



# From Seed to Apple

Inspirational stories and lessons learned  
from Washington's Teachers of the Year

Volume I

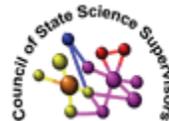
2011

# About Teacher of the Year

Since 1963 the Washington State Teacher of the Year program has selected one outstanding educator annually to serve as the Washington State Teacher of the Year. The Teacher of the Year is selected from a slate of ten regional candidates representing Washington's nine Educational Service Districts and Tribal Schools. In 1963, 1970 and 2007 the state program garnered national attention when Elmon Ousley of Bellevue School District, Johnnie T. Dennis of Walla Walla School District and Andrea Peterson of Granite Falls School District respectively, were each selected as the National Teacher of the Year.

The State Teacher of the Year is selected by a statewide committee through written applications and a series of panel interviews. Candidates are reviewed based on the following criteria: professional biography, community involvement, philosophy of teaching, responsiveness to education issues and trends, commitment to strengthening the teaching profession and his or her proposed Teacher of the Year platform.

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# From Seed to Apple

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For our families and colleagues who make our work possible

For the Teacher of the Year program,  
especially Susan Johnson and Tom Robinson, for helping us tell our stories

And for our students who are often our best teachers

**A mind once stretched by a new idea  
never regains its original dimensions.**

Oliver Wendell Holmes

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## Foreword

Holiday feasts are built with an array of mouth-watering dishes. Walking up to a table filled with turkey, stuffing, potatoes, gravy, beans, and rolls, with a selection of pies waiting in the wings conjures up a magical sense of wonder in all of us. But the real story behind the food that makes the meal is the work of those who toiled in the fields so that it all could be brought to your table. The farmer invested his time, energy, heart and soul into growing that food, not knowing where or how it would turn out. He didn't know that some of his wheat would become the crust for the pie, or that his apples would be baked in the pie. He didn't know how his potatoes would be prepared, or how many different ways his milk and butter would be used. But without his investment months, maybe even years, before, the holiday meal, the magic, wouldn't be.

High school graduations and high-stakes test scores are often the holiday meals of education. They give us reason to join together to celebrate successes, reflect on struggles, and ponder the future. But without the work done by those in the fields — the hard work done by committed, passionate, and determined teachers — the feast wouldn't be possible, and the magic would never happen. These are their stories — heartfelt and passionate, direct from the classrooms of some of Washington's finest educators. This is where it begins. Bon appétit!

Tom Robinson, NBCT  
2010 Regional Teacher of the Year, ESD 171  
Chelan High School  
Chelan, WA



# The Valedictorian's Dilemma

*From farmer's daughter to neuroscientist —  
a case for STEM education*

by Jeffery Wehr, 2011 ESD 101 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Odessa High School, Odessa School District

Melanie was a stereotypical rural American farmer's daughter. She earned straight A's, carried her hair in pigtails, and most days a pair of jeans and a plaid shirt draped her athletic frame — she was the captain of the volleyball, basketball, and track teams. She came from a long line of dry land farmers, none of whom had much more than a high school education. A polite young woman finishing her senior year, she was a shoo-in for class Valedictorian. Because Melanie excelled in all of her coursework, I encouraged her to take a new class I was creating entitled Advanced Science Research. In this course, independent thinkers created a testable hypothesis, designed an experiment to test that hypothesis, and wrote a scientific journal article reporting their results. Once they completed, reviewed, and edited their articles, my students presented their findings to the scientific community. This type of challenge was tailor-made for Melanie and when I saw her enter my classroom that first day, I smiled.

Melanie was a product of her upbringing — her parents tended to the extreme of being overprotective and ultra-conservative. Thus, it did not take her long to create a research project around her family's way-of-life: farming. It quickly became a wonderful opportunity for her to work side-by-side with her grandfather and father collecting scientific research from the family's dusty fields, even while she addressed a significant need. One of her father's immediate agricultural problems was the insect *Cephus cinctus*, commonly known as the Sawfly. This tiny nuisance lays its eggs in the stems of the wheat. Once mature, the adult fly "saws" its way out of the stem, leaving the wheat to fall over onto the ground. Melanie went to work finding a solution to this agricultural dilemma. After countless hours of background research, she discovered a solution to the problem, implemented an experiment to test her solution, collected her results, and wrote a stellar scientific paper about her findings.

She first presented her research at the local science symposium like the finest of keynote speakers. At the symposium, she was named top presenter and invited to speak at the state level. A few weeks later, Melanie presented a fine-tuned version of her Sawfly study at the state symposium and this time she was asked to present at the International Science Fair. It was only once the event was over and the congratulations finished that we realized the dates for the International Science Fair were the same as her graduation. "I can't go to the Fair, Mr. Wehr..." she said, as she looked down at the floor. "My parents won't let me." I told her we would never know unless we asked them.

A few days later, I invited her parents in to discuss the conflict. I tried to convey to them

what an honor and privilege it was to be asked to attend such an event. I also tried to quantify the opportunities that would arise from Melanie's participation in this science forum. I explained about the unique collaboration experience she would have with fellow students from other countries such as Japan, Russia, France and Norway. And yet each time I made a point, her parents rebutted it with multiple responses, explaining graduation is the largest event in a young person's life. Indeed, how could anyone miss her own graduation? On one hand, they were right. Graduation *is* an important event in a young person's life, and to the many students in our community at the time who would not seek higher education, it really would be the end of their educational lives. But then her parents hit me with a surprise I hadn't seen coming. "Oh, and Melanie is becoming a minister anyway, so she won't need any of this."

I was not opposed to Melanie following a path in religious studies, or any other discipline that suited her. I just hadn't heard this plan from her before. I quickly looked in her direction for confirmation. She looked up from the table and nodded her head in approval. "Yes, that is my plan." I wondered why they thought attending the International Science Fair would hinder this plan — why would one have to get in the way of the other. As much as I wanted to ask the question, I remembered their deep faith and respected their view that science and religion don't mix. Instead, I thought for a moment and quietly said, "I believe if Melanie attends a school of ministry she would benefit from the experience of traveling to Cleveland and intermixing with people from across the earth." I didn't really think it would change their minds, but I hoped they might at least consider allowing her to go.

Early the next morning, a blur of pigtails, jeans and a plaid shirt bounded into my room. Melanie smiled from ear to ear and blurted, "I get to go to the International Science Fair!" I can only imagine what conversations took place the previous evening, but I was thrilled to begin making plans. Ultimately, Melanie was named Valedictorian of her graduating class. We arranged for a news team from Cleveland to broadcast her address live via satellite back to our hometown for the ceremony, but just in case that didn't pan out (and it didn't) I helped Melanie record her address onto video prior to our departure. In light of the once-in-a-lifetime journey she was taking that caused her to miss her ceremony, she focused on the fact that life is a continuous journey. Though most of her family, friends, and colleagues viewed graduation as an ending, Melanie was showing them that this was just the beginning, a true commencement. She now saw high school as a stepping stone toward something much greater.

Melanie and I traveled to the International Science Fair where she presented like a true scientist. Out of hundreds of agricultural and botanical entries, Melanie took third place overall in the world. In a sophisticated and unhurried manner, she walked up the lighted runways quite a few times to receive top honors and awards. She was offered several scholarships from universities across the United States and finally settled on one in Montana. She never did become a minister. Instead, she earned undergraduate degrees in microbiology and chemistry, minors in biology and physics, and her master's in neuroscience at Marshall University. Sadly, I have not heard from Melanie's family in quite some years, but I have to believe that they are as proud of her as I

am. That rural American girl in pigtails, jeans and a plaid shirt, a descendent of generations of farmers, will soon be called Dr. Melanie when she receives her MD/PhD in neuroscience from Yale. And in the end, she will be using her talent to save people's lives...what better ministry could there be?

# From “F\*\*\* you!” to “Thank you!”

*A caring teacher offers one of her toughest students a way out.*

by Melissa McBride, 2011 ESD 114 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Stevens Middle School, Port Angeles

I remember the first time Chris swaggered through my classroom door — all bravado and macho defiance wrapped in a tiny package. He wore long black hair, had baby-soft cheeks, and stared through stone-cold brown eyes. He was dressed in a red Tribal Journeys sweatshirt that nearly reached his knees, crisp new jeans, and spotless white basketball shoes. He sneered at me when I said hello. I knew he would be difficult, but as a second year teacher full of hope and optimism, I naively thought I'd be able to reach this angry little boy by simply being as nice as possible to him.

For the first few weeks of class, Chris's only phrases directed toward me included an expletive...the “F” word was a favorite. As green as I was, I was keenly aware that I couldn't let him openly treat me this way without addressing the inappropriateness of it, especially since he was doing it in front of so many other students. So I wrote him up for using foul language, for disrespect toward the teacher, and for defiance.

His behavior was going to be a challenge, and how I chose to meet it would affect not only my future with Chris, but with the entire class. The game was on, and the ball was in my court. However, before I even got a chance to try out my skills, I received word that Chris had been withdrawn from school and had been sent to the local juvenile detention center. I was hardly surprised, and not a little relieved by the news.

Class continued and immediately improved with his absence: no more sneering or cursing, no more door slamming. Best of all, I was no longer spending hours reflecting on ways to reach this very damaged little boy. Several weeks later I was pulled into the vice-principal's office to discuss a “student of concern.” I figured I was going to learn something about one of my current students...but when I saw the name on the file she was holding, my stomach clenched.

“We have a returning student,” she began.

“Chris?” I asked.

“Yes. He was retained in 7<sup>th</sup> grade last year because he never came to school. Since he's been gone, he's been working in the Juvi classroom, making some strides. He told us this morning that he hates schools, and he hates teachers. But he hates you the least. So, if he has to be in school, he wants to be in your class.”

“What if I don't want him in my class?” It was a loaded question. A dangerous one. But one I needed to ask. If I didn't take him, he would be placed into a regular schedule. If I took him, I would be teaching him all subjects in order for him to demonstrate his readiness for 8th grade work.

“Is this legal? I’m not even capable or certified to teach him anything but reading, writing, and social studies.”

“It’d be more than he’d get otherwise.”

The weight of the charge being placed on my shoulders was almost unbearable. It hit harder Monday morning when he arrived to meet with me during my planning period. “Hey.” His anger was not miraculously gone, but it seemed as if he was at least going to attempt to be civil. Maybe it was because the court had ordered his attendance. Maybe it was because he had done some soul-searching in the detention center. Maybe he had just decided to stop hating me.

“Hey, Chris. Welcome back.” I tried hard to allow him to start over, even though every fiber of my being wanted to say, *I have enough to deal with in here...I don’t want this kid in my class...how am I supposed to teach him everything he needs to know to get into 8<sup>th</sup> grade?*

“So, um...whaddya want me to do?” He wouldn’t make eye contact with me, and he kept shrugging his shoulders slightly and showing his palms, as if to show me he had no weapons.

I had made him a checklist. I led him to my desk to take a look at the contract I’d created over the weekend. I’d listed all of the major instructional milestones for 7<sup>th</sup> grade language arts and social studies: expository essay, persuasive essay, geography, the American Revolution, civics, etc. I explained that I would help him get started on each assignment and ensure that he had the time, resources, and support to get through them. There were 20 in all. Most were open enough for him to decide his topics, but specific enough to incorporate a good portion of the standards. If he could get through this list, he would have demonstrated enough skill to stand his ground in the next grade, even if he had missed a large portion of the content. We started with the expository essay. I told him he could write about anything he wanted, even himself.

“Like what?”

“Well, how about writing me a letter, introducing yourself to me? Tell me about your hobbies, your family, your goals...that sort of thing.”

He glanced around the room. “Where should I work?”

I explained that during the morning it would just be the two of us. But when the other students showed up, he would be able to stay and work in the back of the room, or head to the library where it would be quiet and he could use the computers.

He jutted his chin out in a nod of acceptance and said, “Alright”, though he left the “l” and the “r” out of the word so it sounded more like “Ite”. He was trying hard to be tough. He went to a seat on the far side of the room, opened his crisp, red notebook and started writing with his brand new, sharpened pencil — materials that had surely been supplied by the school. When the bell rang for the passing period, Chris looked up, “Hey, Miss C? I’m a head to the library, ite?”

“Okay, Chris...I’ll come over and check in with you after this class.”

This continued for several weeks. Each morning, Chris would walk in, wearing his signature red sweatshirt, his white basketball shoes, not so white anymore, and his dark blue jeans. His long black hair hung loose below his shoulders, continually falling in his face and covering his eyes. He would head over to his desk, open his notebook, pull out the checklist and begin

working. Sometimes he would stay when my other students arrived, while other days he would head to the library to type or use the reference materials. Occasionally, he asked questions and he regularly turned in his rough drafts and practice tests for review. He never complained, never argued, never cussed. It was a strange state of affairs but it seemed to be working. He was accomplishing all of the tasks I had set before him in satisfactory manner.

One morning, Chris didn't show up for school. I asked at the office, but no one knew where he was. Later that morning, I checked back again, but there was still no word. Part of his sentencing required that he show up for school on time every day. I was worried that he'd ruined a good three-week run by skipping school. But without knowing where he was or what he was doing, there was little I could do. Later that afternoon, I saw him downtown, standing with a group of kids who looked a lot older than him. I waved. He waved back. I walked toward him. He left the group and crossed the street to meet up with me.

"Where were you today, Chris?"

"Hangin' with my brother. He's here from Tacoma."

I asked him whether skipping school would get him in trouble with the judge — wasn't his attendance at school mandatory? He assured me he would be there the next day. He wasn't. Toward the end of my planning period, I drove downtown, hoping to spot him hanging out with his friends where I had found him the day before. Sure enough, he was right where I had last seen him. Pulling up to the curb, I rolled down the passenger window and honked. I could see the boys looking over at me in my car, trying to figure out if they knew me. I watched as a sudden look of recognition came across Chris's face. He waved to his friends and came jogging over. Without a word, he hopped in.

I asked him why he didn't come to school. He told me he wanted to be with his brother. "Do you want them to put you back in Juvie?" I asked. "Because that is what will happen if you keep skipping school."

I don't know what prompted my next question. Intuition maybe? Maternal instinct? Whatever it was, it led us into a whole new level of our relationship.

"Did you even go home last night? You don't look like you've even been to bed yet. Or changed your clothes."

"No. I told you. I was hanging with my brother. I didn't have time to go home."

I was confused. I asked, "Why didn't you both go home?"

"My mom won't let him in the house. He joined a gang and she said he wasn't never allowed back home. But, I don't care about any of that. He's my brother, you know?"

I found it odd. His mother was hardly ever home. She had a number of addiction problems and often left Chris to fend for himself. Even though most of us knew this about Chris, there was little anyone could do about it. He did a lot to protect her. He would never testify against her parenting abilities. He'd never accuse her of neglect.

He came to school most days after that. Occasionally, I'd find myself back downtown, before my first morning class, hunting him down. But, for the most part, our days together

became pretty normal...even cordial. He'd joke with me, even smile. I'd bring food from home, things I knew he'd accept because I'd convince him that it would just go to waste otherwise: lightly spotted bananas, packages of graham crackers, bread and peanut butter. I had a hunch he wasn't eating when he left school. The way he devoured things that I offered him seemed to confirm my hunch.

By the time Chris completed each item on my checklist, I was confident that he could handle any assignment the 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers could dish out. I was, however, a little afraid he wouldn't survive the day-to-day routines of a regular schedule. He'd gotten comfortable doing things at his own pace and coming up with his own topics and ideas. He'd also gotten comfortable in his place at the back of my classroom. But as much as I worried about his future success, I also knew that I couldn't take care of him. I couldn't fix his home life or keep him away from his gang-involved brother. I had to let him go. I took his signed checklist and his pile of completed assignments to the vice principal's office.

"He's ready to go. He's fulfilled the requirements for 7<sup>th</sup> grade and, if he is willing to put up with his placement and teachers, he has the academic ability to do whatever they ask of him. I'm not sure he'll do it, but he can...if he wants to."

She nodded, took the papers, and gave me a look that said she knew exactly what I was saying. He was given an 8<sup>th</sup> grade schedule the following day.

I checked in on him from time to time, said hi to him in the hallway, waved when I saw him downtown. But, he faded out of my days. I think he spent a little more time in juvenile detention for attendance issues, but at last he made it through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

On the last day of school, I went to my school mailbox. Inside was a note, folded in the signature origami of an adolescent. When I opened it, I immediately recognized the small, rounded writing.

*Dear Miss C,*

*I wanted to thank you for everything you have done for me. You have helped me get through so much hard times. Without you I would still be at ground zero. I have tried so hard to get out of that life, but no matter what I still keep getting pulled back in. With your help, I finally got out, after all this time. I got over it and half of it was because of you. Sad to say I don't even have family that would help me out as much as you did, and I thank you a lot. Even if I don't graduate, I want you to know you did all you can, and I'm very grateful.*

*Sincerely,  
Chris*

I never saw Chris again after he left our school. But I'd like to think that he made it. I'd like to think that even in the darkest times, he remembered that a few of us believed in him enough to see through his mask of defiance and take care of the scared little boy he really was.

# Chicken or Beef?

*Why students are often more than they appear to be on the surface*

by Jay Maebori, 2011 Washington State Teacher of the Year  
Kentwood High School, Kent School District

“Chicken or beef?”

“Huh?”

“*Chicken or beef?*”

“Mmmm ... chicken, I guess.”

Student by student I make my way around the classroom with two sets of post-it notes—one purple, one green. “Chicken or beef” is just a gimmick. It could just as easily have been Coke or Pepsi, Ford or Chevy, Team Edward or Team Jacob. But these are high-school sophomores. Any silly, random decision that distracts them from the drama of their teen lives and focuses them instead on their learning is a good one. We are 20 days into the new school year, and I’ve given each student one post-it to tell me what they felt I needed to know to make this classroom a place where they wanted to come every day.

Some students don’t read well aloud and don’t want to be called on. Others need me to know that class is already fun but that they want more of a chance to work in groups. Still others say they want to listen to music in class—“their” music, not “teacher” music (whatever *that* is). One student makes a request for no homework ever. Sorry, that’s not going to happen, buddy.

As I move through the room, one by one, I ask the students my question and present the choices: “Chicken? Or beef?” Charles asks which one is which, but I simply repeat the question:

“Chicken or beef?”

“OK, chicken,” Charles says, finally taking the green paper.

“Oops, that was beef.”

“Awww!”

“Just joking,” I say, already on to the next student.

Amy says she’s vegan. Tyler says he wants pork. Others just politely smile, take one and give me a strange look. In ten years of teaching language arts, I’ve seen that look a lot, as students try to figure me out.

Sean is a young man who likes to be seen in his football uniform on game days. He says he prefers the dark jersey because it makes him look more manly. His real name is Robert and he writes that on his papers, but he asks me to call him Sean. With his trademark smile on his face, Sean struts in most days just before the bell, glancing over at me to see if I’m going to flash him a look for cutting it so close. Too many friends out in the hallways and too many girls to hug before coming to class—that’s usually his excuse. He is Mr. Popular, no doubt.

“Chicken or beef?”

Sean takes his post-it without saying a word. A green one. He doesn't seem to care if it's chicken or beef. No trademark smile, just a straight face. Strange, I think at the time. But I can tell that he heard my instructions for this task, as he appears to be deep in thought. I move on to the next student, repeating the question until everyone has a note. After a couple of minutes, I invite students to the front of the room to place their post-it on a large piece of construction paper. I read some of them as they are placed.

"I like how you teach us things that connect to our life. Like, I use what I learn."

"I'm just content with any lesson plan you have—the classroom is a monarchy anyway."

"Hit the reset button for me. I started off bad and want to restart over and have a clean record."

As the last note is placed, I look around the room and notice that Sean is still writing. When I ask if there are any more notes, he holds up his non-writing hand to indicate he's almost finished. The bell rings and the class shuffles out. I can hardly wait to sit down read my students' comments, especially Sean's. What did he have to say to me? What does he want me to know?

"Positive: I'm very sociable and fun guy to be around with. And I try to get a good connection with my teachers so the class period isn't a big downer. Negative: I'm very doubtful of myself. I don't really have a lot of confidence in myself. And I give up when things are frustrating."

Who could have known that this young man, who appeared to so many people as a beefy tough-guy on the outside felt like a chicken on the inside? Even after 20 days, I certainly didn't. As a young teacher, I didn't always make time to listen, to really listen, to my students. I was too busy preparing lessons and making sure we filled the time from bell to bell. But now I know that what I do in the classroom, I do for students like Sean. He's the reason I'm here. I need to listen to him and to every other student just like him. It seems so clear to me now.

I feel so blessed that Sean cared enough to write this to me and my mind begins to race. How many students have passed through my classroom in my career? Is it possible that I really didn't know them or what they were really feeling? How often have I dismissed students, thinking he or she was 'fine' or 'ok' simply because they looked that way, or told me that's how they felt?

I don't know what the days ahead will hold for Sean and me in the classroom. A literary unit on "the masks we wear" is coming up, and once we get there, I hope he will have some things to share about the masks he wears. But no matter what the future holds for Sean, the reminder is a startling one for me. People are not always what they seem. They hide things. They present themselves as if everything is ok, when in fact, inside it is not.

Each day my students enter class, they unknowingly point their own question directly at me: Am I going to take on the challenge of finding out who they truly are or am I going to run away and hide in my lesson planning, the tests I give, or the essays I assign?

Chicken or beef?

# Santiago

*A passionate teacher shows her Native American kindergartener the path to success*

by Abigail Chandler, 2011 Tribal Schools Regional Teacher of the Year  
Chief Leschi School

Dear Santiago,

I can only hope that I have made the kind of difference in your life that you have made in mine. On your first day of Kindergarten, I saw the hesitation and skepticism in your deep brown eyes. You were so small, so handsome, and yet determined to appear tough and strong. You tested my limits in an effort to demonstrate your superiority over me. Your defiance, although fairly transparent, kept me on my toes, for reprimanding you in front of the class would only fuel your fire and push you further away. Allowing you to continually ignore or disobey my requests would set the wrong tone for the rest of the class.

Finally, the moment of truth arrived. “Ok boys and girls, please take a seat.” Everyone quickly sat down. Everyone but you. You stood your ground, waited for my full attention, brought your eyes to mine, and said, “No!” The standoff had come to a head. You needed to know, needed proof, of who I was, what I was made of, and how I would respond when pushed. Maintaining eye contact, I spoke calmly to my assistant, asking her to take over for a few minutes while I stepped out of the classroom. Closing the gap between us, I took a risk, with my voice strong and steady, “Santiago, you need to get out of my classroom, right now.” I pointed at the back door and waited, holding my breath, counting the seconds that passed, each one feeling like an hour. “Fine, I didn’t want to be in this class anyway!” You stomped out the door. My opportunity had come; it was make or break time.

Collecting my thoughts and slowing my heart rate, a few minutes passed and I joined you outside. As I passed through the open door, I was taken aback. The look I saw on your face was no longer challenging, it was fear. I dropped to your eye level and with a steady serious gaze I spoke the words you needed to hear. “Santiago, I don’t know what goes on in your house but let me tell you how it is going to work in this classroom. I am your teacher. I am in charge. You are little and you get to be a child in my class. You get to act like a five year old. You have two jobs, follow directions and have fun. You don’t have to be tough or strong in this room. You will never have to wonder about who is in control, it will always be me. If you have a problem with that, we had better work it out right now because you will not tell me ‘no’ in my class ever again. Is that clear?” Thankfully, it took only a moment to watch your fear turn to relief. That day, we formed an alliance that still exists today.

Our partnership continued when I moved to second grade. I was thrilled to have my former kindergarten students once again. The music teacher, PE teacher and recess monitors frequently sent you back to class due to your behavior. You would walk in with a sheepish, half-ashamed,

half-amused look and greet me with a sparkle in your eye and a shrug. The other children knew that your spot at the lunch room table was always on my elbow. I bragged to your mother about what a wonderful student you were, and I told her how glad I was to have you in my class for a second time. “Santiago has such a wonderful smile and he loves to help around the class. I can count on him for anything. You are a lucky mom.” She told me I was the only teacher that ever called her to say something good about you.

For years you were lost to me. You were kicked out of one school after another, in and out of various types of institutions. Someone would run into you and report back that they had seen you. “How is he doing?” I would ask, eager for details on your life, wanting desperately to hear that you had finally pulled it together and turned your life around. But the reports weren’t good. My heart broke over and over. We ran into each other at the Family Fun Center during one spring break. I was thrilled to see you. I asked you how you were doing. You lied and told me you were doing well, staying out of trouble.

And then you were back. You were 16 years old, a sophomore, well-behaved and just as charming as I remembered. You put up with my frequent check-ins. Every time I saw you in the halls, I would ask you, “How is it going? Are you getting good grades, staying out of trouble? Really?!” Knowing my pestering came from genuine concern, you reassured me over and over. I did additional research, asking your grandma, your teachers, your coaches and I got the same report from everyone, “Santi is doing well.”

One day I passed you in the hall and you were sitting with a girl. You called out to me, “Ms. Chandler, are you coming to my basketball game tonight?” “Of course Santi, I wouldn’t miss it.” As I walked away, I heard your friend whisper in a sarcastic tone, “Who was that? Your counselor or something?” “No! That is my teacher.”

That's right, Santi. I *am* your teacher. But you are the one who has taught me what that means: to wholeheartedly commit to the success of a child who is not my own and to know, love, respect, and understand the children I work with. Thanks to you, I am more patient, more compassionate and yes, more demanding. I maintain high-expectations for every student regardless of outside factors or distractions. Yes, Santi, I am your teacher, I will always be your teacher and I will be invested in your future and willing to support you long after your school days are over.

Your loving teacher,  
Ms. Chandler

# The Student Who Spontaneously Combusted

*A rebellious student learns how to light his own fire*

by John Kerr, 2011 ESD 123 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Pasco High School, Pasco School District

William Butler Yeats once said that education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire. The trick in education is getting the fire lit. This is the story of one student who was able to light himself—literally.

David was a free spirit. He did what he wanted to do, said what he wanted to say, and did not care one bit what his teachers or his parents told him. He came to class purely for social engagement and did little beside talk to his friends and flirt with the girls. Regardless of my efforts to engage him in class, he simply refused to participate in meaningful ways. Still, I tried several times to build some sort of connection with him. I shook his hand every day when he entered class, and I tried to use analogies and examples from daily life that I thought would apply to him. Every time I tried, he turned my efforts into a joke, and used that joke to prove how inept and “out of it” I was. I wanted so badly to find a way to pique his interest and make science seem relevant. By the middle of the school year, however, I had just about given up on reaching him. And that is when it happened.

It was a frigid January morning, slightly foggy. You could see your breath in the cold air. I was outside by the portables walking during my prep period. I looked ahead and saw David about 30 feet in front of me walking in the same direction I was. He was wearing a baggy black sweatshirt with long sleeves that covered his hands. I thought it strange to see him at that moment because he should have been in class; the portables were a common hideout for students looking to skip class. I began to step quietly and quickly with the intention of sneaking up and overtaking David before he could get away. It was then that I noticed the air he was breathing out was extraordinarily white. Upon closer inspection I saw smoke coming out of his right sleeve. I had caught David smoking on campus.

I snuck up behind him, moving with stealth. When I drew near him, I shouted in a loud voice “Hey David!” He shot up in the air and spun around at once, hiding his hands behind his back. “So David, what ya got back there?” I said in a teasing voice. I couldn’t help but smirk as I spoke. “Nothin’. What are you talking about?” said David defensively. In a scolding tone I replied “Come on David, I just saw smoke coming out of your sleeve.” “You’re seeing things old man! Look at all the fog out here.” He began to rebuke me by mocking my age (thirty at the time) and my eye sight, lacing his speech with expletives and profanities.

While he bellowed I noticed a small hole forming in the sleeve of his sweatshirt. The hole steadily grew larger and larger and began to smolder as he spoke. Interrupting his ranting, I said calmly: “David, you’re on fire.” The sardonic nuance in my voice perfectly infuriated him. He began yelling at the top of his lungs, red-faced and roaring with anger—yet the entire time he

kept his hands tightly folded in his sleeves behind his back. By this time the hole in his sleeve was sending up a plume of smoke, but David was completely oblivious to his predicament. His temper was burning as much as his shirt. At the pinnacle of his rage I looked down at his sleeves and saw flames beginning to emerge from the hole. I looked him squarely in the eyes and in a very somber voice I said “David, you are on fire, dude.” Completely incredulous and with no way out other than admitting his guilt, David continued to yell and shout profanities at me.

While he continued his tirade, the flames began to climb up his sleeve. Upon seeing the flames I felt a jolt of panic. I had no fire blanket or fire extinguisher as I had in my science classroom, and I knew that if I tried to tackle David at this point he might try and fight me. In seconds the flames had engulfed most of his right arm, and yet he was completely oblivious to the inferno that was about to scorch his body. In a desperate plea I yelled at the top of my lungs “David, you are on fire, man!” Not wanting to be duped by his teacher, David reluctantly glanced over his shoulder without releasing his hands from behind his back. When he saw the flames he paused for a second, as if trying to convince himself of what he was seeing. As he stared into the flames I could see the gleam of the yellow-orange light in his eyes. In the silence I could hear drops of molten polyester falling to the ground. He looked back at me with an expression of utter horror, as if pleading for help in a dumbfounded stupor. He began flapping his arms like a chicken trying to escape the coop. I yelled “Stop, drop, and roll David!” He didn’t listen. I was just about to take him down myself when he managed to get his sweatshirt off and stomp out the flames.

After he had a chance to catch his breath, I asked “David, are you OK, man?” “Yea.” he said sheepishly. “I must have spilled something on me in science class that spontaneously combusted!” I was speechless. Up to this point I thought I had heard them all. As I walked him to the office he dumped something into the trash, presumably his cigarettes. We sat for a few moments in the office waiting for the vice principal. I was preparing the speech in my mind that would doom David to certain expulsion. As we sat, I watched David inspect his scorched sweatshirt. A strong feeling of pity filled my heart. I realized at that moment that my attitude toward David was preventing me from connecting with him. When the vice principal finally approached he looked at David and asked “What happened to him?” I looked at David and his eyes met mine. He looked like an abused puppy ready to take another beating. I looked back at the vice principal and said “David spontaneously combusted. Make sure he sees the school nurse.” The vice principal gave me a bewildered look as I walked out of the office and back toward my classroom.

The next day I shook hands with David as he entered my classroom. I watched as he took his seat away from the friends he normally conversed with. For the first time all year he paid attention and even participated in class discussions. While I can't say that he was a perfect student after that, something certainly had changed. Perhaps David had finally learned his lesson after almost burning himself up. Or maybe I had learned my lesson by seeing how my pride was blocking my ability to connect with him. Either way, our experience had allowed me to form a link with David that could not have formed in any other way. When David caught himself on fire, his true education began.

# Speak Up!

## *Discovering the power of sharing yourself with others*

by Jo Anne Buiteweg, 2011 ESD 189 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Sequoia High School, Everett School District

Learning life lessons can be painful and at other times appear unexpectedly. Sometimes it comes down to looking at yourself in a mirror and noticing the most unflattering features or allowing yourself to see your motions for the ripples they create that makes it possible to begin a transformation. While there have been many times I am proud of my work, early in my teaching career I found myself blurring boundaries. I lost sight of my role as an educator, and became too invested in my work. I was practically living in the theatre, arriving at 7:00am, often staying past 8:00pm, surrounding myself with students. Thankfully, it was a student voice, clear and articulate, sensitive to the core and written in a letter, that told me I was sharing too much of my adult world with those who hung out in the theatre after school. At 18, that student showed more wisdom than I possessed at 24.

At first, I was disappointed in myself. But I used that letter to understand that when I had adult issues to face, I needed to share those issues with other adults help me problem solve and grow as an educator. That experience was very humbling for a young teacher—it made me first judge myself for having had such a professional lapse. But then I came to understand it as a gift, giving me a challenge to build balance into my life. I began to connect with my fellow teachers in very real ways and when an opportunity to collaborate came up, I was the first to sign up.

As surprising and eye-opening as it was to receive a student's reprimand, so it was to receive another's praise. One lovely young, academically gifted woman spent class time and production time with me in the theatre. One of my great joys in doing theater is that it allows me to work with a diverse mix of students. It is an art form that depends on all kinds of talents to survive. She was an amazing student—bright, inquisitive, and she always pushed herself to do her very best. But acting was something she had to stretch for. As a senior, she was selected our Superintendents' Scholar. As part of her application, she was asked her to honor one of her teachers. I was shocked to find that she chose me, even though my program was not where she had received her accolades. When I saw her application letter, my own words jumped off the page at me as she reflected on the lessons she had learned in my care.

Later, I recalled the time she worked with one of my struggling students during production for our fall show. He was loud, obnoxious, often late to class and vocal about his experiences in drug rehabilitation. He was a kinesthetic young man, so I allowed him to clean backstage in place of serving formal detention for his tardies. One Saturday morning, my lead technician called in saying he couldn't be there just as this young man walked in the door. He heard me announce to the cast that we needed extra help on Saturday and came in on his own. He immediately went to finish the door he had started in detention. Soon he needed some help holding up

the walls and my valedictorian volunteered. For the next few hours they worked together, side by side. She asked him how he learned to do carpentry, and complimented him on his work. I watched in stunned silence as this young man who stood on the verge of dropping out of school comfortably taught an honor student. She showed no pretense, no bravado, just her respect for his talent. He noted that he never thought he would be telling such a smart student what to do.

Sadly, the young man didn't last at our school. But he stayed with the show until the set was built. When it was done, I thanked him for every moment he gave to our program. I thought that was the end of it...until I read her letter. In it, she spoke of her admiration for the fact that I always made a plea to the cast to thank those who helped us. She remembered me saying that my small gifts of appreciation meant nothing in comparison to the simple words, "thank you", spoken with sincerity. Her letter inspired me to be even more deliberate in welcoming and thanking my students for "showing up," and for giving me the chance to be a part of their lives.

The young man who helped build the set disappeared that year and I never heard from him again. He is one of a long list of students who make me question whether my efforts are ever enough. Recently, however, a letter arrived from the 32-year-old version of a freshman I lost contact with in 1993. When he first walked into my classroom, he was all attitude. He struck an overconfident posture, apparently trying to counter his five-foot freshman frame. During his first semester, he struggled to be in class, to do the work I assigned, to get along with others, and not get lost in the gang culture that surrounded him. Though he didn't earn credit that semester, he still decided I was "cool".

For second semester, I designed a project in which my students gathered their own data. Students created charts to gather evidence about the balance between teacher and student talk time in class. I divided them into research teams and they set out to collect data from junior and senior classes. He was assigned the Advanced Placement English class. When he returned from his first day of observations, his eyes were open wide. "I never knew what a class could be like if all the students did the homework!" You see, this young man had been in remedial classes all his life. He had never witnessed student engagement like this before and for once, he was excited about school. He watched the AP teacher take a seat and let the students lead the conversation. Most of all, he wanted to go back the next day to hear more about the novel.

That experience taught me that sometimes, talk is cheap. Students need to see a context for what they are learning. Since that day, I've used that project as a model for providing images in all my lessons. Sadly, this young man left school before the year ended. I never had him in class again and I didn't hear from him for many years. Last week I got a message from him. He wanted me to know that he knew I had cared about him. He credited me for being there at "darkest" part of his childhood and told me how much I had helped him through that phase. He proudly told me that he had become a "decent person and a great father." He never made it through Romeo and Juliet, never finished reading about The Outsiders. Some might say he was a failure as my student. But as an adult, he was proud of who he was, as a person and as a father. And to his credit, he took a moment to write to me and say "thank you."

After 21 years of lessons, plays, field trips and after-school work sessions, my greatest accomplishments are reflected in the voices of my students. One young man spoke up bravely. An honor student showed grace to a struggling classmate. A lost young man found his confidence in his own time. I no longer doubt the power of speaking up, of sharing with others how I feel about them. My students taught me that lesson, and because of them, I am transformed.

# Front Page Surprise

*Early childhood education leads special needs child to become a top graduate*

by Tracey Schepman, 2011 ESD 105 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Valley View Elementary, Ellensburg School District

It was springtime—end-of-the-school-year time—and I hurried into the staff room for lunch. Report cards, inventories, and student teacher references glared at me from the top of my spring to-do list, a list that had, as usual, grown out of control. I was only going to stay for a minute. On the table was the latest copy of our high school newspaper and it was calling to me. I make a point to read each issue, but the June edition is especially interesting to me because it always includes the bios of the students who are graduating in the top ten percent of their class.

I was a resource room teacher for many years before my recent transition to second grade, so I was not at all prepared for what I saw. I usually read the names and bios of our top graduates with some interest but only slight recognition. I can often place their names or faces as students I may have met once or possibly heard about, but *never* had any of those high achievers from my class. Sometimes I connect them with their parents or siblings: “Oh that must be John’s youngest,” or “That’s Jenny’s sister!” and I’m always so excited for them. But this time, when I opened the crisp front page and read the first name, I felt goose bumps. There he was—and at the top of his class no less—with a 4.0. One of *mine*. It was Joseph!

When I met Joseph as a second grader he was quite tall for his age and gangly, but he wore a smile a mile wide. He had coke-bottle glasses and used to only talk in questions. Early on in the school year his classroom teacher had come to me, pulling her hair out.

“He won’t stop asking questions,” she cried.

“Like what kind of questions?” I probed.

“Like all kinds—what day is it? What time is it? Why do you wear pants? Do we have desks to sit at?” I smiled and secretly thought, “*Now that’s my kind of kid.*”

As the year went on, Joseph had trouble with reading and writing and wasn’t succeeding in his classroom. Wouldn’t you know it, he became one of my students. We learned a lot together. Every day Joseph would ask “Are you my reading teacher?” My answer to Joseph was usually “I don’t answer questions students already know the answer to.” Or I’d say, “I don’t know, why do *you* think I used a red marker for that poster?” And he’d tell me. He learned to make statements and tell stories without questions. He learned to communicate with his classmates too, and by the time he left us on his way to middle school he had learned to read.

I wondered about him, as I do all my students. Would he continue to make friends? Would he continue to mature and keep learning? And most of all, would others appreciate his wonderful qualities as we had? Now all those years later, I was frozen—standing near the copy machine smiling. And there was Joseph, smiling right back at me. His bio read just like all the others I had read about for years: a young man with dreams of college and a career; a young adult

ready to jump into the real world.

Most high school graduates have questions as they make this jump. I'm sure Joseph was no exception. But in that moment I was confident that he knew the answer to one important question: Will I succeed? I'll tell the world what I used to tell Joseph. I don't answer questions students already know the answer to.

# Inspirational Erasers

*Students achieve on high stakes exams through little reminders from their teacher*

by Carrie Black, 2011 ESD 113 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Rochester Middle School, Rochester School District

It was my second year of teaching, and the day before the state testing began. Students ambled down the halls mumbling about how they were going to have six tests over the next two weeks. I had seen my students' scores from the previous year and they were abysmal. All year long, I committed to helping them change their pattern of performance, giving them a range of strategies to help them catch up and build onto their understanding of 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics. We learned vocabulary, took on slope, used whiteboards to have equation solving contests between teams, and had completed several projects focused on developing geometric and probability and statistics sense. All that hard work and effort was about to be measured in two days of math testing. Quite a few students were feeling less than confident, but I had a surprise for them.

As my first class shuffled into my room that day, they immediately noticed a difference. There wasn't a daily warm up, and the message on my front screen instructed them to take a seat on the floor in front of the whiteboard. A few of my students joked about it being "read-a-loud" time in math. As I came into the classroom, their mouths dropped open when I told them they were right. I picked up Hooray for Diffendoofer Day!, by Dr. Seuss. I was a tad surprised to see my principal enter with his laptop, prepared for my formal observation, but I forged ahead. I read that book page by page to my highly-engaged 8<sup>th</sup> graders. As the story ended, I explained, "I choose to read you this book because I know that several of you are feeling a lot of stress. Some of you will not be in this room with me tomorrow because we need to divide you up into smaller groups for testing. But I want you to know that no matter which class you are in, *I* have confidence in you and know that you'll do your best to show what you know and what you have learned this year. I also wanted to give each of you a surprise."

From behind me, I grabbed a red cup filled with tip erasers stuffed with a rolled up piece of paper—something like a fortune cookie. I had each student take one and pass it on. One by one, students took an eraser and unrolled the paper tucked inside. On each of those papers I had written a quote that I thought would inspire them. I gave them a few minutes to read through and process what their quotes might mean. Then I had each student read theirs aloud and discuss how the quote applied to the big test that was waiting the next day. When they finished reading their quotes, I continued.

"You know that if I could have all of you in my classroom taking the math portion of the state test with me, I totally would, but since you all can't be with *me*, I wanted you to take a piece of my inspiration with *you!* Tomorrow, when you get your #2 pencils, I want you all to have your tip erasers out to put them in place. Every time you get frustrated or nervous, I want you to remember the book that we read today, the quote that you were given, and the inspiration that

you feel right now. And always know that I believe in you.”

The rest of my classes came and went that day, each experiencing the same events. When I met with my principal at the end of the day to debrief my observation, he had a smirk on his face. “I felt like I was in my wife’s kindergarten classroom instead of your algebra class today,” he joked with a chuckle. “Listen,” I said with a smile, “I just want my students to have confidence and some students need to hear a pep talk given in a different way! We’ll see if it makes an impact.”

The next day, as students prepared for the test, they cleared their desks and placed their binders under their chairs. Then, one by one, my students began to pull out their tip erasers and top their pencils with their little reminders. I was beaming.

Hours later, it was lunchtime and the first day of testing was out of the way. Several students came to my door. “Mrs. Black, I had my eraser on AND my quote in my back pocket,” one student told me. “My quote was in my binder, but I have it memorized,” chimed in another. I high-fived them and sent them on their way. One stayed behind, and waited until the others had gone. “Mrs. Black,” she said almost in a whisper. “I just wanted to say thanks.” Stephanie was one of my quiet students, and definitely not a self-confident young lady. “You’re welcome. What are you thanking me for?” I asked, confused. “Those inspirational erasers were exactly what I needed. When I came to class today, I was really nervous! I didn’t pass the math portion of the state test last year, and that’s all I have been thinking about over the past few weeks. With my parents freaking out on me, and my brain working overtime, it hasn’t been pretty at my house. The story you read to us yesterday and the whole quote in the eraser thing was really kind of different, but it didn’t really hit me until today,” she continued. Her words came rushed, but she went on. “As soon as I pulled that eraser out of my pencil pouch, I remembered the whole thing from yesterday in class—the quote, the story...and I remembered that you were right there with me...even though you weren’t—you know?!” I nodded to let her know I understood what she was saying. I couldn’t say anything because my eyes were flooding with tears. “Anyways...I just wanted to say thanks.” She turned and headed out the door to lunch.

I will never know how my new-found tradition affected each student individually—or if it *really* helped any other students, but it did help Stephanie. That year, our test scores earned our school the title “School of Distinction” from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), and to this day, I still have kids who come back to remind me and tell my current students about when “Mrs. Black read a Dr. Seuss book” to them on the day before the big test. I learned that something very small can make a huge impact...those little inspirational erasers!

# Discovering a Special Gift

*A young teacher asks his student for help and lives change forever*

by Brian Eggleston, 2011 ESD 112 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Washougal High School, Washougal School District

It was my first day teaching high school, first period, Spanish II. I expected my students to be eager to learn, with a solid foundation, and that they would welcome the chance to work toward fluency. I was certain they would delight in writing to pen pals in Mexico, Chile, or Spain, that they would look for chances to use their language in travel, and that one day, they would spend time studying abroad at a university. I just knew they would pepper me with thoughtful questions about the subtle nuances of Spanish, marvel at its richness and complexity, and even stay after school to learn more.

The moment my first student walked in, a Latino boy named Romario, I knew my dream was just a fantasy. I greeted Romario with “Buenos días” and as he looked down to avoid eye contact I heard him mutter a barely audible, “Hey.” While his classmates sat together in predetermined cliques and talked before class began, he sat alone, looking through his textbook furtively with a curiosity he tried to hide. Romario had some body piercings and carried a tattoo of a sea monster; he had the rebel look down. But I quickly noticed that his clothes were dirty, he appeared not to have bathed in some time, and his shoes were falling apart.

I learned immediately that Spanish was not my students' favorite subject, nor was it “cool.” Most had little foundation in the language and to cover their timidity and embarrassment over that fact, they poked fun at it, saying inappropriate phrases, or simply refusing to participate. I tried different approaches and techniques but no matter what I did, most of the class remained withdrawn. Yet among these reticent students, Romario, whom all the kids avoided, was the quietest. One day I asked him a question and out of his mouth came a string of words pronounced so beautifully that they could only have come from an experienced speaker. All heads turned, and the class collectively gasped. Romario immediately diverted his eyes to the wall and bowed his head, as if he had made a horrible mistake. A few students giggled, but in the faces of others I saw unmistakable interest, even admiration for his hidden talent that perhaps they wished they had too.

Over the course of the year, Romario would come and go—he'd miss days or even weeks at a time, and would come back to school looking disheveled and tired. I called home only to discover the number had been disconnected. When he did come to school, he remained quiet in class while the rest of my students progressed slowly. Clearly Romario had been misplaced, but the next level of Spanish was full so he was stuck with us in first period. And despite his obvious skill in Spanish, his classmates still avoided him.

One day I invited Romario for lunch as I had brought food for both of us. He cautiously took a seat opposite mine, and I started a conversation with him in Spanish. He looked back at me

silently, as if measuring the consequences of responding, and after what seemed like an eternity, he spoke. At first, his responses were curt. But after ten minutes we were having our first real conversation together. Our lunches became a daily event, and I soon learned that when his dad became unbearable, Romario took to the streets. Most days I just listened and offered him a safe place to come and talk.

I began washing Romario's clothes in the Home Ec. room, let him use the school shower, bought him some personal hygiene items, and gave him clothes from other teachers whose kids had hand-me-downs to donate. After I paid a visit to his parents, his home life even seemed to improve for a time. Before long, other students took note of his new appearance and some even willingly sat with him. As this change began to take place, my wishes for him included finding a way for Romario to take pride in his native language and that this secretly charismatic, sensitive boy could have a few friends in his life.

I asked Romario why he thought I was having such difficulty in getting my students motivated to learn Spanish. He replied, as if he had always known the answer, "you don't know what they like. You don't know what their lives are about, what they deal with." For a moment I was taken aback, and immediately after, I was stunned at how right he was.

When I asked him what my students' lives were really about, Romario rattled off a list of sports, teams, TV shows, films, local events, and teenage issues, most of which were a far cry from my life and more importantly, my teaching. At that moment, I realized that my teaching had made Spanish seem out of reach and impersonal to most of my students. I went home and threw out my following week's lesson plans because now I had a new plan. Each unit I taught would have a theme that matched my teenagers' lives and interests. They would learn grammar and vocabulary, then act out episodes of their favorite TV shows in Spanish; they would make Spanish travel brochures for their home town; they would talk and write in Spanish about adolescent life.

As good as I felt about the change in my teaching, it bothered me that Romario still found it difficult to make friends and his attendance still suffered. One day I proposed an idea to him: "I need a Teaching Assistant. I need someone who's good at Spanish, and you are. I want you to help me teach this class."

"Are you joking?" Romario asked, almost indignant. "I'm not good with people, and some of them don't like me."

"No—you have a talent. You have a role to play here. I am choosing you. It might be tough at first, but this is something you can do."

Initially, he was dismissive of the idea, then cautious, then curious. The more I told him how much I valued his presence in class, the more he warmed to the idea. Finally, one day Romario joined me at lunch, smiled widely, and said, "I'll do it." He slowly took on new responsibilities in my class. At first, he tried to simply give students the right answers. I explained that he was to guide students to reach those answers themselves, with explanations and background information, but not to give away the answers. I watched him avoid those students who had made fun of

him and I challenged him to approach them and offer his help. After just a week of learning the ropes as my teaching assistant, he took pride in doing his job, and he did it well. He enjoyed helping others. He served as a tutor, he helped correct assignments and offered feedback, and he even contributed ideas to my teaching. Perhaps his greatest moment came when he confidently taught a lesson and earned nods of approval from his classmates.

Over the course of his time with me, Romario's attendance improved and he even wore a smile some days. By spring, my students' level of Spanish had improved to the point that they produced research projects on Spanish-speaking countries they wanted to visit and presented their findings in Spanish in front of the class. Through it all, they relied on Romario for help, which he readily offered with barely concealed enthusiasm.

Romario found something in my classroom. His shyness and appearance may have initially turned some students off, but in that Spanish class, my first teaching experience, everyone—including me—learned a lesson. We learned that each of us has much to offer, and by showing others just a hint of compassion, we help each other find it. Romario found his role, and overcame a crippling self-doubt in the process. Romario ran away twice more during high school, but each time, he found his way back. He graduated with his classmates, and is currently on schedule to earn his Teaching Certificate and a Master's degree in Education.

# Go, Ricky, Go!

*The special bond between a teacher and a student is timeless and profound*

by a 2011 Regional Teacher of the Year

*When you teach, you build enduring relationships.*

We stood side by side. Ricky drew deeply on his cigarette. Solemnly contemplating, he looked out in silence. His heavily tattooed arms were covered with the symbols of war and death. As we ate lunch together a few minutes earlier, he lifted his shirt to show me an array of tattoos of skulls, knife blades, and twisted barbed wire. I took it all in with little comment, nodding my head. The young boy I knew had changed.

“You know,” he intoned dully, briefly looking into my eyes, “it’s not good .... saw a buddy ... standing right next to me ... face... shot off ... gone...,” his voice trailed. He shared his horror while I looked him in the eye, taking it all in, knowing I had nothing to offer him beyond an ear and a soul he trusted. Ricky had been a student of mine for six years. He was a good friend. The silence between us was not awkward. We knew each other well.

The clock ticked off our final moments together and too soon, it was time for Ricky to head back. He’d saved some of his precious leave for me, but now that time was running out.

“You come back, Ricky,”

“I will.”

As we hugged goodbye moments before he departed, curious onlookers must have wondered at our connection. Ricky, a short brown-skinned Asian, with an appearance like a hardened gang member and I, a tall gentleman with white hair and bifocals. The honest embrace we shared must have seemed incongruous to those around us. Moments later, he was gone. I turned, walked away and, tried to calm my troubled soul. My only thought was a prayer, “Please be with Ricky. Please let us see him again.” Ricky was heading back to war; I was heading back to school.

Ricky was one of the “Wild Bunch,” a group of seven boys, first through third graders, that were ALL boy. And he was fast. There was nothing little Ricky had liked more than to tease the other students, young and old alike, to the point that they would chase him around the playfield outside school. He darted and dodged and evaded every one until one of the older students finally caught up with him. Ricky's contagious smile and infectious sense of humor made him a favorite in the school. Everyone enjoyed his company. After the school day, they vied to have Ricky come to their house to play.

Ricky, his brother Jason, and sister Renee were all adopted. For a short period of time, they were all in school together. His parents and I worked together to publish our small town newspaper. I spent countless hours at his home working on that newspaper. I also shared many evening meals with his family, for in our town, school life and family life are tightly woven.

Ricky was in fifth grade when he left us. His older sister was in high school and his family had to make a difficult decision to leave. Later, when Ricky finally reached high school, he played football. He was a fullback. And he was very good. He was still fast but now he lifted weights and had become strong. Because he had moved a good distance away from my town, I had few opportunities to see Ricky and his team play. There were, however, a few Friday nights when I was able to sit in the stands and watch him do what he loved to do most: run from those who tried to catch him, just as he had done as a little boy.

One particular Friday stands out in my memory. The game was tight. Ricky was a senior and his days on the football field were quickly winding down. His team held the ball at the end of the game. They were behind. The quarterback took the snap and handed off to Ricky. Two waves of color collided. Ricky dove into the middle of the line. From my vantage point, there was little to see other than a mass of confusion as the players on both teams converged on a single point—Ricky. He quickly disappeared, covered by a swarm of wrestling, tearing, tackling bodies. The players seem suspended in time. Certainly the referee would blow the play dead. Seconds passed in slow motion. Few stirred in the crowd. Sitting passively, we felt intuitively that the play was finished.

Then suddenly, miraculously, out of the mass of helmeted bodies, Ricky appeared. Legs churning, ball held tight, he was relentless. He broke through the flailing defense. At the moment I saw his number emerge from the mass, I was transformed. It was as if he was once again on the grassy playfield at school eluding everyone who dared try and catch him. Jumping to my feet, I called, “GO ... RICKY ... GO!” Like me, the crowd erupted, as they watched Ricky finish his improbable run.

On that cold autumn evening, Ricky did what he loved to do most. He ran! He was young, happy and relatively carefree. And yet, within a mere seven months, he would graduate from high school and join the Marines. Now, two and a half years later, we had had lunch together once more back in his hometown. Ricky's transformation was profound. His face no longer beamed the bright smile of his youth. His visit to see me was simply an act of checking in with his past. He had come to bathe his troubled soul in warm memories that helped sustain him when life turned awful.

Those who teach, if they teach with a loving heart, develop relationships that endure. Relationships that endure are like islands of reprieve in a sometimes too tumultuous world. My connection to Ricky is one of those islands.

Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote a profound entry in [The Brothers Karamazov](#):

“People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some fine, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days, and if we have only one good memory left in our hearts, even that may sometime be the means of saving us.”

Ricky survived. Some of his comrades-in-arms did not. I attended his wedding. He knows he is one of the fortunate ones who gets the chance to build his life again. Seeing him take his vows, I couldn't help but wonder about all the children we teach—all the children *I've* taught—about their lives and about their futures. Assuredly, we cannot know all the challenges they will meet. However, we can know that, if we do our jobs well, we may provide some fine and sacred memory that will somehow be the means of saving them in the future.

Teach like you will meet your students in the future. One way or another, you will.



