

The amazing adventures of a typical mix of middle school kids, teachers and administrators, each with their own hopes and dreams and pathologies, as they roll through another nine months in pursuit of "The Great American Education."

YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD FOR SPACE CAMP

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**YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD  
FOR SPACE CAMP**

**By Tom Anselm**

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## ONE

*Why'd they have to pick yellow?* I wondered as the school buses rolled into the lot. A black girl with blue eye shadow and pink fingernails over by the door glanced at me with an absent look, then went back to checking her cell phone. Over by the benches, three would-be studs were crowding around a lass who was obviously what one could call an early-bloomer. She was drinking up the attention until one of the guys accidentally broke wind—and loudly, at that. With a roll of her eyes and an “Oh... my... Gawd” she spun off in search of girlfriends to hug and squeal with. As for the three young men, they collapsed into puddles of laughter, beating each other on the back with calls of “What a dork!” and “You loser!” and other less-printable epithets.

Ah yes, it was that time-honored moment, the exact end of summer, the beginning of who knows what will happen. It was the first day of school at Cedar Grove Middle School.

“So, Joe. I can see that you haven’t gotten any brains over the summer,” said a voice to my right.

It was Eddie Railey.

Eddie and I had gotten to Cedar Grove within a few years of each other. We had played in a softball league together before that, and I’d told him about the job opening up in Social Studies. It was hard to believe that had been over 15 years ago.

We no longer play softball, by the way.

“Mr. Railey, Sir.... Hey, I guess we’re both dummies, since you’re standing here too.”

It was standard practice for teachers to complain about how fast the first day of school comes, even though most of us still felt that tingle of coming attractions that we felt as kids. But whereas it used to be, “Who will be in my class? or “Will

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that pretty red-haired girl sit next to me?” now it’s “Will I be able to do this for yet another year?”

Eddie smiled. “How was your summer? Overall, I mean.”

“Good enough. Got a lot done around the house, to Julie’s delight. Played a ton of golf, some with you, if you recall. Drank some beer, also with you. All in all, successful,” I said, as row upon row of long yellow vehicles fouled the curbside with diesel exhaust.

“Lucky you. Three weeks ago, I had to go down to Texas to help my mom and dad move into an assisted-living place. Pretty nice place, but they hated to leave their house. Then when I’d been home for a week I got a call in the middle of the night that dad died. Just sitting in his recliner one afternoon watching *The Price is Right*. Mom thought he was nodding off like he did all the time. An hour later, she went to wake him to see what he wanted for dinner, and that was that.” Railey choked up a bit, turned his head. “A peaceful way to go, I guess.”

“Oh Man! Why didn’t you call me? I had no idea.”

“Nobody did.” Eddie shrugged. “That’s okay. Besides, it was in Texas, and they wanted to be buried there. They’d been there almost 20 years. The funeral was small since most of their friends were dead anyway. Dad had one brother, but he passed away a couple of years ago. Mom is here with us, till we can get things squared away.”

Over by the door, Miss Pink Fingernails was howling. “Go ahead and bring it then. Bring it on.”

Railey saluted me and strode slowly over to the scene. “Now, children. First day jitters? Let’s see if we can at least get into the building before we get suspended. Whaddya say, huh?”

“Mr. Railey, we just playin, Man,” said a smallish boy with a budding Afro.

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“Yeah, just playin’ is all, Mr. Railey,” said the girl, now smiling at the big teacher.

I looked over at Railey. He seemed to have the situation well in hand. Literally. He led the two off to see our beloved administrator in charge of discipline, Mr. Wilton X. Davis III, in spite of the kids’ claims of a truce.

He glanced at me over his shoulder. “Have a great year, Joey. Catch you at lunch.” He had a firm but benevolent grip on each kid’s arm.

I turned my attention to the scene before me.

The sidewalks were filling up by now, buses having disgorged their contents like big yellow hoses. It was a diverse gathering.

Black kids, white kids, mixed and Asian, a few girls wearing designer jeans, their heads covered with white scarves hanging down their backs; a boy who looks like he’s about 10 years old; another who might have driven to school; young women wearing long jean skirts, their hair past their back pockets; a girl, I think, wearing black eye shadow, black jeans that could fit two people, and a spiked dog collar. *A dog collar! Oh, Mr. Principal?*

I said a short prayer for them all.

“Mr. Akers, may I see you for a moment?”

My prayer was interrupted by the venerable Joanna C. Sloan, Ph. D., assistant principal. We dropped the “vice-principal” moniker a few years ago. “Too negative,” said the School Board. Dr. Sloan, as she prefers—no, demands—to be addressed, even by those who have known her for years, is already in a lather about something or other.

“Mr. Akers, I—.”

“Call me Joe.”

“What? Oh fine. Mr. Akers, you are *supposed* to be at Door 15. *This* is Door 17.”

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She waited for my response, hands on hips.

I looked at her and flashed my best fake smile. “Oopsies. My bad, as the kids say. I guess I should have read the memo, huh?”

She failed to see the sarcasm, mild as it was. As I moved dutifully to my correct post, Dr. Sloan was already off to make the sidewalks safe for democracy, barking orders into her walkie-talkie. She managed an exasperated glance my way, just to make sure I was heading in the right direction.

“How long till the bell? You a teacher here?”

I turned to see a man-child blocking the sun, about 6’2” and 220 if he was a pound. I instinctively felt the need to make a good impression on this creature. I smiled. “Well, good morning to you too.”

He paused, then grinned widely. *Thank God.* “First, I’m afraid I have no idea what time it is. Are you really in that big a hurry to get inside? And second, yes, I am a teacher here. Name is Mr. Joe Akers.” I extended my hand. This future All-State offensive lineman looked at my hand. He engulfed my fingers in a mitt the size of a baseball glove. But he didn’t know how to properly shake hands, something I find more and more in kids these days. All soft and awkward, a social ineptitude that needs correcting. But not right now.

“Davon Arnold,” he offered in a deep, husky voice. “And yeah, I gotta get my schedule for my classes. We just moved her and my momma registered me, but I got no schedule.”

“Nice to meet you, Davon. Here’s what you do. You’re at the wrong door.” *We have something in common.* “Go around to the front double doors, the blue ones, and when the bell rings, go to the guidance office. Can’t miss it, first door on the right. They have schedules for all new students.”

Davon gives me a look that I couldn’t quite figure out.

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*Does he think I was just another white guy teacher who is messing with him? Or is he unsure of what to do... new kid, no lay of the land yet?* He continued to look at me. I began to get uncomfortable. Then, he grinned, a gold tooth prominent in the front.

“Yeah. Thanks... guidance, right?”

“Sounds like a winner,” I said, breathing easily again. “Good luck, Pal.” He worked his way through the crowd like Moses parting the Red Sea.

*Remember me with kind thoughts, big man.*

The last buses trailed each other off the lot, and the air quality improved measurably.

The morning sky was achingly blue, nearly cloudless. Light breeze, about 70 degrees. Last Monday about this time I was driving my Maxfli Noodle into the woods off the third tee at Eagle Cove. Ah, well. As the Beatles said decades ago, “Obla dee, obla dah, life goes on....”

Yeah.

I have made the mistake once again of standing directly under the outside loudspeaker.

As the bell, which is really not a bell, but a mechanical tone, rattled my teeth, I pulled open the freshly-painted blue double doors and marveled at the kids’ Pavlovian response. Short of salivating, our little puppies herded themselves nicely, funneling through the doorway, then splitting into different directions in search of... what?

“Let us discover the answer to this together,” I said out loud as Miss Pink Fingernails glided by, jamming a cell phone into her size XXL purse. She looked at me like I was goofy. And you know what? She might just be right.

## TWO

Amidst the clamor and confusion, I wound my way to my special education classroom. Not being one for room feng shui, I had at least thumb tacked a bunch of sports pennants, old pictures of former great baseball players, and a collection of hats to the wall. That was the extent of my room décor. It was here where I would officially meet my 13 students for home room. These were the kids whose educational progress would be under my auspices for the next 186 school days. Most of them had absolutely no idea what to expect of me. But I had a leg up on them, having talked to their 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers and read some of the info in their files.

I had learned to not give too much weight to the file review. I wanted the basics, like their disability, an idea about the discipline record, whether they threw desks—you know, the things one needed to know to survive the first few days and to get the kid off to a good start. Too often, though, the records and reports and goals and write-ups didn't tell the whole story, didn't give me a true picture of a kid. That took time. I had to talk to them and looking them in the eye, see whether they have a soul. Or whether they'd laughed at my jokes. At this middle school age, where a kid could change virtually overnight, you had to give them a chance to show who they are here and now. And then you could, maybe, with a little luck and the stars in the correct position, get them to where they wanted to be in the coming months.

The scholars entered and took seats where they wished. I'm not a stickler for seating charts, unless little Jimmy can't keep his hands to himself or Sally can't shut her trap to save her life. I said hello and watched as they made themselves as comfortable as possible. And I wondered, *Does this kid have the tools to be a student, like a pencil, a binder, a daily planner?*

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*The basics? Is that guy with the droopy pants ever going to sit down? Why does that young girl with the pretty eyes dress like she's working the corner after school? And most importantly, Will I be able to give them what they need this year?*

The bell sounded, and—*We're off!*

“Okay friends, let’s all have a seat and listen. My name is Mr. Akers. You can call me that or Mr. A, whichever you like. I don’t care, as long as you don’t call me late for dinner.”

Yes, a lame-o joke to start off the proceedings. Still, how they reacted was telling.

Some kids groaned, some grinned. Some had no idea what I’d just said, either because they weren’t listening or they weren’t accustomed to puns and stupid sayings. And some were too cool to show any reaction—or too afraid.

And that was okay. With that awful line, I’d let them know that I wasn’t going to be a butt-head grouch, but that I did want them to listen when I spoke.

“I only have a few rules for my room,” I said, with the emphasis on “my room.” I wanted to establish early on that they were guests and must carry on in a certain manner.

“One, when I am talking, you are not. Simple enough. You will always have your chance, but I need mine first. It’s a basic rule of manners. Two, when you come through the door, your first job is to find a seat. Wandering around is dangerous to your health and my blood pressure. You can’t write or read or find the perimeter of a rectangle if you’re standing up unless you’re at the board. And last, be respectful, both to me and to each other.” I inserted a slight pause. “Any questions?”

As expected, someone spoke up.

“Yes?”

“Uh, Mr. A—”

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“Are you Sammy Lee Brown?” I said to the average sized kid with reddish-brown dreadlocks. He was somewhat surprised that I knew his name.

“Yeah. So Mr. A, why we have to be in here?”

It was an honest question, one he probably asked his resource teacher every year.

“Good question, Sammy. I can give you the official answer, or the one I like better. Which one do you want to hear?”

He seemed intrigued that there were two answers. He went for the second.

“Okay, the real reason.”

The other kids were all listening, even the girl with the short skirt who had so far acted like she was totally bored with all of this. This question was on all of their minds, after all, and how they handled the answer would be a good clue as to how much we would accomplish in the months to come.

“The real reason is, somewhere along the way in this glorious journey that has been school for you, each of you has had some troubles. Maybe in math, maybe in reading, maybe in writing. Or maybe you’ve had problems getting along with adults or other kids.” *Or maybe all of the above.* “Well, these things have affected how you learned, how you handle classes, what grades you get and—”

“We ain’t stupid, you know,” said Janay Willis, the bored little lady, as she flipped her hand and gave a classic roll of her deep brown eyes.

“No, Janay, you are not. None of you are.”

Terry Hallster, a tall, long-haired boy who looked like he shaved twice a day joined in.

“When does the bell ring?”

This kid should be interesting. I chose to ignore the comment.

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“Janay is correct. You all have the ability to pass these classes. It might be harder for some than others, but you can do it. But you have to listen to me as I try to help you overcome any troubles you’ve had in the past or might have in the future. I know that even if you can read a 500 page novel, but don’t turn in your homework in English, you won’t pass. Or if you have no problem with quadratic equations, but don’t take notes in math class, you won’t pass. So that’s what I can help you figure out.”

I was getting their attention. Even Terry Hallster’s. *It’s a miracle!*

“In the long run, in school and in life, we usually get what we deserve. It is up to you what you want to put into it.”

I was beginning to preach, so I changed direction, something you have to do a lot in middle school. “Now, I have a question for you.” I walked to the front of the room and sat on an old barstool that I’d gotten from my father-in-law. “Who wants to be a freshman in high school next year?”

They all raised their hands, of course.

“And who wants to do the Cedar Grove Experience one more time?”

No hands.

“Well and good. Because that’s my main job, to help you all get out of here. And if you become a better student along the way, so much the better.”

I went on a bit about how I’m not their friend but could be friendly, hated writing referrals but would if taken past a certain point, and told them about myself and my family.

Then, one girl who was, thankfully, snickering at my earlier attempts at humor, spoke up. She wore a blue t-shirt and athletic shorts and pink Converse high tops. Obviously a jockette. Her bleached-out brown hair was in a short ponytail and she wore little make-up, if any. She appeared to be mixed

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racially, with lighter brown skin and hazel eyes. Her name was Melanie Moore.

“Who are our teachers going to be on our team? Are they nice?”

Now here was a thoughtful child, trying to get a head start. She might just have what it takes to break out of the cycle of school struggle.

“Our team is the best in the school, and not just because I am on it.” Pause for the laugh. None forthcoming. I continued. “We have Mr. Railey for social studies. Ms. Nolte is the English teacher. Ms.—”

“Cool. Ms. Nolte. She’s that one teacher, the one with the nice blond hair. She’s sweet, right Mr. A?” Sammy interjected.

“Yes Sir. Sammy, don’t butt in, please. Thanks. So there’s Ms. Nolte, then Ms. Pollard for Science, and the math teacher is Mrs. Wilson-Brown.” This last name brought a few groans.

“Hey, hey, be nice. She may be tough, but by the end of the year, if you do what she says, you will be ready for high school math. Trust me. I’ve seen it happen, even with kids who have trouble with the subject.”

More grumbling. I had to laugh at their responses. Most of these kids knew the team teachers by reputation only. It reminded me not to make the same mistake as I attempted to understand my new charges.

With only a few minutes left in homeroom, we busied ourselves with making sure everyone knew where to go next, had their schedules, something to write with (three had nothing!), shirts were tucked in, I.D.s were hanging where they could be seen, prepared for action. The bell buzzed and they scrambled to the door.

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I raised my hands as if to bless them  
“God speed, my children,” I said with mock solemnity.  
A few smiled as they pushed their way into the stream of bodies  
flowing through the hall.  
And away they went, seeking their fortunes in what they  
hoped would be their last year at Cedar Grove Middle School.

### THREE

As the din of passing time diminished, I made a quick run to my desk, gathered my notebook and class list. And something to write with. Time to hit the faculty lounge for a quick visit to the boy's room before heading to the first class. *English*, it said on my schedule.

I glanced at the guy in the mirror as I stood over the sink. *Employees must wash hands before returning to work*, read the sticker up in the corner. Like I needed to be reminded to wash my hands. Please. *Though some of my co-workers DO NOT do this!* I thought back to the days I taught the class of functional kids, those students who were classified as “mentally retarded” but still were able to handle a regular school setting. We did life-skills things like cooking, taking the bus, making out grocery lists. They were a great group for the most part, and I had many warm memories of that gang. I would never forget Arthur, who had an indomitable spirit, and who, in spite of slight cerebral palsy, made the swim team in high school, never having swum before. He was always dead last in every event he entered, but his performance was an inspiration to all of us who knew him. He never quit smiling as he struggled to make it from one end of the pool to the other end. It's a wonder he didn't drown. Or Eric, who, right in the middle of a story lesson, would carefully unfold a napkin with two slices of bacon that he had hidden in his pocket. In his pocket! He would offer a piece to his girlfriend, Colleen. He has since died of heart failure due to asthma and diabetes. He was only 20. I imagined he has them cracking up in the hereafter.

It was a good gig, at least until the district started using these classrooms for dumping grounds for kids no one else wanted or couldn't handle. Or a place to put a kid who had no business being in a regular school setting, but the parents were

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threatening to sue, so the boys in Central Office caved in, much to the detriment of the kids who were properly placed, not to mention the teacher (me). But that's a story for another day.

Then there was this kid, Armondo. One day, he came up to me and just stared at my face. He was as big as I am, but sweet and harmless. I waited to see what he needed. And waited. And waited.

Finally, I had to speak. "Yes Sir? What can I do for you?"

He softened the slightly confused look on his brown-cream face, tilted his head to the right a bit, and said "Mr. A... Mr. A... how... how you get old?"

Well, there it was. Out of the mouths of babes, or at least 14 year old kids who could be babes.

*How you get old*, he says. I wondered, did he mean how did *I* get old, as he looked at my growing forehead and wrinkly eyes, saw the grey in the beard? Or was he climbing up onto a metaphysical plane, asking the universal question, trying to come to grips with life and its inevitable decline?

I realized I might never know where he was coming from. So my response was the best I had at the moment. I put my hand on his solidly-muscled shoulder and smiled. "You just keep getting up every morning. Coming to school. Doing what you have to do. If you do that, then you just get old."

He sighed and backed away, slowly. Maybe my response was enough for him. Without further comment, he went back to his desk, got out his paper and pencil, and started writing. Unfortunately, he didn't know how to write, not even his name. But maybe what he was putting down in lines and squiggles had some meaning to him.

Throughout the year, he would come up to me and repeat that look deep into my face. Never said anything. Still, I

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took it as a profound moment of communication. I knew what he was thinking. He was trying to figure it out.

So I look into the mirror today and ask The Armondo  
Question: *How you get old, Mr. A.?*

The answer is the same as it was 15 years ago.

The amazing adventures of a typical mix of middle school kids, teachers and administrators, each with their own hopes and dreams and pathologies, as they roll through another nine months in pursuit of "The Great American Education."

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