

## 19 American Icons Share Their Greatest Inspirations

Here, a group of distinguished men and women talk about who has inspired them most.

### Educator Salome Thomas-EL on Teacher Marsha Pincus

She took the time to ask whether her students had eaten breakfast in the morning, or if they had enough warm clothes to wear in winter, or if there was someone there for them when they got home from school. My English teacher, Marsha Pincus, did all that and more for me when I was growing up in inner-city Philadelphia, one of eight kids raised by a single mother.

Mrs. Pincus told me to come by or to call her if I needed to. She cared about me. She gave a skinny kid like me some extra support. Sometimes all it takes to succeed is a little help.



I had always been something of a smart-mouth when I was young, but Mrs. Pincus helped me channel my enthusiasm into something constructive. When she was out on maternity leave with her first child, a substitute teacher came in for English class. On the first day, this teacher had trouble controlling the classroom. I watched kids cutting up in front of her and got really mad. This was my favorite class; I loved learning Shakespeare.

I knew the substitute would talk to Mrs. Pincus and that she'd be disappointed.

"We need to stop this!" I shouted.

Usually I was the one clowning around, but the kids seemed to listen. I ended up standing in front of the room discussing *Julius Caesar*. Later, the substitute told Mrs. Pincus about the skinny boy who taught the lesson. Mrs. Pincus said she knew right away what had happened.

"Without her even naming you, I knew it was you," she told me.

Her eyes shone with pride.

Looking back, I think that was when the teacher in me started to emerge.

Mrs. Pincus retired this year after more than 30 years of teaching.

I spoke at her retirement party. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done. But because of this lady's encouragement, I learned I belonged in the classroom, at the front of it.

-- Salome Thomas-EL's latest book is *The Immortality of Influence* (Kensington).