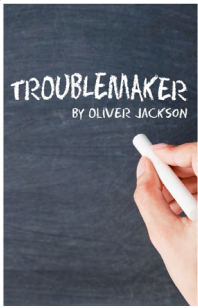


## Troublemaker

By Oliver Jackson



[1] I was born a troublemaker. On January 1, 1956, I came into the world three minutes too late to win the “First Baby of the New Year” gift basket the hospital was giving away. My mother still talks about that event as if it were my fault. Among others that actually were my fault. There was the time I covered my baby sister with stamps and tried to sneak her out to the mailbox. And the time I made a huge sand castle. In my room.

[2] Ten years later, I was sitting outside the principal's office for making trouble. Actually, I just didn't understand the assignment and became upset. “What to do with the troublemaker?” someone asked, referring to me. The principal's reply: “Mr. Freeman will straighten him out next year.”

[3] Mr. Freeman was my sixth-grade teacher. He had been teaching for many years, but had never lost his love for the profession. I remember the inspirational sayings he posted on the classroom bulletin boards.

[4] My family was poor and couldn't afford winter gloves for me. Mr. Freeman must have noticed my frozen fingers after I'd been building snow forts at recess. He handed me a pair of thick gloves. He said they were unclaimed from the school's Lost-and-Found. I'm sure he bought them for me.

[5] When I failed a math test, Mr. Freeman tutored me before school. He had a creative method for helping me understand relationships between fractions. I grouped raisins and broke apart little stick pretzels, and ate them when the lesson ended. Math became my favorite subject.

[6] The attention from Mr. Freeman made me feel important and smart. I suspected that I was his favorite student. Being a “teacher's pet” is usually an invitation to teasing from classmates. But somehow, the other kids didn't seem to mind.

[7] After that year, I'd send Mr. Freeman an occasional letter to tell him what I was doing. Often I asked for his advice when I was struggling with something. I graduated from high school, served in the Army, and worked as a roofer. I enrolled in college at age 26.

[8] Soon after that, I learned that Mr. Freeman had died. I went to the funeral. Dozens of his former students were there. Some of Mr. Freeman's inspirational sayings were on display. I recall one in

particular: “You make a living by what you get, but you make a life by what you give.”

[9] Some of my old classmates from sixth grade were at the funeral. We started talking. I mentioned that I was probably his favorite student that year. “No, I was his favorite,” said one guy. “think I was,” said someone else. Everyone believed that he or she had been singled out for special attention! Mr. Freeman had had that effect on us.

[10] I chose my career right then and there. I would be a teacher, just like him. I would take his gift of making students feel special and pass it on in my own classroom. With Mr. Freeman as my inspiration and role model, I have never doubted my decision.

[11] Now I can look back on a remarkable and rewarding career. I'm retiring next month, after 35 years of teaching math. Mr. Freeman made his life by giving to others. I'm proud to say that I did the same.