

David Acanfora retires from Frontier Schools after 42 years

By Jeff Schober
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Reaching the top of the stairs just before 7 a.m., David Acanfora turns left toward his classroom. Weather is warming, and the students he instructs have mixed emotions about leaving high school behind. Acanfora understands their sentiments each May, but this year, it's especially poignant.

Although the buildings and room assignments have changed several times, for more than four decades, Acanfora has taught social studies at Frontier Schools in Hamburg. This term, after 42 years, will be his last. He has mulled retirement for nearly a decade, but always put off the decision, finding a reason to return.

Soles of his shoes ring across the empty hallway. Opening the door to room 237, overhead lights snap on as Acanfora tosses his shoulder bag onto a cluttered desk, then logs into the computer. So much about teaching has changed since he began in 1973, including technology, public perception, and district leaders.

Expectations are higher for both teachers and students. But the core of the profession — guiding young people and helping them learn — remains the same.

The quiet morning will soon give way to teenage angst and energy. Acanfora smiles, savoring the last days in a long career.

“There are more obstacles to kids these days,” he reflected. “It was different when I first started. Back then, corporal punishment was allowed. Teachers would whack kids. It's a good evolution that students have been given more consideration over the years. I'm grateful to have been part of the change.”

At 66, Acanfora remains lean and youthful, carrying himself like a young man. But for graying hair and creases carved around his eyes, he might still be 35. He regularly wears sport coats without a tie, teaching government, criminal justice and psychology classes to 12th graders.

However, instruction time is only a narrow window of each day. As he deals with young people straddling the line toward adulthood, his role is to prepare them for the outside world, where codes aren't always as rigid, but expectations are higher.

“One of the rules of his classroom is don't ask to go to the bathroom,” said Hayley Wright, 17, a senior in Acanfora's government class. “He thinks you're old enough to have the freedom to walk out and come back. You're going to look funny if you ask to go to the bathroom when you're sitting in a college class. He respects you, and that's why students respect him too.”

It's not just students who appreciate Acanfora's personality. Jeffrey Sortisio, the building principal since 2008, was three years old when Acanfora began teaching.

“He understands the importance of his subject, understands where it fits,” Sortisio said. “Dave works with students at a very vulnerable age. Seniors are in such a change mode. They're stepping into the next phase of their life. There's a lot of internal chaos for them. You need someone who can say, listen, it's going to be okay. And I've heard him say that. He offers students that calm, experienced presence, and offers it to his colleagues and to me as well.”

It is not unusual for students to drop by Acanfora's classroom throughout the day during an off period. Some bring sandwiches and eat lunch there, hanging out.

Recently, a flustered girl stormed into the room, empty except for Acanfora. Behind his desk, he looked up patiently, addressing her by name. She complained about another teacher, who had just dismissed her from class for misbehaving. In an effort to cool off, the girl sought Acanfora.

She complained, words edged with annoyance, pushing dark hair off her forehead. Had she been sent to the office? Acanfora wondered. No, the girl said, continuing her rant about the other teacher: “I really don't like him.”

“So what?” Acanfora said. His tone was soothing, non-confrontational. “It's not about that. Take a breath and relax. You're going to meet a million people in life that you don't like. You've probably only met half of them so far. You've got to figure out a way to deal with it.”

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Teaching was never part of Acanfora's career plan.

After graduating from St. Francis High School, he earned a psychology degree from Gannon University in 1970. Returning to Buffalo, Acanfora tested water for an environmental company, but the job was temporary.

His mother, Millie, was a cook at Cloverbank Elementary School. Substitute teachers were in demand, and state law allowed a person to work up to 40 days without certification. She suggested her son give it a try.

“When the call came to sub that first day, I didn’t even own a tie,” Acanfora said. “I had to scramble to find a suit coat.”

All of 22 years old, he walked into a middle school classroom. Students were out of control, and Acanfora realized he needed to assert authority. He identified one girl as the ringleader, locking her in a closet for the period.

“If I tried that today, I’d be brought up on charges,” he laughed. “She’s a grown woman now, and ten years ago I taught her kids. We joke about it whenever we see each other.”

Acanfora spent two years subbing and hopping between odd jobs. During a summer day in 1973, he was doing work in his parents’ yard when the phone rang inside the house. Acanfora rushed through the door to answer.

“We’ve heard good things about you from your time as a sub,” said Robert Starr, Frontier’s superintendent. “How’d you like to teach at Frontier? We’d love to have you. Come in tomorrow and sign your contract.”

Today, between tight budgets and curriculum demands, teaching jobs are scarce. The hiring process is competitive, involving portfolios, interviewing before a committee of principals, teachers and students, and teaching a sample lesson.

Not so for Acanfora.

“I went back outside, where my mom was still raking the yard,” he recalled. “She saw my face and asked what was up. I told her, I think I just got a job.”

When he visited the superintendent the next day, Acanfora was informed he would teach middle school reading and social studies. But Acanfora was also scolded for hair that was too long; he agreed to a haircut. He taught at Frontier Middle School until transferring to the high school in 1987.

“To me, teaching was one of the farthest things from my mind when I left college,” he said. “But it was amazing how things fell into place. When I stood up in front of that class, I

realized I had found the perfect fit. Now, 42 years later, I can't even imagine doing anything else. I tell my students, if you're patient, the right things will hit you. The corollary to that is, don't you hate when your parents are right?"

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Standing before tables configured into a U, Acanfora's students settle onto hard melamine seats. Fidgeting slows as they open notebooks after the bell rings. Acanfora is prepared to begin a lesson, but he can't shake a feeling that hovers over him. Is it too soon to retire? He was first eligible to leave the profession in 2004, and has contemplated it annually since then, always finding a reason to remain.

"Staying on the job was more about practicality," said Susie Acanfora, Dave's wife of 31 years. "We had children later than many of our contemporaries, so our kids were still in college, and insurance played into that equation. But I know that he's still effective as a teacher. The retirement decision had to be made at his own pace."

Even now, with the decision made, doubt still lingers.

"If it was about the money, I would have retired years ago," he said. "I'm walking out liking my job as much as I did when I started. I like the staff and I enjoy the students. People who complain about their job drive me crazy. Life is too short to complain."

Once he steps away from the classroom, Acanfora has already vowed a self-imposed exile. He will not visit Frontier next fall, nor set foot inside any school before second semester. There will be work around the house, adding stone to his fireplace, painting rooms, replacing floors. He and Susie raised three children: Ryan, 28, Liza, 26, and Evan, 24. All attended Frontier schools.

Despite the public pressures being heaped on educators, it was a hard choice to close his career.

"He enjoys his job and there's a part of him that doesn't want to leave," noted Madison Carter, 17, a high school senior. "Anyone can tell he loves his students. But he's at a point where he's been here 40-some years and has other priorities. This is where the line has been drawn."

Carter's family has a long history with Acanfora. Her parents, James and Loran, both graduated from Frontier and passed through Acanfora's classroom, as did her older brother, who graduated in 2013.

"When my parents heard he was retiring, they said, he's not even going to wait for the last generation to teach my little brother," Carter laughed. "He's friends with my grandparents. It's a whole family connection, grandma, parents, me."

Over the years, Acanfora coached, umpired baseball, and refereed basketball and soccer games. But the classroom was the focus. Estimates are that Acanfora has instructed nearly 9,000 students during his career. He doesn't remember all of them, but appreciates when former students re-introduce themselves.

"My wife and I went to the Garth Brooks show in March," he recalled. "Afterward, we had a drink at Ironworks bar. At least ten former students said hi. When you think about how many people you've taught, it's rewarding."

"Often in social situations, people come up to him and say that he helped shape their life," Susie noted proudly. "I love that."

Acanfora was once approached at O'Hare Airport in Chicago while waiting for a flight. Another time, with some buddies at a bar, he recognized a rough kid who had stabbed someone after high school and served jail time. Now nearing 30, the man crossed the room, growling at Acanfora.

"I remember you," he said.

"I remember you too," Acanfora replied, hoping to head off trouble. After a tense moment where their eyes locked, the guy smiled and put his arm around Acanfora.

"Let me buy you a drink, you son of a—" he grinned.

Students know he is approachable, because Acanfora's classroom policy is simple: everyone is afforded respect.

"It doesn't matter whether you're a genius or have special needs," he said. "I treat all kids the same. Sometimes kids just need attention from adults to get through their day. That's part of what every teacher should be doing."

With his even temper, he reminds students that this a unique time in their lives, and they should enjoy their youth. Better days lie ahead, he assures them.

“I don’t think I’m a great teacher or anything special,” he said. “I want to be remembered as a person that students could talk to, someone who would listen to their problems. Teaching is about personality and delivery. I’m just doing what every teacher should do.”

The key to lasting in any job is adaptability. It is part of Acanfora’s legacy, although he has sometimes ruffled feathers of his co-workers and bosses.

More than 30 years ago, at Frontier Middle School, his request for new textbooks was denied. When he returned to work the following September, Acanfora noticed the parking lot had been repaved and striped. He and a fellow teacher began angling their cars across several spaces as a form of protest.

“They didn’t have money for student textbooks, but could re-pave a parking lot?” Acanfora recalled. “Where was the priority?”

In this, his final year, Acanfora has quietly left his car in an administrator parking space each day. Sortisio, Frontier’s principal, has never approached him about it.

“If that’s his parting shot, I applaud him,” Sortisio smiled. “He’s earned that spot far more than me. There’s a false assumption that older teachers just do what they’ve always done and the heck with any new-fangled ideas. I don’t see that with Dave. When I observed him last year, it was hands-down one of the best lessons I’ve seen in my 12 or 13 years of observing teachers. He had a way of generating discussion among his students where he was able to step aside and listen and advise. I wish I could capture the excitement and energy in that classroom.”

As June draws closer, reality is beginning to hit home for Acanfora and his family.

“The last day will be emotional for all of us,” Susie predicted. “There’s some trepidation, but retiring will rock his world in a good way. For 30 years, I’ve been writing ‘Dave’s first day of school’ on the calendar. It will be different this fall.”

“You know you’ve had a great career when you get to the end and you’re not sure you want it to be the end,” Sortisio reflected. “Dave’s in that position. He’s still a positive influence.”

For now, memories bubble more frequently as Acanfora savors the scope of his life’s work.

“I really don’t know what’s going to happen that last day,” Acanfora confessed. “I’m starting to get nervous. I may just crash after my last class.”