

# From Seed to Apple

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

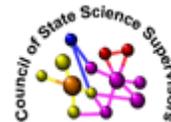


# About Teacher of the Year

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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The names of all students featured in this volume have been changed unless permission for their use has been obtained.

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This collection is dedicated with gratitude to  
our families, colleagues, mentors and  
the citizens of the great state of Washington

And is shared in honor of  
our past, present and future students.

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

Oliver Wendell Holmes

## Table of Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Mark Ray, 2012 Washington State Teacher of the Year Skyview High School, Vancouver Public Schools	
<b>The Tougher They Seem</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Pamelia Valentine, 2013 ESD 113 Regional Teacher of the Year Oakland Bay Junior High School, Shelton School District	
<b>Erik’s Journey</b> .....	<b>12</b>
Barbara Quintasket, 2013 ESD 171 Regional Teacher of the Year Paschal Sherman Indian School, Omak School District	
<b>Unintended Consequences</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Rich Newell, 2013 ESD 114 Regional Teacher of the Year Central Kitsap High School, Central Kitsap School District	
<b>I Wonder if They Know</b> .....	<b>19</b>
Monte Syrie, 2013 ESD 101 Regional Teacher of the Year Cheney High School, Cheney School District	
<b>Almedina’s Extended Family</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Darcy Smith, 2013 Puget Sound ESD 121 Regional Teacher of the Year McMicken Heights Elementary, Highline School District	
<b>I Believe in You</b> .....	<b>26</b>
Commander Rick Gile, 2013 ESD 189 Regional Teacher of the Year Everett High School, Everett School District	
<b>So Many Stories</b> .....	<b>29</b>
Eric Saueracker, 2013 ESD 112 Regional Teacher of the Year Hudson’s Bay High School, Vancouver Public Schools	
<b>Why Do I Say It?</b> .....	<b>31</b>
Jeff Charbonneau, 2013 Washington State Teacher of the Year Zillah High School, Zillah School District	
<b>Rise of the Firebird</b> .....	<b>34</b>
Brian Sites, 2013 ESD 123 Regional Teacher of the Year River’s Edge High School, Richland High School	



## Foreword

A lucky few individuals have the opportunity to experience first hand the wonder of the classroom. Through the eyes of educators, the essential challenges and successes of the classroom are revealed.

While few would claim to understand the medical field by virtue of being patients, many believe they can understand teaching and education based on their recollections as students. Teaching is the work of professionals. Like medicine, the practice of teaching is complex, often representing a life's work and study. In the classroom, each child presents to the educator as a challenging, dynamic and incomplete learner. By contrast to doctors who see one client at a time, teachers work with classrooms full of children, at once assessing, diagnosing, prescribing and guiding the learning of dozens if not hundreds of students each day.

Despite this challenge, these stories rise up. Like the teachers of the year themselves, each of these vignettes is both familiar and exceptional. Virtually every teacher has stories like these to share. They are exceptional because they remind us that great teaching is both professional and personal, melding both science and art. And that as teachers, we are always learning.

Mark Ray  
2012 Washington State Teacher of the Year  
Vancouver Public Schools



# **The Tougher They Seem . . .**

*An aspiring teacher on a mission learns a surprising lesson*

By Pamela Valentine, 2013 ESD 113 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Oakland Bay Junior High School, Shelton School District

I wanted to save the world, and I had a plan. If I could get a school to let me work with their most troubled kids, I just knew I could PROVE that art changes lives! It was the fall of 1996, and I was working with an art professor from The Evergreen State College. I created an art program that required students to plan and develop a project and see it through from conception to completion with step-by-step checkpoints from finding their own materials and supplies to the final display at an Open House Art Show. I ran the idea past him and he said, "Go see if you can find a school that will let you run this as a pilot program."

With my courage in high gear and my chutzpah in overdrive, I approached the curriculum director of a local school district. She liked the plan and took it to the high school principal. Within a week, I was given space in the high school library and assigned six of the most challenging students in the school. Each student would take art with me for one class period per day; we would run the program for a semester and measure the progress using three data points: grades, attendance and behavior.

Then I met the students. Jarrod's parents were pursuing a lawsuit against the school district for unspecified damages for undisclosed reasons. A.J. was on his seventh foster home in as many years. Joanie was back at school following a long suspension. Krysty was "probably a genius" but had not been passing classes for a number of years. Jacob was openly hostile. And then there was Josh.

Josh was a big kid; at age 13 he was easily six feet tall. He entered the cramped room and sat down heavily in the chair, eyes darting left and right, clearly on edge. "How come I'm in the RETARD class?" he asked guardedly.

I explained that it was a brand-new class for students to develop their skills, both personally and artistically.

"You got all the rejects and everybody knows that those kids are just retarded. Did'ja pick us all yourself or did Ms. Z. just set you up?"

I assured him that I had requested all of them, and then a small bit of doubt crept into my fevered and overly optimistic mind. . . . What was I getting myself into? It was too late now; I already had kids counting on me and a 16-credit college contract hanging over my head.

As the classes began, I developed relationships with the kids. Things were running quite smoothly, and I felt some small stirrings of the initial excitement and zeal that had gotten me into this situation. I had five of them right where I wanted, including Jacob, who was clearly pleased that he would be welding. His hostility had dropped away quickly, but I was getting nowhere with Josh. He continued to make comments about being in the “retard class,” and he made no effort to obtain supplies or materials for his project. In fact, he refused to consider ANY art project and sat at the small table doodling in the sketchbook I had purchased for him.

After three weeks of the same behavior from him, I decided to push back. I began by withholding the sketchbook when Josh arrived to class. “What’s up?” he asked, clearly annoyed.

“I think we need to talk,” I said quietly. His face darkened, a red flush rising high on his cheeks.

“What are WE going to talk about, huh? You don’t know me—you’re just pretending to care about me, and in a couple of months you will leave—so why bother?” he spat out. Then he fled from the room, leaving me staring impotently after him.

He was right. I WOULD be leaving them at the end of the semester, but my plans included their transition back to mainstream classes that I thought could put them on the path to continued learning. If I did this correctly, the students would be able to succeed alongside their classmates. I wanted to build relationships with these kids and I knew that to get them to buy in to the program I HAD to get their trust. Josh was holding back, not out of hostility but simply out of self-preservation. I had read his file and discovered that he was new to this school and that he lived with his father. No mother was mentioned. I guessed that another adult leaving him was the last thing he needed. I decided that a home-visit was in order.

I went to Josh’s house the next day when he failed to show up for class. I knocked at the door and waited. For nearly five minutes I stood waiting, hearing sounds inside the house that indicated that the residents were home. Finally, a sleep-tousled man answered, and I brightly announced who I was and what I was doing on his doorstep at 9:00 a.m. on a Tuesday. He was not thrilled to see me, and he was angry that Josh had not gone to school. He bellowed for the boy, and Josh meekly appeared from a darkened hallway. Dad and Josh exchanged exasperated looks, and Josh’s father promised that his son would appear the next day with materials, supplies and a project in mind.

I left the house, expecting nothing and chagrined at my own actions. Had I gotten Josh in trouble with his father? Would the young man be able to build trust with someone who had tracked him down and demanded compliance? Had I done the exact opposite of what I should have done? The second-guessing dogged me into the next day.

Josh arrived to class on time with an elk antler. He hesitantly began to explain that his mother was from Alaska—an Eskimo Native who had died when he was five years old. He wanted to make something Alaskan, but he didn’t know what to make. I blinked in

surprise; as luck would have it, I had lived in Alaska for nearly 10 years and had many Native friends. One of them had given me a book on Alaskan art and artifacts in exchange for creating a goat-horn spoon. I handed the book to Josh, and a look of delight washed over his clouded features.

From that day on, Josh was a changed person. He never missed another class; he created sketches and followed the format for completing his projects with enthusiasm. When the time came for the Open House Art Show, he proudly brought his father and showed him the beautiful Sperm Whale he had carved from the antler and the Eskimo Mask he had carved and adorned with feathers and horse hair.

I earned my 16 college credits. The six students' grades improved, attendance was up, and behavior issues were minimal during their semester in the pilot program. They all transitioned back to regular classes, and Krysty went to an honors English class. Just as Josh had predicted, I left them. But I NEVER forgot them.

This past summer I was at the local hardware store looking for wire for an art project I wanted to do. A young man, wearing a manager's shirt and tie asked me if I was finding what I needed. It was Josh! I stared at him with my mouth open in amazement; he recognized me instantly and grabbed me in a huge bear hug.

"Mrs. Valentine!" he cried. "I want you to know that I graduated from high school, and I'm married. I have a little girl, and of all the things I learned in school, ART is the thing I use EVERY day!"

I smiled as tears began to well up.

"Now don't start crying," Josh admonished. "I did good and you're the reason!"

"Josh, I actually became a teacher and YOU'RE the reason! Six of you spent a semester with me. You were supposed to be the toughest kids in the school, and yet I discovered that you were the most fragile." The tears spilled over, and Josh gently wiped one away. "These are tears of joy, Josh. I'm so proud of you!"

"Thanks, Mrs. V. Now what can I help YOU with?"

Yes, I believe that my pilot program showed that art does change lives, but it turns out that the students are way more important than the subject, and the life that was changed most profoundly was mine.

# **Erik's Journey**

## *Quiet determination and patience triumph over a student's rough exterior*

By Barb Quintasket, 2013 ESD 171 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Paschal Sherman Indian School

Our Tribal school's old campus was located in a deep valley surrounded with trees and wildlife several miles away from the nearest town. It was set up with modules surrounding a central playground area. The first through third grades were located within one module, while older grades occupied the others. When we began a new "walk to read" program, students would leave their modules and hurry across campus to their assigned reading classes.

As a second-grade teacher, I was assigned the first level of reading instruction to work with students who needed reinforcement with letter recognition and sounds, as well as with decoding and fluency. I was teaching beginning reading skills.

My students were first and second graders and one tall, husky fourth-grade boy—Erik. I knew of Erik's legacy of loss. He was orphaned and living with his paternal grandma. He struggled with academics and had developed a tough shell. He was known for his hair-trigger temper and loud outbursts. When he felt threatened by the expectations of his teachers, he'd fix his dark brown eyes on them with a laser-like intensity. Next would come the physical outburst. Erik would throw whatever was handy at the time: books, pencils, desks, even occasionally one of his classmates. He spent many hours segregated from his peers, either in a designated corner of the classroom or in-house suspension. I had heard stories about Erik's tirades and felt nervous about having him in my reading class.

On our first day of class, Erik came storming into my room, slamming into furniture and terrifying the younger students. "I don't want to be here! You think I'm stupid! This class is for babies!" he roared. The other students shrank in fear, and I felt my stomach tighten.

Each morning before reading class, I would mentally prepare myself for the dramatic entrance of Erik into our room. On cue he would enter, slamming the door, stomping across the room and loudly complaining that he didn't belong there, didn't want to be there, and that he hated me.

"Good morning, Erik. It's reading time. I need you to join us so we can begin."

There was no reasoning with Erik during his tirades. It took him a good 10 minutes each day to vent his frustration and anger about being stuck in my classroom with me, "that

stupid teacher," before he was able to join the other students. I honestly wanted to pull my hair out on some mornings.

Several weeks into the first quarter, Erik's tirades were beginning to diminish in both intensity and duration. He began to remember letters and sounds. I began to worry, however. I knew that students would be moved to a new teacher at the end of each quarter, and I knew that Erik had never been good at dealing with transitions. I worried that he would revert to his hostile behavior when faced with moving to a new classroom. I was also worried that he would test the next teacher as he had tested me. I honestly didn't want another teacher to have to go through my experience.

I met with our reading coach and school counselor. I shared my fears and we discussed Erik's history. I pled my case: "Please let me keep Erik in my class. He is beginning to show signs of trust with me. I want to continue building a relationship with him. I want him to learn that he won't always be moved away from someone just as he begins to feel trust." They conferred with the principal, and the decision was made that it would be in Erik's best interest to stay with me. Erik's amount of growth each quarter would determine the reading level I would teach.

It wasn't easy, and his skills developed very slowly. Each Friday when his reading classmates would venture up in front of the group and read their books, Erik would sit slumped in his chair with his arms folded defiantly across his chest, beaming the laser glare at the reader. "I'm not reading the stupid book," he would announce.

Not wanting to set him up for failure before his peers, I didn't force him to participate. "Erik, you need to be a good audience when others read," I would respond.

Erik's demeanor continued to slowly improve. He began to contribute to discussions about the books we read. He was beginning to cooperate with the other students, and would even smile sometimes when a classmate would tell him he was being a good partner, but he still wouldn't read in front of the group.

One spring day in April before reading class began, Erik came up to me and announced, "I want to read my book to the class today."

I tried to keep my excitement out of my voice as much as I could and replied, "Erik, we would love to hear you read."

I don't know how long he had practiced his book at home, but on that day he was prepared. He clearly read the title page and then dramatically turned the page. I held my breath as he read each four-sentence page. As he continued to read, Erik's voice grew stronger and he looked more confident. His classmates listened to him with rapt attention. There was no sound in the room except for Erik's voice as he read flawlessly that Friday. I sat there among my students, tears streaming down my face. He read the last words on the last page, closed the book, and with his eyes focused on me and with a huge grin on his face, walked by me, patting me on the shoulder.

"It's ok, Mrs. Quintasket," he said.

Two hours later I saw Erik's grandma across our campus during lunch break. The younger children played happily during their recess, but I was so focused on Erik's grandma that they were all a blur to me as I hurried across the playground get to where she had parked her car. She saw me and waited quietly. Neither of us saw Erik hovering nearby. I greeted her and said I needed to share something about Erik. Being used to negative reports, she stiffened, pulled back, and her face fell.

I told her that Erik had read his book in front of our group. Erik's grandma opened her arms to me and gathered me into a bear hug. As we hugged and cried, Erik stepped forward, shook his head, and with a big grin, said, "Women!"

Erik and I worked together for two years. He became an avid reader and often sought me out to share the books he was reading. He was a huge fan of adventure books, especially those involving pirates. As a sixth grader, he would come into my second-grade classroom during lunch breaks and drop his current favorite book on the reading table and ask, "Gotta minute, Mrs. Q?" and he would sit in the teacher's chair at the table, pointing to a student chair in his silent bid for me to sit down.

He would proceed to describe his book and ask, "Have ya ever read this book? I'll tell the librarian to reserve it for ya when I'm finished."

As a junior-high student, Erik still had the ability to "kick up the dust" in his classrooms. He defied teacher requests, flipped pencils across the room, and was basically a merry prankster of mayhem. Erik was something of a legend. When we would meet each other in the halls, however, he would still greet me with his elfish grin.

The day I took the eighth grade cap and gown portraits for Erik's class, he asked me if I could take an extra pose of him. Of course, I readily agreed. He stood there with an ear-to-ear grin and his arms crossed firmly across his chest. "Remember this pose?" he asked.

After Erik's transition to the public school, I didn't see him often. Mutual friends would report that he was doing well. Sometimes I would see him walking home from school, and we'd wave at each other. Erik's grandma and I would meet in our local stores and would greet each other warmly. She would share Erik's latest exploits with me and assure me that he was still in school.

Three years after Erik left our school, I was honored with a personal invitation to his graduation ceremony.

# Unintended Consequences

## *New perspectives for a veteran teacher*

By Rich Newell, 2013 ESD 114 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Central Kitsap High School, Central Kitsap School District

Sometimes I wonder if I make difference as a teacher. Am I changing lives or at least helping students develop the skills they will need to be successful in life? I hope so. As teachers, we say or do many things throughout our day and often are unaware of the unintended consequences of our words or actions—positive or negative. In my own time as a student, I have experienced first-hand both actions and words that have had a powerful impact on me.

I remember to this day the anger and humiliation I felt in the first grade, my first experience with school, when I was punished while simply trying to help someone. I was telling Johnny Miller, who was sitting next to me in the front row, that the substitute teacher wanted him to go to his reading group in the back of the room. Johnny always seemed to have trouble understanding directions, so I often helped him out. Unfortunately, the guest teacher must have thought I was making too much noise because she whacked me on the hand with a yard stick, and it hurt! It wasn't just physical pain, however; the embarrassment and the humiliation brought tears to my eyes and left me with a never-ending mistrust and dislike for "she who shall not be named." I don't mean to disparage guest teachers, as they face many challenges in a day, but in this case it certainly left a scar.

On the other hand, at the end of my first- through twelfth-grade schooling, I had just the opposite experience. I will always remember with pride something my favorite teacher, Mrs. Martell, said at the end-of-the-year assembly my senior year. As she was giving out Journalism awards, she announced to the entire assembly, "This next award goes to Rich Newell, the least-recognized great person in this school." I was once again embarrassed, but this time it was from being publicly praised and being front and center in the spotlight. Instead of humiliation, I felt joy and elation! What a contrast in consequences! One was humiliating and defeating; the other, positive, encouraging, life-building. It was the latter that helped me decide to be a teacher. I wanted to be like Mrs. Martell, a positive and encouraging teacher who was able not only to see the abilities of her students, but also to perceive the heart and character of a person, to affirm and build confidence in individuals like me who were often unsure of themselves. She made a profound difference in the lives of her students.

Now fast-forward to my own teaching career. Already a veteran of perhaps 15 years, I felt that I had pretty much figured out the art of teaching. However, a young lady entered my class as a junior and showed me I still had a lot to learn.

Cynthia came into class those first weeks eager to build on her already well-developed skills. She loved Spanish and, in fact, had me for two classes, both third-year Spanish and United States History in Spanish. At first we were both delighted with the situation. She was bright and applied herself energetically to becoming more skilled in Spanish. She was a top-notch student and certainly one of the best in both classes. But as the year progressed, Cynthia started to miss a lot of classes. It wasn't long before her attendance and tardiness started to be an issue. In the morning, during third-year Spanish, I either wouldn't see her at all, or she would come in halfway through the period. Then in the sixth-period US History in Spanish class, she would sometimes just lay her head down. I could see something was up, and would ask her if she was ok, and she would always respond with, "Ya, I'm just tired." She was on the dance drill team, and I thought that maybe it was wearing her out and that she would get used to the hectic pace as the year progressed.

Unfortunately, her behavior did not improve, and her tardiness and absences continued to be a problem. She was obviously unhappy and was growing more sullen. As time passed, I became increasingly more irritated with her tardiness and frustrated not only with her attitude, but also with my apparent inability to connect with her.

One morning she came in late again, and I lost patience with her. Try as I might, I don't always filter my sarcastic side, and I said, "You know Cynthia, you might like to try getting here on time. I would like to sleep in, too, but I have a job to do and so do you. It is time you step up to the plate and get here on time."

I could see daggers shooting out of her eyes, and yes, they were aimed at me. She glared at me and sat down, obviously upset, angry and, perhaps, betrayed. We had a rocky couple of weeks after that, for I was still irritated, and she was not very responsive or enthusiastic, but I realized I needed to be more patient with her. I didn't like snapping at her sarcastically, and was determined to help her reach her potential. I thought that maybe there was something going on in her life that I didn't know about, so when she came in late, I would say sincerely, "Cynthia, I'm glad you are here; let's get going." Unfortunately, my new approach didn't seem to help.

Cynthia wouldn't smile, would say hardly anything and would go sit down, expressionless. I was in the process of deciding what my next step would be when I got a call from one of our counselors, saying that Cynthia wanted me to meet with the counselor to discuss the situation. I felt our relationship was deteriorating, that she might even hate me and want to change teachers, so I was glad to meet. Cynthia was there at the counselor's office, and I soon found out what had caused her transformation from an eager student to a seemingly apathetic one, bored with my classes and angry at me. I was shocked to find out that she liked me and loved my classes, but was simply unable to respond positively. It turned out that Cynthia was suffering from clinical depression, and drawing attention to her in any way when she came in late was just making it worse! Had I, like my first-grade guest teacher, caused a negative unintended consequence?

With that information, I changed how I dealt with her. I tried to quietly encourage her. I checked on her well-being whenever I could, without drawing attention to her. Things did not improve immediately, but little by little they got better. She began to smile more often and would occasionally chuckle at my feeble attempts at humor. Her participation in the class improved, and I started to once again see her potential. Then toward the end of the year, Cynthia told me she had an opportunity to go to Spain for six weeks, but she would have to miss the rest of the school year. My principal was concerned with the timing of the trip and called me to his office to discuss the situation. I encouraged him to OK the absence, believing it would be a very positive change for her and a great experience, and she had been showing improvement in her attitude and performance. He gave her trip the green light, and off she went.

When I saw her again at the start of her senior year, she was a changed person. She was once again energetic and interested in the classroom. As a senior, she took not only AP Spanish Language, but also my AP Spanish Literature class. It is very rare that students take those two very challenging classes at the same time. That year she was my Spanish superstar! The trip to Spain had given her the confidence and additional skills she needed to truly excel. It was exciting to see the transformation. In addition to the two Spanish classes, she was also my teacher's assistant during my preparation period. While she still dealt with occasional depression, she was never debilitated as she had been the previous year. During my prep period she would grade papers, type or run errands. Often we would chat about her life, her goals and her faith. She didn't like high school much, and at times said she hated the games, the attitudes and the lack of morality that she would sometimes encounter there. I tried to encourage her and talk her through some of the issues as best I could. Sometimes I just listened.

Cynthia went on to graduate that year, and I still consider her as one of my best Spanish students of all time. She went off to college, and I was confident she was ready to excel. I hadn't seen her for years when I recently ran into her in a coffee shop. She has graduated from college and is very happily married. We reminisced about high school, and then I left, caramel macchiato in hand. As I was crossing the street, I remembered I wanted to ask her if she had gone back to Spain, so I went back into the shop. As I walked through the door, she said, "Señor, I am so glad you came back! I wanted to tell you something. I wanted you to know that you literally saved my life in high school. It was a horribly dark time for me and you made a huge difference; you really helped me get through it!"

I was shocked because I didn't think I had done that much. Her words, however, were music to my ears. I had recently been wondering, "Do I make a difference?" Cynthia's comments convinced me that the answer for me was "yes," and I know that teachers all over are making that same kind of difference. Yes, I understand that the consequences of what we say and do will not always be as dramatic, but daily we make a positive impact on the lives of our students.

As I reflect on the art of teaching and my own experiences as a student, I know I have come full circle. Now I strive daily to become a master at eliminating the negative, and

creating and fostering positive interactions, knowing there will be unintended consequences. In my own way, I try to be like Mrs. Martell, giving support, encouragement and affirmation to all students, because I never know the impact I might have or the results of unintended consequences.

# **I Wonder if They Know**

## *Confessions from the classroom*

By Monte Syrie, 2013 ESD 101 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Cheney High School, Cheney School District

I wonder if they know  
That I ruined Jared's day.  
He was wearing a bandana, and  
After all, a rule is a rule.  
And despite his sunny, spring-day step,  
I would be right,  
For he was wrong.

*I will not tell  
That I found him later  
With a handshake and a sorry.*

I wonder if they know  
That I failed Marina.  
Too late I learned  
She wanted to teach.  
Too late. For,  
I had already placed her on  
The 16-and-pregnant track.

*I will not tell*

*That now*

*We have community circle*

*Every Friday.*

*I will never not*

*Know my kids again.*

I wonder if they know

That I passed Morgan

Even though he failed

With a 42

And not an attitude

I loved.

*I will not tell*

*That I was not so sure*

*That it was not I*

*Who had failed.*

I wonder if they know

That Rachel earned an A,

But I gave her a C.

It could not be helped.

She had not done

All her homework.

*I will not tell  
Of my now desperate hope  
As I shy  
From the mistakes of my past,  
Clinging not to  
The prejudice of grading  
But the justice of learning.*

I wonder if they know  
Of my emptiness in June  
As I jest  
"Finally! It's over,"  
Scooting each  
Out the door  
With handshakes and hugs.

*I will not tell  
Of my excitement in August,  
Of an admission  
Beyond doubt  
That I need them more  
Than they need me.*

I wonder,  
And I want  
Them to know.

# **Almedina's Extended Family**

## *A student finds comfort in the classroom during tragedy*

By Darcy Smith, 2013 Puget Sound ESD 121 Regional Teacher of the Year  
McMicken Heights Elementary, Highline School District

There she was, the vivacious girl I had previously taught in the fourth grade. She walked into our sixth-grade classroom. Her once-bright eyes had dulled; her contagious smile had been replaced with the unmistakable look of sadness and anger. That twinkle in her eyes that would light up a room was glossed over with a vacant look that cried, "Just leave me alone!" Although she managed to force a tight smile to show her respect for me as a teacher, it did little to mask what was underneath. Her fuzzy pink North Face jacket softened her look and reminded me that she was still very much a little girl, but there had been a conspicuous transformation in Almedina that had changed her both physically and emotionally. She had lost that carefree, youthful look and her face portrayed the burden of anger and hopelessness.

Almedina's family had escaped the war in Bosnia and had worked painstakingly hard to rebuild their lives in America, but she had always seemed happy in fourth grade, so something had changed. She had always been an average student with above-average potential. I knew there was something special in this child from the very first time I laid eyes on her, and I was excited about the opportunity to teach her again. Unfortunately, the past few years had taken a toll on this little girl and had forced her to grow up much too fast. From the very first day of school, I noticed how strained her relationships were with her peers. She shot irate glares and abruptly corrected them when they angered her with a disapproving look or comment. She displayed little patience, appeared sleep-deprived, and had great difficulty concentrating on even the simplest of tasks.

I tried reaching out to Almedina by asking her questions about her summer and finding ways to connect through common acquaintances and interests. Luckily for me, when she answered my questions, she showed only the slightest bit of irritation. I often wondered what was causing this beautiful young girl to be so angry. She had a loving family, was able to maintain academically, and everyone wanted to be her friend. I couldn't understand what more a girl of this age could possibly want. When others tried to make small talk, whether peers or teachers, she angrily snapped at them and carried on with her business. She was at school for only one reason, because she had to be. I recognized she was struggling emotionally, which was causing changes in both her personality and her ability to cope with stressors in her life.

A few weeks into the new school year, we began working on writing memoirs. We brainstormed memories, both good and bad, and learned that there are reasons to remember both. Students listed everything from first trips to Disneyland to the day Dad was hauled off to jail. One student described the fears of moving to a new country and

starting life over with her family, while another described her mother being deported to Mexico. Through their writing, students began to process and cope with their everyday issues. The writing provided a voice to the students to communicate their tragedy, fears and happiness. My childhood tragedy of parents divorcing seemed so irrelevant after hearing all of the significant challenges these children were facing on a daily basis, forcing them into adulthood when they were still at an age that needed a tremendous amount of guidance and support.

As I began conferring with students about their writing, I discovered a remarkable amount about their lives and realized that, in a strange way, the writing was becoming therapeutic to many of my vulnerable children. When it was time for me to confer with Almedina, I waited patiently at the back table with my notebook and pencil and wondered what she had chosen as her "seed" to nurture, a term we used to describe the idea students wanted to write about. She sat down next to me with her pink jacket sleeves covering her trembling hands, head down, hair covering her eyes, leaving only her cheeks and mouth exposed. Tears streamed down her face, and she rocked back and forth as she spoke to me as if trying to self-soothe. The tears might not have surprised me if she hadn't had such a tough exterior.

Almedina spoke softly and vulnerably as she described to me that her daddy was dying. She spoke of lying in her dad's hospital bed beside him, the distinct smell of hospital food lingering while she colored pictures for him to hang on the sterile walls of his hospital room. She described how she would hug him, but he was withering away, and she could no longer feel the warmth of his touch. She then ended with saying, "Dad is coming home. He is dying of cancer, and the doctor said he only has a few months left."

After my conference with Almedina, things slowly began to change. When small groups conferred about writing, Almedina began to soften her touch and open up to the other students. Although she still kept her wall up, she was slowly letting it down. She cried alongside her peers. They wiped one another's tears, shared hugs and words of encouragement. Almedina, as well as many of her peers, trusted each other with personal information; they were bonding over similar feelings of distress and grief.

By November, students had completed their memoirs and created covers that were laminated. I was able to bind the books and make them look very professional. Students read their stories aloud to their peers and we celebrated our hard work.

Months passed, and students had their trials, but they remained focused on taking care of one another. Weekly class meetings would often focus on the importance of respect and kindness. By June, our meetings were spent planning a fabulous sixth-grade graduation.

Late one Sunday night, several weeks before school was about to end, I got the call. It was Almedina's mother, and as my heart raced, I knew what she was calling to tell me. I answered the phone to hear a hysterical Almedina. She sobbed uncontrollably, and I could not make out more than a handful of words, but I knew what she was telling me.

Her father had passed away. The man who saved her family from the war in Bosnia and traveled to America to provide a life of freedom and peace was gone.

Her aunt took the phone from Almedina and apologized for the late call. I expressed my sympathy and told her Almedina was not expected at school, and she could return when she was ready. If she did not return before school ended, I would deliver her report card and belongings. I explained that she needed her family and I completely understood.

The next morning I awoke with bloodshot eyes. I wasn't sure if it was the lack of sleep or the tears I shed for Almedina and her family. I quickly dressed and got myself ready for the day. When I entered the building, I made a detour to the office to let the principal know what had happened. I reluctantly walked through the staff room after leaving his office and I did so with my head down, avoiding eye contact with my colleagues. When I exited the staff room, I rounded the corner and began what felt like a long journey to our classroom. I knew the children would be upset and would want to support Almedina. I had to be strong for them today.

When I was about halfway down the hallway to the classroom, I saw that many students had already let themselves in the building, earlier than usual. I wondered why nobody had kicked them out onto the playground. As I got closer I realized that they were gathered around and hugging and supporting Almedina. I was in disbelief that she had come to school. When she saw me, she pulled her body from the arms of her compassionate peers. She threw herself into my arms, and I hugged her as she trembled and sobbed into my chest.

Almedina stayed that day, the day after her dad had passed. In fact, she came back every day until sixth-grade graduation. When I asked her why, she replied, "This is my family and I needed you, all of you, to get through this." She told me that she once had come to school because she had to, but now this was where she felt safe and a sense of belonging.

I was there the day she buried her father, and I watched her place her completed memoir on top of his body before the casket was closed, and I thought to myself, "What is going to happen now to this amazing little girl?"

I have had the privilege of staying in contact with Almedina and her family. She certainly has had her ups and downs since her father's passing, but she is currently a happy and healthy high school sophomore enrolled in honors classes and taking her aggression out on the basketball court and soccer field. About a year ago, I received a letter from Almedina. In one of the small excerpts she wrote the following:

*You helped me through my father's sickness and eventually death. You held my hand and nursed me through the worst stages of grief. You were capable to be my mother, when my mother wasn't capable, but had given her full consent.*

This letter obviously touched my soul and helped me to once again realize that our jobs as teachers are not merely to enrich the lives of our students academically. We have a

much greater responsibility to the children we teach. We do not always know what role we are fulfilling for a child at any given moment, but it is important to remember that we have a moral obligation to fill these roles when we can.

# **I Believe in You**

*Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is.*

*Treat a man as he could be, and he will become what he should be.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

By Commander Rick Gile, 2013 ESD 189 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Everett High School, Everett School District

I believe in you!

Empowering words when shared with sincerity from one person to another.

If you have ever had someone—a mentor, a teacher, a friend—look you in the eye when you were struggling and give you those words, you know what I mean.

Twenty-five years of leading men and women in the U.S. Navy, seven years as a flight instructor in the cockpits of military aircraft and now, in my ninth year of teaching in the NROTC/NJROTC classroom, one principle has been absolutely validated and is now one of my most cherished beliefs—you *get what you expect from people*. Experience has proven to me time and again that people will rise (or lower) themselves to expectations.

Therefore, we teachers must enter our classrooms and look at every student with the absolute conviction that people inherently want to do well—want to do the right thing—want to be believed in—and give them that. They but need a vision of the future, the tools to achieve it and someone who believes unconditionally that they can achieve their goals. And they will! Time after time.

While I believe that there exists in every person a desire to grow and be successful, that belief is tempered in the reality that as human beings we are flawed, we make mistakes. It is an inescapable fact of life. A good measure of our character, then, is how, when we do stumble, we pick ourselves up, learn from our mistake and press on.

As teachers, while we all appreciate and enjoy working with standout people, we must realize those people would be successful regardless of our presence or efforts. A true reward in life comes when we find those students whom the world has given up on and who perhaps have even given up on themselves, and we help them find their way.

One of those moments for me came while teaching at the University of Washington. It came at a time when, like many teachers, I was going through a period of deep reflection, questioning whether I was still making a difference. I was in a slump.

Her name was Sarah. She was an NROTC midshipman who was studying to become a Naval officer. I first came to know her when she strolled into my class one winter day. There was snow on the ground, and it was freezing outside, yet she was dressed as if for

summer. I remember thinking, "Hmm, a bit eccentric." I learned that she was at UW on a Navy ROTC scholarship.

I believe that success in life is all about character. Without the values of honor, courage, commitment and integrity at the core of our being, we are nothing, regardless of the education we may have. The qualities of good character and caring are hallmarks of the most successful leaders—and Sarah was all about character.

Over the course of the class, as I came to know her better, I could see that there was something special about her. I saw in her a spark of character that I was sure would grow her into an outstanding leader. She was selfless and caring about the well-being and success of others, especially her fellow students. When one of her classmates was struggling with a task or just needed someone to talk to, she was always one of the first to notice and offer help. She had the strongest sense of integrity, always striving to do the right thing. I well recall one instance in which she confronted a professor in a geology class who was known to speak little of geology, but instead used the podium to rant about political matters of the day. She bravely stood and reminded the man that the students were "paying for geology and not political science!"

She also displayed a wonderful sense of humor that uplifted others around her. She exuded positive spirit. Sarah earned the respect of others—and mine!

At the core of all this, she burned with a passion to serve her country in uniform. She wanted to be a Naval officer.

Academically, through her college years, Sarah struggled and fell short time and again. She worked as hard as any student, but good grades eluded her. She labored constantly under the threat of losing her Navy full-ride scholarship, one given almost exclusively on the basis of academic achievement. Finally, in her senior year, her grades suffered to the point that the Navy revoked the scholarship. This did not mean that she was dropped from the NROTC program, only that she would have to pay for the remainder of her schooling out of pocket.

However, soon thereafter, she entered my office, sat sobbing and shared the heartbreaking revelation that her family did not have any money and that she was unable to afford the expense of remaining in school. She would be withdrawing from the university and going home.

I felt like I'd been kicked in the stomach. I was instantly angry at the Navy for being so myopic as to let such a promising leader go over the issue of grades. I sternly cut her short and said, "No. You will not give up!"

I went on, "We'll find a way for you to finish school so you can become a Naval officer." Looking her straight in the eye, I said, "I believe in you!"

I will never forget the look of both astonishment and relief in her eyes as she reacted almost physically to the impact of those words. It was as if she had been reborn with a sense of hope.

With her renewed and determined spirit, I helped her scrape together the student loans that would allow her to finish school. We found tutors, fellow midshipmen and teachers who were willing to help her with her studies. We spent hours in my office where I did my best to help her with her academics. I also made it absolutely clear to the Navy chain of command that Sarah had the kind of character that we needed leading sailors in the fleet. I was not going to let the Navy lose her. Slowly, but surely, her grades rose and we labored on through the year.

That following summer, with tears in my eyes, I watched Sarah proudly march at graduation, wearing the uniform of a newly commissioned Naval officer.

From time to time, over the subsequent years, I received reports from the Navy that revealed she had indeed gone on to be an outstanding leader of sailors. I had conversations with fellow senior officers—her superiors—who raved about her leadership. They told me of the high state of morale amongst her sailors who counted themselves lucky to have her as a boss.

I even had the occasion once to visit her on one of her Navy ships and to meet the sailors working for her. They shared the same sentiment about Sarah I had been hearing from others. They were proud to follow her.

For me then, this is what it means to be a teacher. It is my sacred duty to facilitate the success of others, to never give up on any students, for I might just be their last and only hope, and I will not take that hope away from them.

My personal reward in this . . . those who come back one day to stand before me with eyes and heart full and say, "If not for you, I would never have made it to what I am today. Thank you for believing in me."

"No, Sarah. . . . Thank you for reminding me of why I'm here."

# So Many Stories

A young teacher finds the greatest inspiration  
in the lives of his students

By Eric Saueracker, 2013 ESD 112 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Hudson's Bay High School, Vancouver Public Schools

So, did you choose to read this because it looks like the shortest story in the book? If so, you're a lot like my student Tim. Or maybe you're reading this straight through from front to back; that's what Mindy would do with a textbook. Or maybe you're flipping around and you just happened to stop on this one; that's a bit more like Jesse. In fact, you're probably more like some of these students than you'd be willing to admit. That happens to me all the time.

Tim spent 16 years in foster care before he ended up in my physics classroom. He had about five credits to his name (you need 23 to graduate) and probably turned in about 10 percent of his assignments. That's OK because he got the third highest grade on the semester final. I still remember when this kid, who honestly had no hope of graduating on time, scrounged up money for the bus and rode it 45 minutes to the WSU Vancouver campus for their Science and Engineering Open House. He chatted with students and professors, got to play around in the lab, and then came back the next day and shared the experience with the class. Only three out of the 102 AP Physics students took advantage of this opportunity.

Mindy went to it as well; this was pretty much expected of the girl with the 4.0. Later that year, we both took the University of Washington Calculus final exam and she scored about five points below me, which put her about 30 points above her next highest classmate. I'm still not sure where she found the time to get this good at math as a three-sport varsity athlete in the executive branch of our student government.

Jesse didn't go to the Science and Engineering Open House because he was working. His family had moved out of town a few years before and he had decided to stay in Vancouver. He'd been living with a roommate for the last two years and was working part time to pay rent. Most days he would wake up, go fishing or bird hunting before school, come to class, go to football practice, go to work or go fishing, and then do it all over again the next day. Is any of these kids sounding familiar to you yet?

Maybe you're more like Jane. She was going to the skills center to become a dental hygienist, but I'd convinced her to stick around on our campus and take AP Calculus and Physics her senior year, even though she didn't need them for her program. She was worried because she struggled with math and was volunteering at a dentist's office several days a week and didn't think she'd have time for homework. But she decided to take the classes anyway and ate her lunch in my classroom so she'd have time to do her

homework. She even kicked me out so I could eat lunch with other teachers; she just needed a quiet space. It all paid off when she got the third-highest score on the first-semester final. I found out right around this time that she was married and living with her husband and wanted to be home every night to have dinner with him when he got off work.

If that doesn't sound like you, maybe you're more like Kara. She was a total band geek and would come to school for a 6:30 a.m. zero-period band class and stick around that late most nights playing with the band at games and putting on concerts at school. She even found time to volunteer at the middle school band practices so our high school would have a bigger and better band the year after she graduated. She also loved math and kept pestering me to start a competitive math club so she could do more problems. In fact, she confessed to me, the reason she wanted to go to college so badly was that when she went home she couldn't find a quiet space to do homework. She just wanted to have a dorm room so she could work on her math homework in peace.

If that doesn't sound like you, maybe it's because you're like me. I never had to struggle growing up. School came easily to me, I got OK grades, and when it was time to go to college (which was expected of me) I went. Most of my friends are middle-class white kids with college degrees. We haven't had it too bad, and most of the things we have to complain about are pretty ridiculous. It's actually really hard to decide where to go for vacation and then, planning all the details, that's tough. I mean, it really is pretty challenging to find a nice low-risk stock that pays good dividends that I can invest my extra income in. Also, it's so hard to find a good restaurant to go out to on the weekend, and as soon as you find one, can you believe the wait is an hour? Outrageous.

Have you ever thought about all the stories that surround you? High school is one of the last great mixing pots of life, where you're given the opportunity to interact and become friends with other students who come from a wide range of backgrounds, family values and incomes. I'm always amazed by how much their experiences open my eyes to a world I didn't know about. How could I ever complain about having to put in extra time to make my lesson more engaging and relevant? How could I ever even dream of letting these students down by showing *Indiana Jones* in the classroom (because it's got Physics right?) instead of teaching them the skills they would need to be successful on the next stage in their journey? In fact, if I ever need to humble myself, I can simply think of these amazing kids at my school and what many of them go through in a single school day.

# Why Do I Say It?

## *An act of vandalism reveals the meaning of community*

By Jeff Charbonneau, 2013 Washington State Teacher of the Year  
Zillah High School, Zillah School District

I start out every lesson in my classroom the same way, saying “Welcome back to another day in paradise.”

I know it’s a pretty dorky cliché, but what do you expect? I am, after all, a high school science teacher. As such, dorky sayings are kind of my thing. But the reality is, I really do believe that we are in paradise.

Ah, but therein lies a secret. . . Even though I welcome my students to paradise every day, I have never explained to them why I believe it is so. In total, very few students in my 12 years of teaching have figured out why I “welcome them to paradise.”

At least, that is what I used to think.

A few years ago, during the last week of school for our seniors, a single vandal came onto our campus. Toting cans of spray paint, the individual graffitied virtually every painted surface and defiled the campus.

The next morning, the last scheduled ASB meeting of the year was set to begin at 7:00 a.m. As ASB advisor, I had bought doughnuts and juice, and had a nifty little speech all ready. I was going to impress upon them the enormity of what these students had accomplished that year. . . homecoming, Fall Pride, the Polar Bear Plunge, Wacko Olympics, the assemblies, the dances and more. I wanted to be sure that they had understood my messages of what it meant to have high moral character and a sense of community. Certainly I was happy with their efforts that year, but I still wondered if they had really understood.

I was the first to arrive on campus that morning. Within seconds of exiting my car, my heart sank. To say I was disappointed in what I saw would be a gross understatement. The graffiti cut me straight to the bone. I was livid. *My* school had been hurt—*my* school. Looking back, it is so hard to imagine just how arrogant I was to believe that it was *mine*.

Clearly this was one of the worst days I would have in education; this day would not be “another day in paradise.”

At 7:00 a.m., the ASB began to assemble in my room, a full hour before the rest of the school would arrive. As my student leaders began to enter the room, my perspective began to change. I was admittedly slow to catch on at first, but as each of these students, nay, as each of these young men and women, entered the room and met my

eyes, I slowly began to force my mouth not to smile. Strangely, there was a part of me that was incredibly elated each time I saw another student come through the door angry as all get out.

That's right. I was happy that they were mad. It meant that they cared.

It meant that they felt like THEIR school had been damaged. It was THEIR community, THEIR building, THEIR fields that were violated.

Then the school day started. You could feel it. You could feel the anger spread throughout the hallways; classroom conversations were dominated by disbelief and accusing glances. My ASB leaders on that day became just that—leaders in the truest sense of the word. But I wondered if they would stop and realize what it meant—our entire student body was upset because THEIR school had been hurt. I thought to myself, maybe, just maybe, some of them have figured out what it meant to be in paradise after all.

As the day wore on, I was still too self-absorbed to take in the enormity of it all—busy worrying about how we would get everything painted and cleaned before the end of the week. Worried about how *I* could have let this happen ... how *I* had failed as ASB advisor to teach character education . . . how naïve I was. It turned out that many of the students had their own ideas about what to do next.

At the end of the school day, the senior ASB officers asked to talk with me. They started by saying, "The seniors will be here at 8:00 p.m., ready to work until we're done." They asked simply, "Will you leave the paint and brushes outside?" I told them no, but instead offered to join their ranks.

I could not have been more proud. The senior class, without prompting, organized and assembled their own work crew, on their last school night, to put THEIR school back in order.

They quickly set plans, and sure enough at 8:00 p.m., as promised, the seniors descended on the campus. Armed with work gloves, garbage bags, rakes, and brushes, they cleaned the parking lot, completely repainted virtually a third of the school, washed all the windows on campus, pulled weeds, picked up garbage, made home-baked cookies and wrote good-bye letters for all the staff, finished the last of a large silhouette project that now hangs on the gym wall, and laughed and joked until I kicked them out a few minutes before midnight.

They also composed, painted, and framed a 4-foot by 8-foot good-bye letter and hung it in our main hallway. It read:

To the Students of ZHS,  
For the past four years this high school has been our home. We have learned lessons that we will remember forever. Now, we pass this school on to you. As we do this, we ask you for one thing: PLEASE leave this school better than when you

found it.  
Sincerely,  
The REAL class of 2009

Some folks were there all night, others for short while. . . What matters is that they were there to make sure that the last impression of their class was, well, class.

I have never been so proud of a group in my life than I was by the actions of those young men and women.

It turns out, they did learn what paradise is all about. Fundamentally, paradise exists only where people care enough to create it and work hard enough to maintain it. Paradise requires sweat equity, triumphs in the face of adversity, and maintains consistent positive attitudes.

That day, the day that I thought would be one of my worst in education, turned out to be one of the greatest. On that day we were in paradise, and we all—finally—knew why.

# **Rise of the Firebird**

## *How a single moment can change the course of a life*

By Brian Sites, 2013 ESD 123 Regional Teacher of the Year  
River's Edge High School, Richland School District

It started out as just another typical spring day. Things changed once Olivia walked through the door that afternoon, looking haggard, eyes sunk deep, and wearing pajamas that told me she had just gotten out of bed. I sensed something was wrong, so I asked her to step outside with me so we could talk. I had a feeling she was using drugs, and felt like it was time to have a conversation about getting help. She stood there, arms crossed, not making eye contact, as I gently tried to tell her I was worried about her. As we talked, she began to admit that she knew she had a problem, but wasn't ready to get help. That was when I looked at her, with tears in my eyes, and told her, "I don't want to bury another student."

That moment became Olivia's turning point. Showing I cared was the decisive element in changing the course of her life that she later acknowledged in a letter to the superintendent and in her graduation speech the following year. It took her hitting rock bottom, but the countless calls I made, trying to track her down, letting her know that I still wanted her to return to school and graduate, showed her that we were in this together and that there was a better life waiting for her once she got straight.

The next school year, Olivia didn't show up for the first two weeks of school, which led to numerous calls and emails. Numbers were disconnected; emails would get bounced back. I was getting nowhere, until finally, I chanced upon an emergency contact number that was able to help me. I found out that she had been incarcerated, and was going to be living in a nearby district with her father, whom she had never known. I took steps to fax paperwork to her dad to keep her in our Independent Learning Program, because I wanted to give Olivia some much-needed stability in her education. Once Olivia returned, sober, she became a top-notch student. She immediately earned recognition as a student of the month, and began planning for what she wanted to do after graduating. She met the superintendent of our district as he was passing through the room, and decided to email him, which is when I finally found out the depths of hell she had been through, and how amazing her story truly was.

I had been aware of some of the obstacles Olivia had been going through, but when I later learned of the things she had endured, I was in a state of disbelief. Olivia told how she had attended private schools since elementary, but never felt accepted. She eventually dropped out in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and did not attend school for several months. Although she did re-enroll at my alternative high school, her family was in turmoil. She got sucked into a lifestyle of using drugs, dealing and other horrors too difficult to imagine. The problems only got worse as her mom and stepdad began using drugs too,

and had to sell their home to continue to support their habit. In her email, she explained how bad things had gotten, "Most families sit down every night and eat dinner around the table; my family would sit down around the table and make crack."

Her mom and stepdad moved into a motel, but Olivia had nowhere to go, so she stayed at flop-houses. Her boyfriend got her hooked on heroin; things were spinning out of control, and in her words, "I had no priorities other than feeding my addiction." This ultimately led her down a path of self-destruction, and resulted in her incarceration.

Her real story began when she got clean and returned to school. She worked hard, stayed sober and began looking toward her future. We talked about the different things she would like to do with her life, and as she got closer to graduating, the excitement grew. She knew that she had people in her corner like me, not judging her, but moving her forward in her life. Despite the many mistakes she had made, she was given a new lease on life, and was taking full advantage of the opportunity. No longer was I worrying about whether I would read her name in the obituary, another tragic tale of a kid who overdosed. Instead, we were talking about college, financial aid, scholarships and what her dream job might be.

Students today face a stressful world and, too often, don't know how to cope with the demands of life. I feel compelled to step back and realize that the relationships we create can be a matter of life and death. We don't always know what students are going through, but somehow we find the right words at the right time that often help carry them to a brighter future.

I've had many students go through life events that could easily be turned into reasons for failure, but they have shown their resilience, and they keep bouncing back. When I look at the power of a caring adult, and how it helped someone overcome an addiction to a drug as strong as heroin, I am in awe of what an influential role we as teachers can have in our students' lives. In her speech at graduation, Olivia said, "It took a lot of inspirational, helpful and encouraging talks with my teachers, but they were always there to listen, and never gave up on me. They saw something in me that I couldn't see in myself, but standing here today, I'm confident I am beginning to see what they saw in me!"

During the period when Olivia was making self-destructive choices, I admit, I was disappointed that she wasn't grabbing onto her lifelines. I knew she was headed in the wrong direction in a major way. However, by showing her unconditional positive regard, I let her know that I had faith in the possibility of her being a better person, and would do my part to help get her life back on track. Olivia went through things no child should endure, but transformed into a confident and successful young woman; in large part because she had an adult who was irrationally committed to her success. Her resilient spirit, and her willingness to own her past, but not let it dictate her future, is the driving force that gives me the passion to keep doing the work I do. I go back to that moment often, and sometimes wonder what might have happened if I had not taken the time to step outside and have that tough conversation.

President Kennedy once said:

“Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength for our nation.”

Olivia had dreams, just like every other student I work with. While her life obstacles were much more serious than many endure, I was able to help her keep her hopes and dreams alive, and not lose sight of them.

I am proud to say that Olivia is continuing her education at the postsecondary level, and is over one year sober! In her closing comments to her fellow graduates, she declared, “I know there are many hard times to come, but I feel confident that I’ve been successfully taught the tools I will need in order to be successful in life.”

Just as the Firebird rises from the ashes, Olivia is spreading her wings, rising to new heights as she flies toward her future!