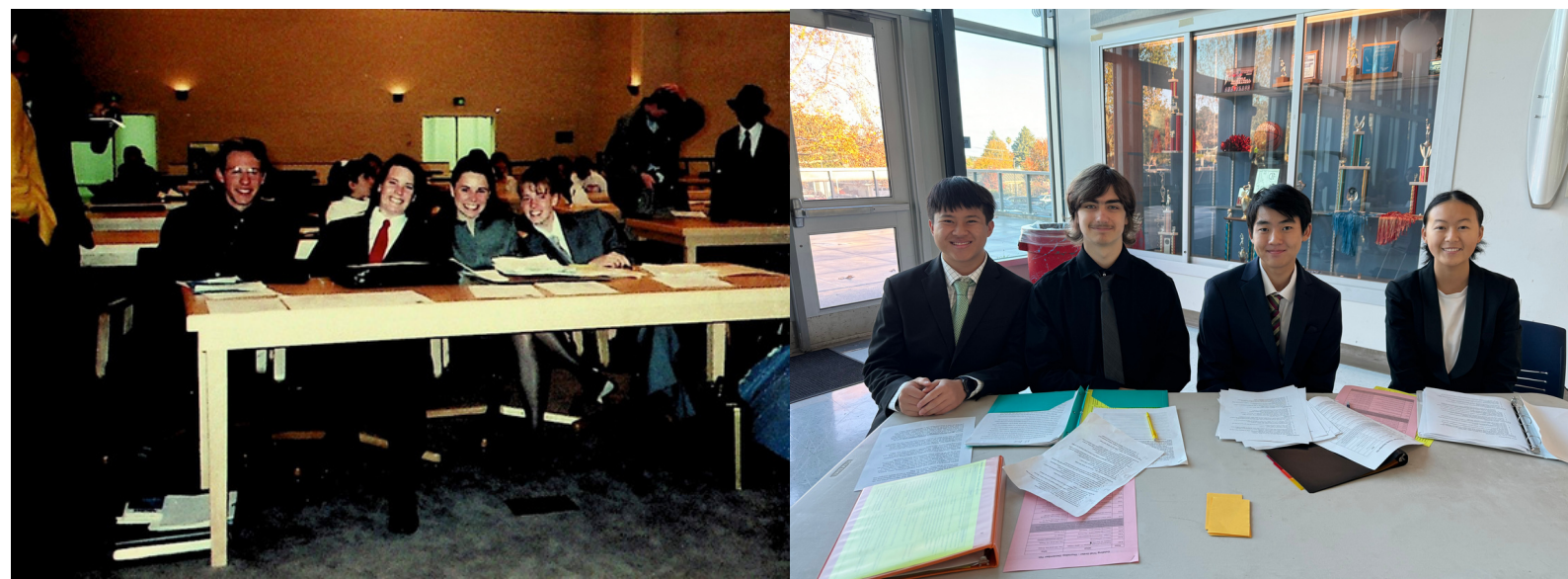
had a background in anthropology, he approached Susan with an idea: why not work together to create an engaging project for their students that examined the parallels between the two topics?

“Susan loved her subject, knew her subject, and was able to convey her passion and knowledge to her students,” says Greg. “She was also open-minded, willing to take risks, and creative.”

And so an incredible partnership was born. Susan and Greg collaborated to create the William Golding Trial, the first of many projects they would spend thousands of hours fashioning out of a desire to build powerful experiences for students that were as exciting and memorable as any sporting event or high school rite of passage, like prom. The Trial starts with William Golding accused of libeling human nature in *Lord of the Flies*. Students are tasked with portraying all of the characters you see in a courtroom drama; expert witnesses like Mark Twain and Ghandi might make an appearance. Sometimes, Golding is acquitted and freed; sometimes, he’s convicted. For more than thirty years, his fate has been in the hands of Hillsdale students.

“The William Golding Trial is the single best thing we get to do,” says Sarah Press, an English teacher at Hillsdale who happens to teach in Greg’s old classroom. “The book asks a totally provocative question about all of humanity, and it’s a way to get kids to engage with ideas in a way that’s motivating and exciting.”

The Trial has proven to be such an extraordinary experience for students that it is now taught in schools across the country.



Student attorneys at the William Golding Trial, then (left) and today (right)

Here’s a fun fact! Did you know that the William Golding Trial was featured in the book *The Power of Moments*, by Chip Heath and Dan Heath? If you don’t have time to read the book, you can [check out Dan Heath’s explanation about why the William Golding Trial is such an amazing experience for students on YouTube.](#)

Planting the Seeds of the Small Learning Communities Model

Susan and Greg continued to collaborate. They developed a pilot program for 9th grade Honors students that featured an integrated, performance-based humanities curriculum and focused on creating a sense of community in the classroom. In time, this would blossom into Hillsdale's much-loved Small Learning Communities. Susan also served as the English curriculum coordinator at Hillsdale from 1994 to 2000, and was a member of the original Association-District joint evaluation and staff development committees, which emphasized the portfolio projects and dedicated collaboration time that are Hillsdale hallmarks today.

Susan was always trying "to find the right question and the right activity to create the most powerful experiences for students," says Greg.

The work Susan did was like a case study for what Small Learning Communities could be, says Sarah. "The goal was to make lower-division academics as motivating and awe-inspiring as sports. Susan was all about project-based learning, big ideas, open outcomes, and positive peer pressure."

Passing the Torch as a BTSA Mentor

In 1997, Susan won a Fulbright-Hays award to travel to post-apartheid South Africa and participate in a seminar titled "Understanding for the New South Africa: A Major African Power in Transition". This trip would go on to serve as the inspiration for another module that Hillsdale students participate in to this day: a mock hearing of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Not long after, in 2000, Susan left Hillsdale to become a Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) mentor for the San Mateo Union High School District (SMUHSD), as well as an adjunct professor of education and leadership at Notre Dame de Namur University. She would go on to mentor 141 new teachers, many of whom still work at Hillsdale and in SMUHSD today.

Susan served as Sarah's BTSA mentor during her first two years teaching English at Hillsdale, and they met at least twice a month for an hour during that period. Sarah remembers that Susan would appear for their meetings with perfect shoes and a "ninja highlighter" (a highlighter with multiple, different-colored tips).

"I can't think of a truer measure of a lifelong educator than one who enables her students to learn and grow on their own terms, in ways that are personally valuable to them, and Susan consistently embodies this quality."

-- Sarah Press,
English
teacher at
Hillsdale High
School

Sarah says meeting with Susan was “like weekly therapy with someone who was willing to just sit and listen. She had a talent for letting me be miserable and vent up to a certain point, and then stepping in at the perfect moment to offer suggestions.” The result, Sarah recalls, was the perfect “combination of caring and constructive criticism that helped me grow immensely as a teacher.”

Enshrining Professional Development at Hillsdale

In October 2023, Susan celebrated her 80th birthday. To honor this wonderful occasion and Susan’s many contributions to Hillsdale, Susan’s daughter, Kate Bedford, made a gift to the Foundation that would further Susan’s “vision of creative, hands-on teaching and interdisciplinary collaboration, as well as her love for teacher support and development”. In the coming year, this gift will give teachers in Hillsdale’s English and Social Studies departments the funding they need to pursue professional development opportunities around programs or projects involving interdisciplinary and/or hands-on teaching.

“This is such an incredible gift,” says Sarah. Projects like the ones Susan created and championed “come out of knowledge and passion and collaboration between educators. Giving educators time to sit down with each other and talk, to learn and reflect and dream and be creative, gives them the time and space they need to create projects as big as Susan created... Creating innovative experiences for students transforms their relationship to school.”



Many thanks to Don Leydig, Greg Jouriles, Kate Bedford, and Sarah Press for contributing to this article!

Susan celebrated her 80th birthday this year.