

Described as “a bright light for his colleagues to follow,” Tom McCrary guided many beginning teachers at Flat Rock Middle toward successful careers in education, and created a safe space where his students could realize their potentials.

A 1967 East Henderson High graduate, Mr. McCrary returned to Henderson County Public Schools’ East district in 1976 as a teacher at Flat Rock Junior High, after beginning his teaching career in Greenville, S.C. During his 31-year tenure at Flat Rock, Mr. McCrary taught English language arts, social studies, and science, in addition to serving as a reading specialist.

He advocated for students by organizing a Students-At-Risk program at Flat Rock, and championed public education in North Carolina as delegate to the 1979 National Education Association National Convention, president of the Henderson County Education Association (1979-81), and North Carolina Teaching Fellows Scholarship Committee (1987-93).

More than that, he inspired confidence in his peers and students.

“He was an instructional coach before we had instructional coaches,” writes Scott Cowan, who was assigned to Mr. McCrary’s middle school teacher team in 1995. “He was a mentor without an official mentorship program.”

Now an HCPS instructional coach himself, Mr. Cowan recalls how Mr. McCrary helped transform a beginning teacher who was, admittedly, “a bit of a mess” when he started out. Mr. Cowan said his mentor taught him valuable lessons in classroom management, time management, and school culture, with a “calming presence and steadfast reassurance.”

Those same qualities, coupled with Mr. McCrary’s investment in each of his students, made him a pivotal role model in the lives of some Flat Rock youth.

Former student Susan Daigle Elmer writes that in 1995, she was brand new to North Carolina and living in a turbulent, abusive home. Not only did Mr. McCrary pinpoint her passion of English and reading – and made sure all her California credits transferred to Flat Rock – his classroom made her feel safe enough to express herself through her own writing.

“He praised and encouraged me when no one else in my life saw anything special in me,” Ms. Elmer writes. “I felt that I *was* because he said I was, and he meant it.”

“As a young insecure adolescent, he spoke truth into my life at the right time and made me feel good about who I was,” writes Katie Bradley, former student and current assistant principal at East Henderson High. “He saw me for who I was then, but also for who I could become – and I will be forever grateful.”