

Sunburst Elementary School: A Journey of Growth, Learning, and Leadership

My time at **Sunburst Elementary School** marked a pivotal year in my life — 6th grade — a time when change was not only external but deeply personal. The year was 1979, and my family had recently moved a few miles across town to a new home in West Phoenix, near Thunderbird Road. The move marked a new chapter in my childhood, one that would shape not only my educational path but also my character and the way I would approach leadership, learning, and even creativity in the years that followed.

The Changing Landscape of West Phoenix in the Late 1970s

West Phoenix during the late 1970s was undergoing significant changes. The area was a mix of residential and suburban developments, with suburban sprawl creeping out to areas like Thunderbird Road. It was an exciting time to be in Phoenix, as the city was evolving rapidly, becoming more diverse and industrial. This created a backdrop of opportunity, but also an undercurrent of tension and transition. The neighborhood near **Thunderbird Road** was starting to see its own identity form as a growing suburban area, marked by schools like **Sunburst Elementary**, which was situated in the middle of this transformation.

The school, though small and modest in comparison to others, became a place that welcomed students from various backgrounds. Sunburst itself represented the intersection of cultural change, community-building, and education during a dynamic era in Arizona. The school's focus was to create an environment of personal growth, not just academic excellence. In many ways, this environment allowed me to thrive and find my voice. But more on that later.

A Teacher Who Believed in Me

When I arrived at Sunburst, I was already an experienced student. I had moved from one part of Phoenix to another, leaving behind my friends and familiar routines. The first person to notice my potential was a teacher who, to this day, I believe had a significant impact on my educational trajectory. She saw something in me that others might not have recognized — a drive to learn, create, and lead.

This teacher, in particular, encouraged me to go beyond my comfort zone. She didn't just treat me as another student; she nurtured my curiosity and opened doors to new opportunities. Her name is still clear in my mind, though I won't mention it here out of respect for privacy. However, her impact cannot be understated.

She had an incredible ability to foster creativity and individuality. Perhaps it was because she saw in me a passion for the arts and intellectual pursuits, but she took extra time to nurture my interests. She was the driving force behind creating a special "Humanities" class — an experimental offering for students who were intellectually curious and eager to explore art, literature, and history in a deeper way.

This special class allowed a select group of students to meet during a dedicated period instead

of attending gym class. It was here I first discovered how much I loved studying not just history or literature but the intersection between various disciplines — how different ideas and cultural movements influenced art, the way we live, and ultimately the world around us. It opened my mind to the potential of creativity, which would go on to shape my future, particularly in filmmaking.

Expanding My Academic Boundaries

During this time, I was already known for my intellectual curiosity and drive to excel. I petitioned to take algebra classes with the 8th graders, and with the backing of my Humanities teacher, I was allowed to join them. This opportunity was a massive step up from the regular curriculum, and while it was challenging, it showed me the value of pushing boundaries and seeking out challenges.

But even with these academic pursuits, there were hurdles. Moving to a new school in 6th grade meant adjusting to not just a different school culture but to a set of social dynamics that were often difficult to navigate. I quickly learned that being the new kid was not always as easy as it seemed, even if you were ahead in your classes.

Student Government: A Taste of Leadership

The year also saw me run for a position in student government. I ran for **Historian**, a role that would give me the opportunity to document our class's memories with a "real" 35mm camera — an incredibly appealing prospect for me, given my love for filmmaking and photography. However, despite my enthusiasm and what I believed was a strong campaign, I was soundly beaten by the more popular girl in class. It was a crushing defeat but one that taught me valuable lessons about leadership, popularity, and personal perseverance.

That experience in student government was a valuable precursor to understanding the dynamics of power, influence, and how to channel those energies into more productive, long-term goals. I would later use these lessons as I began to explore more complex creative and leadership roles in my life.

The "Lord of the Flies" Exercise

Perhaps the most memorable and odd experience at **Sunburst Elementary** occurred one day during a group exercise that the administration had planned for our grade. We were placed into a large circle in the classroom, and told that we had been marooned on a deserted island with no adults. We were left alone in this "Lord of the Flies"-style scenario with minimal direction, essentially told to figure out what we would do in this strange new environment.

It was a strange exercise, meant to simulate leadership, survival, and community-building under stress. For the other students, it quickly turned into chaos, as they didn't know what to do without guidance. However, I saw this as an opportunity to take charge, just as I had seen in movies and books. I stood up and suggested we needed a leader, and from there, the rest of the class took nominations. Naturally, the most popular kids were nominated, but I knew I could

offer more than just popularity — I had a clear idea of how to navigate this situation.

At that point, the staff re-entered the room and stopped the role-play. The exercise was meant to assess leadership qualities and decision-making under pressure. They asked who thought I would be a good choice. To my surprise, the entire class erupted into applause and began chanting my name: "Jack, Jack, Jack!" It was a triumphant moment for me, reinforcing the value of stepping up when the situation called for leadership.

The Aftermath: A Call to the Principal's Office

After the event, I was called to the principal's office. I remember walking down the hall with a mixture of anticipation and uncertainty. Was I in trouble? Had I overstepped my bounds by taking charge in a scenario like that? It turned out that the evaluation had been part of a broader study on leadership dynamics, and the principal wanted to acknowledge how I had taken charge. While that moment may have felt like just another small episode in a busy school year, it underscored something deeper: the power of leadership, the importance of stepping up, and how this quality could be the deciding factor in success.

Reflecting on the Experience at Sunburst

Looking back, my year at **Sunburst Elementary** — though short — was marked by growth, exploration, and self-discovery. The school, nestled in the growing suburbs of West Phoenix, helped shape me into the person I would become. It wasn't just about academics, though that was an essential part. It was also about finding my voice, developing leadership skills, and learning to navigate the challenges of being "the new kid."

From the Humanities class to the challenges in student government, to the bizarre "Lord of the Flies" scenario, every experience added to the tapestry of who I was becoming. It was here I learned to blend creativity with academics, leadership with humility, and curiosity with hard work.

As I moved on to other schools and new chapters in my life, my time at **Sunburst Elementary School** stayed with me. It had taught me the importance of pushing boundaries, challenging norms, and stepping up when the time came.