

The room was ordinary. The people seated around the tables were young couples - newlyweds. A few had infants; most weren't parents yet. Four older people were present - my husband, another couple, and me. We were their mentors. Mentor was once a very intimidating word, mainly because I know myself. I've learned that my abilities, shortcomings, mistakes, and everything else combine to give me life experiences. We're not more intelligent than the people we mentor - we just have more miles on the tires.

Francie was another mentor in the room. By profession, she was a social worker several years older than me. Throughout life, she was an extraordinary example of a mentor. While most of us can be tempted only to share our best moments, Francie shared the good, the bad, and the ugly if it would benefit another human's journey. Let me be clear: she wasn't that "share way too much" awkward type of person. Francie had great discernment. What I mean is she would share about the fantastic main dish she made as well as the dessert that wasn't even edible when it came out of the oven. She shared about yelling at her son's wrestling match and probably not representing her best self.

Her stature was small. Francie wasn't worried about fashion - she was a comfortable shoes kind of person. She found her worth in her faith and self-confidence from those extra miles on the tires. It might be tempting for young, trendy couples to dismiss someone like Francie. That never happened. There was an authenticity to her that was mesmerizing. The couples would soak in her words - often not fully understanding them, but knowing they were wise and genuine.

Francie took a dry erase marker and went to the board on this particular day. She drew a simple triangle. At one end of the base, she wrote "wife" and, on the other, "husband." At the top, she wrote "our marriage." In her direct but loving style, she explained that if either spouse chose to put themselves at the top, their marriage would be a failure. She also shared that marriage wasn't like we see in romantic movies, and it would be a daily battle to fight for the marriage. No mincing words there.

What was spell-binding about Francie was she extended the triangle analogy to life in general. Many in that room hadn't yet imagined that they were close to being parents. Yet, she put children at the top of another triangle and talked about the selfless behavior it takes to raise healthy, well-adjusted, independent adults. She applied the triangle to work projects and how teams get so much less done if they don't keep their eyes on the top of the triangle.

Francie taught that everyone at the base of the triangle - spouses, work teammates, etc. - plays a different role. We bring our life stories, baggage, relatives, previous work experiences, and more to our unique spot on the base of the triangle. Everyone has a story.

What stuck in my mind was how active the process was to be part of the triangle. It's tempting to think that life is done to us. Francie painted a powerful picture of the amazing things that can happen when we see ourselves as active, vibrant participants in the triangles of our lives.

It seems simple - a three-sided figure - but it's really complex. Variables galore affect the success of whatever sits at the top of the triangle.

The triangle life is everywhere.

We have a wonderful neighborhood grocery store. One clerk checks out groceries. One clerk bags groceries. The goal at the top of the triangle is helping the customer check out. With everyone pitching in, it's a smooth process. I'm the beneficiary of this teamwork on a regular basis.

In our family, we call navigating intersections: I go. You go. Taking turns. We're all on the base of the traffic triangle. If everybody takes their turn, it works. If not, well, you know. The triangle mindset is simple in theory. As with most of life, the practicality of real life doesn't always align neatly with the theory.

One of my roles as an educator was serving as a middle school principal. It was an extraordinary job! No two days were the same. Middle schoolers are unique humans. They are discovering their gifts and talents, stretching their wings, and being goofy at the same time. A challenging part of watching middle schoolers is that they often think they are the only ones on that journey. Parents, during the middle school years, spend their days perplexed. One day, their kiddos want hugs from momma or daddy. The next day, they don't want to be seen with their parents. There is very little weather forecast for parents of a middle schooler's temperature.

As a principal, I regularly met with parents by phone or in person. Most of the time, there were no disciplinary consequences. Instead, the conversations were proactive. That's what I wanted when our children made less-than-stellar choices.

There was an incident of squirrel bait behavior by a young 7th grade boy. By the time of this incident, I had learned not to ask a middle schooler what they were thinking.

The question would just frustrate both of us as there was generally limited time invested before a middle schooler made a decision.

This young man's behavior wasn't monumental, but it was the initial phases of a pattern that wasn't serving the young man well. Our staff goal - we didn't always meet it - was to intervene early in the pattern before things became major. I reached out to the young man's parents and asked if they had time for a conversation. They agreed to come in and visit with me, and their son would be a part of the visit.

As we sat at the round table in my office, I shared that the young man was making good grades. He had a great circle of friends but had recently been putting his toe over the line in a variety of settings. I had already had this conversation with the young man so he wouldn't experience surprises during the visit. The surprise was actually mine to navigate. The father turned to me and asked me to tell the mother something about the situation. Then the mother asked me to tell the father something. Both the young man and I were watching the exchange. I watched his shoulders droop and his eyes fixate on the table. My posture changed, too. I had to reign my emotions in. After the first few exchanges, I asked the young man to step outside and sit in the chair outside my office. He seemed relieved to do so.

The picture of Francie's triangle on the whiteboard flashed through my mind. This 7th grade boy and his life story were at the top of the triangle. Dancing along the base were his parents, his teachers, his principal, expectations from all of the actors, relationships among the adults, and many other variables. I was glad that picture of the triangle popped into my head, as I may have responded differently had it not.

Triangles in our lives coexist. There's never just one. In this case, the parents were so busy climbing the sides of the triangle of their own relationship that it eclipsed their triangle as parents with their son at the top. I can't count the times when I've let one triangle in my life overshadow another, more important one. My own struggles and missteps allowed me to identify theirs.

It was pretty clear that I was not going to affect the relationship between the parents. That wasn't my role. However, I calmly shared with the parents that in our school, we seek not to talk around children but either to talk to them or on their behalf. Even when young people misbehave, they deserve to be respected. Also, I reiterated my respect for them as parents. That's why I asked the young man to leave the room so he wouldn't hear what I had to say. I recounted Francie's simple triangle lesson to them. I shared that while people work through things on a triangle, there is a culture around that work. I truly honor the fact that people choose their culture in their homes. In our school, the faculty established the culture. The school existed for the students, and the staff served students. Not the other way around. That day, we were not there for the mother or the father. We were there for a valuable young man who needed the adults in his life to set aside their needs and wants for his greater good. He was at the top of that particular triangle.

When the young man returned to wrap up the visit, I was very thankful the parents took the high road to the top of the triangle. I have no idea what else occurred when they left. For the next year and a half, the young man found success in his days at school. Advocating for a child at the top of the triangle is never a waste of time. One of the hardest things for me as an educator is acknowledging that I'm a seed planter.

Sometimes, I hunger to be a harvester, but that's not usually the case. The young man at the top of the triangle is worth the seed planting.

Rarely does a week go by that Francie's triangle lesson does not resonate in some part of my world. As I write this, March Madness is in full swing. I am addicted to March Madness and the sleep-deprived joy that watching the games brings. The goal for every team is to survive and advance. It's inspiring for us to watch David teams use role players to knock out Goliath teams through selfless teamwork at the base of the triangle. With big wins or upsets, there are rarely players climbing the sides of the triangle. Instead, everyone is shuffling their feet along the base. Some are moving out of the way and letting others have the spotlight. A few will need to step to the free throw line for the first time in NCAA play, and they often have a look on their face that says they'd rather be anywhere else at that moment. But, they do it for their team and the win at the top of the triangle.

Recently, my daughter participated in a ladies charity skeet tournament in Georgia. I had the gift of traveling with her as her guest. Existing for many years, the tournament takes place to help provide housing opportunities through Habitat for Humanity. At the top of the triangle is a home for a person or a family. Along that base, a homeowner is investing sweat equity and is a partner participant in the process. The women who competed in the charity shoot were not the only donors along the triangle's base, but they were part of the dynamic network of people who chose to give to something greater than themselves.

As a spectator, I watched three days of competition. I marveled that less than 50 people had raised over \$100,000 the year before and were on track to do so again this

year. How could these women from across the nation do this? They lived daily lives demonstrating the power of Francie's triangle story. Living that kind of life requires sacrifice - sacrifice of time, talent, money, and often the hardest sacrifice - our own wants.

Society regularly sends messages to people who are working on their triangles. Before we are all too judgmental, society is really a code word for you, me, and other ordinary people. Disunity and criticism in society seem to capture the limelight more than is healthy. Arguing with those who are polarizing and dismissive is rarely productive. Instead, heroes in our society simply focus on their triangles and stay the course.

One of the most incredible things I observed on that skeet field in Georgia was the intersection of the messages in society that I regularly hear and the behavior of those who were competing. You've probably heard the messages, too, and I wonder if you have experienced some of the same helplessness and frustrations I feel when I hear them.

People of different generations can't get along and work together. The women in the tourney ranged from ages 13 to 85. Skeet shooters compete on squads. Mentoring was everywhere. For one podium presentation, there was a sixty year range among the honorees.

People today are selfish. These women traveled great distances. Their homes were in Montana, California, Connecticut, and places in between. The men who refereed traveled from other states and donated their time. Triangle thinking keeps our eyes off our sacrifices and on the significant purpose at the top.

People don't forgive anymore. True, some can't or won't. Several female skeet shooters spoke of times decades ago when there was exclusiveness in the sport of skeet shooting. Especially those who were older and experienced it first-hand, made the decision they would never be a part of excluding others. Young competitors are recipients of that growth. Forgiveness lets new triangles be built over old ones.

People are so competitive they won't help others. The women in that skeet shoot were competitive. Shooting 100 clay targets in a row when you're over the age of 70 isn't a result of a casual approach to competition. One woman who did that is also a church organist and created a quilt for the tournament's silent auction. She was competitive. She helped others. Those types of behaviors can coexist in a triangle.

Age differences, selfishness, unforgiveness, competition - the list of obstacles to meeting the goal at the top of the triangle is endless. These are all very real obstacles. But when we see life through a triangle lens, the obstacles can run along the base with people who have the power to overcome them. Impediments hide in the nooks and crannies of our world, but those in society who have their eye on something bigger can step over and around those obstacles. It's doable.

Not one of those women could have raised a hundred thousand dollars alone or provided housing for someone else. Most of life's challenges and big triangle goals are not doable alone. But they are doable.

Francie portrayed timeless wisdom in her simple drawing of a triangle on a whiteboard in front of a dozen or so young couples. Wisdom doesn't always need a large audience. It can exist in private conversations. It can plant seeds that hide underground for decades. Wisdom is eternal and bears fruit for generations. I will be

forever grateful for a wise, small-statured woman who painted a simple yet powerful picture of a triangle. My hope is that her picture empowers you as you navigate the triangles of your life.