

Reaching Kids is the autobiographical story of the nearly four decades the author spent in public high schools. The Debate team Richards coached at Broad Run H. S. became one of the most successful teams in Virginia.

Reaching Kids

By Ron Richards

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REACHING KIDS

One Public High School Teacher Tells
His Story



Ron Richards

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Paperback ISBN: 979-8-88531-181-6

Hardcover ISBN: 979-8-88531-182-3

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-183-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2022

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Richards, Ron

Reaching Kids by Ron Richards

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022909952

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Chapter Six: Lives Touching

I started writing novels in the spring of 1979. It was during the revolution in Iran, and I was sitting in an incredibly long line waiting to buy gasoline. I started day-dreaming about the whole thing getting worse rather than better. The idea sparked a fantasy, sci-fi story which grew to over 4,000 hand-written pages in seven or eight years. Throughout that effort, writer's block was something I rarely experienced. Four or five weeks have passed since concluding the previous chapter on the first half of my career as a debate coach. I had been thinking of how I wanted to approach this chapter and then I found it became something of a challenge.

It is not so much having too little to say, as I have rarely found myself at a loss for words. The aspect of this chapter which had left me so unsettled was the direction I wanted to take it. I confess to having conceived this chapter as a type of rebuttal. Some of the relationships I have been privileged to be a part of came to mind as I read an editorial by Thomas Sowell in *The Washington Times*. In "Response to Teacher Complaints," Mr. Sowell made no effort to hide his contempt for people like myself - public school teachers - and for the system which employs us. He began by informing his readers that the shallowest and silliest letters he received were from schoolteachers. He continued by hammering home the idea that most public-school teachers graduated in the lower half, many in the lower third of their own graduating classes. He lamented the thought of "having children taught by the dregs of the college-educated population." Perish the thought.

I suppose I am among the group to which he referred. I graduated from the University of Maryland in 1969, with a 2.357 GPA. Where in the grand scheme of things did I stand? Quite honestly, I don't know, but I imagine this put me in the lower half of the graduating class. If I interpreted his argument correctly, my less than sterling grade point average means I don't know my subject matter very well, hence my sorely deprived students are being seriously shortchanged.

Not being privy to Mr. Sowell's mail, I'm hardly in a position to make any judgments about the maturity or level of intelligence of the correspondence he receives from teachers. However, there were a number of points in his editorial which I felt needed to be addressed. This was my frame of mind when the ingredients for this chapter started coming together. The chapter became another journey through my memories, and what started as a rebuttal to a journalist grew to a picture of teaching which I feel could be of some value to anyone planning to enter the profession.

I will take my leave of Thomas Sowell for the moment, but I will take issue with much of his critique later in the chapter. In a sense, the fact I brought him up at all forms the first situation of which a prospective teacher should be aware. If you are someone who is considering a career as a classroom teacher in the public school system, be prepared to have blame heaped on you by the many vocal critics of our nation's public schools. All the problems associated with public schools, the vast majority of which arise from sources outside of the schools themselves, will be laid at your feet. You will have to accept that people like Thomas Sowell will hold you in contempt and hold you responsible for a host of society's woes. That said, let me add this: Pay no attention to people like Sowell. There is no profession more important than teaching, nor any which can generate as much personal fulfillment, assuming one doesn't measure personal fulfillment through the size of one's salary.

If not Sowell, to whom is this chapter directed? This is a question I've wrestled with from the time I sat down to write the first page of this book. A great deal of this chapter had been assembled in my mind - in rather jumbled fashion, I might add - before I came up with the answer. I don't mean for this to come across like a beer commercial, but if there are prospective teachers reading this, "Lives Touching" is for you. My intent is to demonstrate how much more there is to this profession than instruction in grammar, history lectures, chemical formulas, or algebraic equations. There is another element which tends to have a far deeper impact than any of the preceding. I am speaking here of relationships, of the impact a teacher can have on the lives of

his or her students and conversely, the degree to which students influence the lives of their teachers. After roughly two generations in the classroom, it was this aspect of teaching, more than any other, which brought me back for more every August.

As I've already mentioned, some of the stories I'll be speaking of in this chapter are extremely personal, both to myself and to the students involved, and it was the feeling of not wanting to betray personal trust which kept me from starting this chapter. It was in early February of 2001, when I was finally able to break through the mental barriers and start writing. Why? That year, for the second year in a row, I had received a nomination for *The Washington Post* Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher of the Year Award. On that day during my 5th period Government class, my kids were working on an essay which was basically a response to two different perspectives (editorials) concerning the status of Martin Luther King's dream. I was at my desk working on administrative details when I noticed the door opening. I glanced up to see one of our assistant principals, Ron Petrella, entering the room in the company of another gentleman from the central office in Leesburg. They asked to be excused for interrupting the class and then proceeded to announce that I had been one of the twenty-two teachers in the county to be nominated for the Agnes Meyer Award. They then informed us that I had been selected as one of the five finalists for the award, and the winner would be announced the following week at a School Board meeting on the 13th of February.

At first, I was stunned and didn't know how to react. At one point, when the gentleman from central office turned his head from me, I glanced over at Mr. Petrella and mouthed a silent "thank you," as he was one of the individuals who had supported my nomination with a letter. He acknowledged my thank you with a smile and a nod. The kids, meanwhile, had broken into a chorus of applause and congratulations. It turned out to be another of those warm-fuzzy moments and I believe these are part of every teacher's career.

This was a basic-level Government class, which in our tracking system meant the lowest level of the classes. I have a lot of fond memories of this group of kids. They were the best basic-level class I

had taught in the three years I had been assigned to teach classes at this level, and I so informed them at the end of the first semester. The class could almost be considered an ESL (English as a Second Language) class and more often than not, it resembled a meeting of the United Nations. Of the twenty students who had started with me in September, two had left - one into Fairfax County and the other to Job Corps training. Of the remaining, eight spoke Spanish as their first language: one from Ecuador, one from Puerto Rico, one from Peru, three from Mexico and two from El Salvador. There was also an exchange student, a young lady from Italy, and a girl from China who had been in this country about a year. In some ways it was an ESL class with government on the side. We had some spirited discussions, especially when it came to the policies of the United States toward Latin America. On this particular day, as they applauded my selection as an Agnes Meyer finalist, the message I read in their eyes was one of surprise and joy - two emotions I was experiencing as well upon hearing that news. It was a small thing, but for those few moments on this one day, the kids in my 5th period Government class touched my life in a special way and brought a smile to my face. This is the aspect of teaching I now wish to address. Teaching leads to forming relationships, and the lives of teachers, students, parents, and administrators are woven together in ways which translate into each of us having a tremendous impact on each others' lives.

We've all seen the bumper stickers and the cute, catchy phrases designed to lure folks into this profession. Examples would be, "If you can read this, thank a teacher" or "Shape a future... teach." The cynics among us might be inclined to simply scoff at sentiments such as these. Others might write off such bumper-sticker wisdom as merely corny - if I may be allowed to use a word from my childhood. In 1981, prior to my first appearance as a substitute in a classroom, I might have been one of those cynics. Not so today. If nothing else, my career as a high school teacher has taught me one thing. No other profession offers the potential to make a difference the way teaching does. A teacher, any teacher, has the opportunity to make a difference not only in the lives of the individual students, but in the shape and character of entire

communities. I can think of no other profession where this is as true as it is in the field of education.

Is the converse of that last statement true? My first nomination for *The Washington Post* Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher Award came during the 1999-2000 school year. I was not selected as a finalist that year, but I was one of only twenty-two nominees from Loudoun County. Obviously only one person will emerge each year as the winner, so the county holds a dinner each year at one of the more historic restaurants in Leesburg to honor all twenty-two nominees. My wife, Lacey, and I attended this event in the spring of 2000. Each nominee is called up and asked to say a few words to those in attendance. I must apologize for not remembering who it was, but one of the ladies who spoke before me said something which more or less crystallized what I had been thinking and helped me find words to express my own thoughts. When my turn came, the message I tried to convey was that we have all heard many times how teachers touch the lives of our students, and in so doing, touch the future. However, too seldom do any of us hear how much those same students touch our own lives, and they most certainly do. I told my fellow nominees the real beauty of what we do, the true wealth and treasure which come from teaching, is found in the degree to which our students touch our own lives. Here you find the focus of this chapter.

Looking back over my career, I can recall enough situations of lives touching to fill a book of their own. I am inclined to think most teachers could readily say the same thing. What I decided to do here was narrow them down to a handful. So, people outside the profession can get an idea of the types of situations we encounter beyond “readin’, writin’ and ‘rithmetic.”

Every time a former student drops by school to say hi, I feel like my life has been touched, and again I’d say that most teachers would concur with such a statement. For me, all those years of teaching seniors has resulted in no few of them coming back to Broad Run to touch base with me. Consistently, year after year, I had former students drop in and tell me mine was the course which prepared them most for college. Some have even said mine was the only class that prepared them for college. I think this was due to the avalanche of essays I

assigned every year, but whatever the reason, it was truly gratifying to hear young men and women say those things. It also helped to validate my choice to enter teaching during those times when I felt sorry for myself because my salary paled in comparison to those of my peers in the private sector.

Students have touched my life in so many ways. Let me tell you about Ethan and Owen. In the fall of 1988, I was starting my fifth year at Broad Run. If memory serves me, I was teaching both Honors Government and Honors World History, as well as two sections of Academic Government. One afternoon I walked into one of my government classes a minute or two after the bell rang and prepared to get the class started. I never actually called the roll after the first week or two of school. Once I've become acquainted with my students, I just look around the class to see who's missing, and I usually do this while lecturing or launching the class into a discussion. On that day I started talking about something as my eyes swept the room, but suddenly, in mid-sentence, I stopped. Instead of detecting the absence of any students, I spied two unfamiliar faces sitting all the way in the back of the room by the windows. I made a comment to the effect we seemed to have acquired two new students, and would they be kind enough to identify themselves. I might add this was in the pre-Columbine days, and security was far less of an issue than it would become.

The two fellows in question exchanged glances and both leaned over so their faces were totally visible. For a second or two I was stumped. They certainly seemed older than the rest of the kids in that room, and they sure started to look familiar, yet I continued to draw a blank. Then it hit me. "You guys!" I grinned. "What are you doing here?"

It was Ethan and Owen, two of my favorite students from Osbourn Park High School's class of 1984. They broke out into smiles and we talked for the next ten or fifteen minutes. Owen had graduated from Virginia Tech in May with a degree in engineering. He told me he had accepted a job with a shipbuilding company in Newport News,

Virginia, and he had started his career. Ethan was living his dream, which was to be a part of the filmmaking industry. He had moved to Hollywood and managed to land a position as part of the technical crew of the film, *Fantasm*. He had flown home to visit family and friends and hooked up with Owen. They heard I was now teaching at Broad Run and decided to drive the twenty-four miles from Manassas to stop by and say hello. I think I was grinning from ear to ear as I listened to the two of them tell stories about their lives since graduating from OPHS. I was surprised they even remembered who I was, and it truly warmed my heart to think I mattered enough to them to go way out of their way to come say hi. Visiting with them also brought back many of the wonderful memories of the three years I had spent at Osbourn Park. Suffice it to say it was a great feeling.

As the saying goes, all good things must come to an end, and so it was with their visit. We shook hands and said good-bye and I watched them head off down the hall. Many years have passed since that afternoon, and our paths have never crossed again, but never will I forget the day they did cross.

In the last chapter I mentioned the name of Charlton Dunn several times. He was captain of the debate team during my first year at Broad Run and was one of my finest government students that year. He attended the University of Virginia and joined the National Guard. Without his help I don't think I could have built the debate program at Broad Run. Every year until well into the 1990's, he was there for us: coaching, teaching and judging tournaments. Right after his graduation from UVA, he called me and asked if I'd like to go rock climbing at Carderock, a series of cliffs along the Potomac River on the Maryland side, just down from Great Falls. As a young man right out of college, I had been an enthusiastic climber, and I had climbed most of the cliffs at Carderock without ropes. I think I must have been insane. Either that or I had been seduced, like many people in their late teens and early twenties, by the thought I was immortal, and therefore I could not possibly fall off a cliff.

That was then. At some point in the intervening years, it dawned on me I could die. Somewhere along the line I had also picked up a fear of heights. In any event, despite Charlton having all the climbing

gear a person could ask for, I couldn't bring myself to even make a serious attempt at the same rock faces I once scampered up like a spider. I suppose the fact I had put on considerable weight and was now a much heavier spider influenced my lack of enthusiasm for vertical assents. Eventually Charlton gave up and suggested we give repelling a try instead. We climbed up on the trails that snaked up the rocks at the farthest upriver point of Carderock. We made our way out to a point some eighty feet above the rocky banks of the Potomac River. Many times I had scaled that exact face when I was fresh out of college, but this time I would not even walk within five feet of the edge. I guess it's fair to say I was flat-out terrified at the prospect. I sat down well away from the edge with my back against a rock. I couldn't bear to even look past the precipice so close at hand.

Charlton was undeterred. He began hooking up all the ropes and the gear with which to secure ourselves to the main line. He walked to the edge, turned around and stood with the heels of his feet beyond the edge of the cliff. I would not even look in his direction so horrified I was at the possibility of his falling. Averting my eyes from this former student perched precariously on the edge of oblivion, I implored him to move away from the edge, but I may as well have been talking to the sky. He was in no way handicapped as I was by a fear of heights. As part of his National Guard training, he had become an expert cliff-climber, and he was not at all hesitant about putting those skills to use. He repelled to the base of the cliff in two or three bounds, then disconnected himself from the rigging to hike back up to the top. Then it was my turn.

The teacher had become the pupil. Despite Charlton's reassuring words, however, this pupil was of no mind to be stepping off an eighty-foot cliff. He helped me don the necessary gear and made sure that I was securely locked to the descending rope. He managed to coax me to the edge of the cliff where I stood with my back to the river, the surface of which seemed light years away. The drop was no more than eighty feet, but as I glanced down toward the river, I suddenly felt like I was about to leap into the Grand Canyon. I leaned back just a little to test the rope, and in that instant, I knew that there was no way on God's green earth I was ever going to take the next step. Charlton did

his level best to help me find a little nerve, but it was all for naught. I had suddenly become acutely aware of the prospect of my own mortality. In the end we found a much smaller cliff, twenty-five feet or so, and I was able to summon the backbone to give it a go. I repelled down several times and found the experience exhilarating. With my wounded pride salvaged and a renewed sense of self-esteem, I actually contemplated going back to the first cliff, but contemplation was as close as I would ever get to that cliff again.

We talked a lot about the debate team that afternoon. Four years had passed since Charlton's graduation, and through each of those years he had been an integral part of Broad Run's debate program. It would be many years before I had an official assistant per se, but over the years a number of alumni have made themselves available to the team, in a sense giving back to the program which had helped each of them develop strong thinking and argumentation skills. Charlton Dunn was the first of these. Perhaps a case could be made his contribution to our program was among the most crucial because it was during those years, we built the foundation which produced all those championship runs in the 1990's.

It's fair to say I became rather attached to the debate team at Broad Run. For the better part of two generations it was an integral part of my life. By helping me build this program, Charlton Dunn touched my life and the lives of the students who benefited from his experience and ability. He was also present on one of the absolute best days of my life.

Allow me to explain. On the day I went "not" climbing with Charlton, I mentioned my desire to build a cabin on some land I had down in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Charlton volunteered his time to stake out a foundation atop the hill where I envisioned building the cabin. I saw an opportunity within the next week, but I had to clear it with Lacey. Lacey Bowcock was a young drama teacher near the end of her first year at Broad Run. We were becoming rather fond of one another, and Monday, Memorial Day of 1989, was to be our first "date." We planned a picnic on the previously mentioned mountain property. I figured this could also be an opportunity to stake out the foundation, so I asked Lacey if Charlton could join us, at least for the

first part of the afternoon. I explained who he was and that he would be helping me stake out the foundation for a future home site. She had no problem with the idea, and we arranged for the three of us to meet at my house in Manassas on Memorial Day.

In retrospect, I have to smile when I look back on that afternoon. By 1989, the debate team at Broad Run had become a major part of my life. It would become even more so through the nineties. After Lacey and I were married, the debate team would all too frequently intrude on our lives. I suppose Charlton was the first of such intrusions. We had to break Lacey in from the get-go. Actually, there is more to it. Most people tend to introduce their prospective significant others to their parents. Both of mine were gone by the time Lacey came into my life. My mother had passed away and my father was a missionary in Mexico. In terms of seeking other opinions about her, I checked first with my children, then with my friends. Charlton Dunn, once my student but now my friend, was the first to meet Lacey, and he voiced his approval at the next opportunity. In any event, he visited with us for a couple of hours, long enough to measure and stake out an area for a foundation. I didn't realize it at the time, but another fifteen years would pass before we started construction, and we ended up picking a different spot on the same hill on which to build. We shared our picnic with Charlton before he took off for home. Lacey and I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening with one another and have been together ever since.

The lives of people within the educational community touch in countless ways. Case in point, class reunions. I've only been able to attend a few of these, but the experiences certainly warmed my heart. In the summer of 1995, the class of '85 had their ten-year reunion. I learned of it from another member of that class who had become a teacher and had joined our faculty at Broad Run. As strolls down memory lane go, that reunion of the class of 1985 was simply a delightful experience.

Space had been retained in one of the local hotels, and invitations were sent far and wide. I got there about a half-hour after the affair got underway, and a couple of the "kids" remarked how I was still in character. Punctuality was still not my strong suit. I've noted before

how special this class has always been to me. It certainly was that evening. They had been my first senior class at Broad Run, and the year I spent with them was my twentieth out of high school. Would I recognize any of them? Would I be able to remember names and faces? I didn't trust my memory. By that time, I had taught for ten years at Broad Run, which translated into about twelve hundred students or so. Too many faces. Too many names. I dusted off the first of my Broad Run yearbooks and paged through the pictures of the senior class. I was hoping I wouldn't embarrass myself by not remembering a former student's name. With my memory refreshed, I journeyed out to meet my first Spartan senior class.

Memories are so deceiving. Mine of this class were of the faces in the yearbook. Those were the faces of seventeen-year-olds. The faces I found that evening were not seventeen-year-old faces. These were young men and women at the tail end of their twenties. Some were married and a number of these were showing me pictures of their children. Nearly all of them were college graduates, and most were well into their careers. It seemed like quite a few were employed in the then relatively new field of information technology. They were the pioneers of the new economy.

In the summer of 1997, I was able to attend the ten-year reunion of the class of 1987. I walked in with my heart beating a little rapidly, anticipation, I imagine, of the evening ahead. How many of the kids whom I taught would be there? Would I recognize any of them? Would any of them even remember me? I left for home that night with my heart all aglow, bathed in warmth. The class of '87 made up my first honors Government class. There were only a handful of them, and most were on hand that night. I think that Mason was one of the first I bumped into. We swapped memories for a few minutes, but Mason was one of the organizers of the event, and his presence seemed to be in demand in several places at once. Maria was next, now a captain in the Air Force, looking splendid in uniform. Suddenly Patton was there as if out of the blue. I had heard he'd be there. In fact, MTV had paid for his round-trip flight from Texas to make sure that he would not only be at his ten-year high school reunion, but also that he would be back in Texas in time to film a special on which they had been

working. He gave me a hell of a bear hug, and I heard Maria say, “He remembers.” As with Mason, we shared a few minutes of memories, but Patton was master of ceremonies, and there was a microphone waiting for him up on the stage. I wandered about looking for people I remembered and trying to associate names with faces. Brayden, Whitefield, Dyer, Rusty, Bergin, Altoff, Andros, Briganti...the list goes on and on. Some were there that evening, others not.

It was near the end of the evening, and I was starting to entertain the thought of gravitating toward the exit. It was at this moment I encountered a young lady who had been one of my students. Patton had made it a point to announce that Mr. Richards was among the crowd, so I found myself talking with quite a number of young men and women as the evening wore on. Now the crowd was thinning and several minutes had passed without anyone engaging me in conversation. It seemed the time had come to depart, and I had already said good-bye to a number of people. I heard someone call my name and ask if I remembered her. I turned to see a lovely young woman of twenty-seven or twenty-eight. Familiar she was, but try as I might, I could not come up with a name to go with her face.

“I’m sorry,” I smiled sheepishly, “You look very familiar, but you’re going to have to help me out.” That which I dreaded most, not being able to recall a student’s name, had reared up and bitten me again.

“Kerri,” she replied at once, then added her maiden-name.

I repeated her name with a nod and a smile. Instantly all the memories of this young woman as a student at Broad Run returned in a rush. I remembered her as being of one sharp mind. I also remembered there being times when she would pose a challenge for people in authority. She had been from a family of means, and always seemed to be driving another new car... nice ones. I remembered how school was something she often seemed to rebel against. Now, ten years later, I was looking into her eyes, and I wasn’t seeing that sharp edge which was so often present back when she was in school. I told her I remembered her, and her smile broadened.

Actually, I remembered more than I wanted. I recalled hearing she had been in a horrible car accident on the Capital Beltway and was in

critical condition in a hospital in Montgomery County, Maryland. If memory serves me, this was the year following her graduation, though it may have been the second. I called her in the hospital to wish her well, and she told me the details of the accident which left her fighting for her life. Listening to her on the phone, it wasn't difficult to see how shaken she was by so close a brush with death.

We talked for the next ten or fifteen minutes, and in terms of how those minutes touched my life, I would have to describe them as precious. She told me I was one of the few teachers she remembered from her days as a student. She said I might not have realized it, but that I had a tremendous influence on her life. She told me she sensed I truly cared about my students, that I respected them as individuals. More importantly, she explained, I was the only teacher who never gave up on her when most viewed her as a spoiled delinquent. Not only that; I was the one who never let her give up on herself. Now, ten years later, it was important to her I knew she was okay. She told me she had turned to Christ and had found peace unlike anything she had ever known. This I could see readily enough by looking into her eyes. There I saw serenity, something I rarely saw when she was a student. She had fallen in love and married a young minister. Residing then in Texas, the two of them were then preparing to undertake a mission overseas. She said much of this was due to my influence, particularly since I never judged her and never lost faith in her.

Times like those touched my heart at its core. I confess from time to time, in the early years of my career, to have yielded to bitterness regarding my choice of a career. I was particularly susceptible to this around payday, when I would write out the bills and there just wasn't enough to go around. I looked at what men my age – late thirties, early forties - were making in the corporate world, and I would question the choice to become a teacher. Whenever students or former students like Kerri say the types of things I heard from her the night of that reunion, my choice of a career as a teacher is validated in ways few could ever imagine. We exchanged addresses and said good-bye. When I left that night, I felt like I was walking on air. It was an experience which gave new meaning to the term “warm-fuzzies.”

Heather Nelson was a young lady I will remember all the days of my life. She was a senior in one of my government classes in the spring of 1990. Selected by the Washington area McDonalds as one of the top ten students in the metropolitan area, she wrote a letter nominating me for the Ray Kroc Outstanding Teacher Award, given to ten area teachers each year. I've received a number of awards and nominations from students over the years. This one was precious to me then and remains so to this day.

Heather and I were recognized along with nine other students and teachers from around the Washington area at a banquet at an exquisite hotel in Bethesda, Maryland. The Ray Kroc Award was impressive to look at, a crystal apple mounted handsomely on a wooden base, but it was the evening itself which became one of the most special moments in my career. Heather's mom and dad were there. Her mother was gravely ill, and it was apparent it was a sheer struggle for her to be there. In her face I could see how much of an effort she was making not to yield to pain. I saw something else. She was beaming with pride for her daughter and what she had accomplished. For the Nelsons, this was one of those moments suspended in time, priceless and with no match. I was privileged to have been a part of it. Lives were deeply touched that evening, memories made... bonds forged.

Heather graduated from Broad Run. In due course the Good Lord called for her mother. I knew how close they were, and how deeply Heather was hurt by the loss, but she stuck to her goals with a persistence I found inspirational. She graduated with a bachelor's degree then moved to Philadelphia to attend graduate school. After earning her master's degree, she joined her father in Anchorage, Alaska, for several years. She then moved to California. Not a Christmas passed without a card from Heather.

This reminds me of someone else, Krystal, one of the African-American students I taught in the early years of my career at Broad Run. She attended college in Richmond and used to come by school to say hi when she was home on breaks. It was good to know I was still part of these students' lives so many years after their graduations. Being able to watch from a closer perspective as they go through their

lives is a truly special privilege which comes with its own share of good feelings. Other teachers reading this will understand. We still heard from Krystal for many Christmases as well. It is nice being able to say that.

Students, it is said, tend to remember teachers who were to them a source of inspiration. Let me tell you about some of the kids who've inspired me as the years have passed. Dawn comes to mind. I've already mentioned her in chapter 5 on the first half of my coaching career with the debate and speech team. I found her to be a person most of her peers would want to emulate.

Broad Run went through a tremendous transition starting in the late eighties. Suburbia happened overnight. Cornfield High disappeared, and everywhere one turned there were high-priced subdivisions. The evidence of opulence was hard to miss. Some of the kids drove cars I knew I'd never be able to afford. Most of them dressed very well even when dressing down. Dawn's situation was similar to a line from one of Don Henley's songs about what happens when "happily ever after fails." Her parents divorced, and I often had the impression she felt trapped between two homes. I also felt as though she believed she was responsible for the well-being of both parents, neither of whom was in particularly good health. Sometimes when she talked with me of problems on the home front, she would come across as a parent talking about a child, not the other way around.

Over the years I've had plenty of kids in similar situations, many of whom were literally derailed as a result. Some would just shut down and drift off in a sea of apathy, pain and bitterness. Others would draw attention to their pain by rebelling against any type of authority. Not so with Dawn. She was not about to let anything derail her. During the two years I was associated with her as debate coach and Government teacher, she was never without a full-time job. There were times she worked two jobs. She literally supported herself, paying for her car and buying all her own clothes. She even helped both of her parents with money whenever either of them was caught in a financial bind. She did all this while maintaining a full schedule at school including a number of Honors and Advanced Placement courses and competing

on the debate team as a Lincoln-Douglas debater where she reached semi-finals at the state tournament her senior year.

They say that adversity breeds character. I'd say it did a super job in Dawn's case. I never heard her complain. Not once did I ever see her yield to despair. From Dawn there was never a "woe is me" attitude toward life. Quite the opposite. To me she was an example of patience and persistence. She had set her sights on certain goals and would not allow any of life's setbacks to deter her. If every one of us had the sheer will power Dawn displayed consistently there would be nothing we could not accomplish. When last we talked, she was doing quite well, having graduated from college and being accepted to law school. Whenever I found myself feeling overwhelmed by it all, which happened more frequently than I care to admit, I would think back to the days Dawn was at Broad Run. This never failed to help me to refocus on the future. Hers was an indomitable spirit.

When thinking of students from whom I have drawn inspiration, the faces of several foreign exchange students come immediately to mind. Bernardo, Czech born but raised in Germany, participated in forensics in 1986. He did a dramatic interpretation of a Shakespeare piece if memory serves me correctly. In 1990, Edelina from Austria competed in Lincoln-Douglas debate. Then there was Virgil from Lithuania, class of 2000, who competed in policy debate throughout the season. I've tried to imagine myself, or any of my American students, going to Europe and competing in a debate in say, Russian. Would we be helpless or what? Needless to say, my respect and admiration for these young Europeans jumped by leaps and bounds whenever I watched them compete. With every speech they had to absorb what they had heard in English, analyze it, and think of responses, and counter-arguments, all in English. A challenge this was, but it was a challenge they rose to meet. All of them performed admirably, but it was Virgil who had the most success. By year's end he had established himself as a rather formidable debater. Kids who sought rather than avoided challenges were always a source of inspiration to me, and those exchange students were certainly no exception.

In thinking of students who've inspired me, I would certainly be remiss were I not to mention Andreas, a member of the class of 2000. I remember the first time I heard his name. It was late August of 1999, and all his teachers for the upcoming term had been gathered together for a conference. As soon as one of our assistant principals arrived, the door was closed so we could immediately get underway. The purpose of the meeting was to brief us on what to expect from this student.

I studied the paperwork in front of me and saw right away Andreas was a special education student. Having taught countless special-ed students over the years, I was confident in my own abilities, and for the life of me, I couldn't figure out what all the fuss was about. Then I heard the magic words: Lawsuit. That explained it, I thought. Each of us was given a copy of his IEP, Individual Education Program. We were advised to make sure this IEP was followed to the letter. Apparently, his family and Loudoun County Schools were already embroiled in some sort of litigation, and the feeling seemed to be there could easily be more.

Having never met this young man, I wasn't at all sure what to think. There was certainly an atmosphere of anxiety bordering on fear in that meeting, a feeling which had a contagious character about it. As a result, my own level of anxiety began to grow, and I had to remind myself to keep everything in perspective. Whom should I be fearing? Mom? Dad? Andreas? Our own front office in the event I raised his parents' ire by straying a centimeter from Andreas's IEP? With these questions bouncing around in my head, I turned my attention to the written material we'd been given, much of which was federally mandated information regarding the nature of this student's disabilities, his strengths, weaknesses and so forth.

After perusing the various reports from the Special Education Department, I glanced at the young man's schedule for the upcoming year to see when I would have him. Since he was a Special Education student, I automatically assumed he would be in one of my basic level classes. These classes tended to be relatively small in size and were usually team-taught. There was both a regular teacher and a Special Education teacher in the room. I glanced over the rolls for both of my basic classes and did not see this student's name.

“Wait a minute,” I blurted out. “He’s not in either of my basic classes.”

“That’s because he signed up for honors,” came the immediate reply.

“Honors,” affirmed the assistant principal.

I confess to having felt more than a little dumb-founded. Here was a student whose test taking skills were questionable at best, and he wanted to be in honors? To me it made no sense.

“Does he have any idea how much work I assign?” I demanded.

I should note here Andreas was a member of the class of 2000, which was my sixteenth year at Broad Run. I had been teaching Honors Government for a long time, and I had developed a specific workload for the students in those classes. Starting on the first day of school, every honors student would be assigned two 2-3 page essays every week and a 5-7 page paper every two weeks or so. My goal was to assign four of these longer papers every quarter. I had three reasons for doing so. First, I wanted to expose my students to an in-depth examination of the crucial issues of the day, and of these there was never any shortage. My second purpose was to prepare my students for the challenges which awaited them at the collegiate level. Finally, I hoped to make better readers and writers of them. All the studies I saw since I began teaching suggested American students were lacking in communication skills, which is to say too few of them fully understood what they read, and too few of them were able to effectively communicate their ideas in writing. I suppose it can be said much of my career was something of a crusade to reverse those studies, at least as far as my own students were concerned.

In assigning essays on various contemporary issues, I liked to expose my students to as many conflicting viewpoints as possible. They learned to view issues from numerous angles, and if nothing else they realized there are no simple answers to the issues government officials wrestle with every day. However, I seem to have wandered off on a tangent. Back to Andreas.

The main thing going through my head during those moments when I realized Andreas would be in one of my honors classes was the sheer volume of work which I knew would be coming his way.

“There’s no way on earth he’ll be able to pull this off,” I muttered, half to myself, but the assistant principal who was running the meeting heard me.

“Wait a minute, Ron,” he cautioned, “Don’t be too quick to judge. He likes to write. He’s on the newspaper staff. Writing is one of the reasons he requested your class.”

“Does he really want to write as much as my honors kids have to write?” I asked. The essence of his reply was we would find out soon enough.

I had always prided myself on being able to keep an open mind, at least more often than not. I always made it a point to refrain from making judgments about students until I’ve gotten to know them myself. Yet the comments I had made and the questions I was posing seemed to indicate otherwise, and as I realized this, I was more than a little embarrassed at having opened my mouth at all. I reflected on the matter for a moment or two and decided if nothing else, Andreas, whoever he was, at least deserved a chance.

The first day of school arrived, and I began calling the roll. I loved teaching seniors, but there was one drawback. Unless I knew a student through debate or another activity, I never got to meet most of them until their senior year when they showed up in my government class. I would call the roll out loud for the first two or three weeks, and I always have the kids raise their hands in addition to answering verbally. That way I could begin to associate five new sets of names with the appropriate faces. The feeling of apprehension about Andreas, which had been spawned initially in the aforementioned meeting had yet to be dispelled, and as I glanced around at the faces of the kids who filled my third period class, I found myself wondering which one of them was the infamous Andreas. I started calling the roll. When I got to his name, a very pleasant looking young man with short, brown hair said “Here,” and raised his hand. So, that’s him, I thought, and I remember thinking he didn’t look like Lucifer incarnate, so maybe this wasn’t going to be that difficult of an experience.

How many ways are there for a person to say he’s wrong? How many different ways are there for someone to eat his words? I believe I was a candidate for at least a couple of them.

As a rule, I liked to begin the school year with a discussion about the quality of public education in the United States, and in that direction I did proceed. I passed out a number of editorials, most of which bemoan the decline of public education in our country, the lack of cultural literacy, the minimalist approach to Geography, History and Civics, and the supposedly inferior instruction in Math and Science. This packet of editorials never fails to mention how poorly our students do in comparison to their peers overseas in the tests administered on an international basis. In addition, I always included pieces which take all of the negative opinions to task. My students had to wade through a host of conflicting perspectives on the state of public schools, explain the various viewpoints as best they could and offer their own assessment as to the quality of the education they themselves were receiving. For the longer essay on the topic, 5-7 pages, I include a selection of proposals to improve things - longer school days, longer school years, more homework, less homework, block scheduling, and so forth. When the kids write their own papers, they must also include their proposals for improving the situation.

I loved assigning papers which focused on areas of controversy. Depending on the subject matter, it rarely failed to trigger the thought mechanisms on the part of my students, and in the case of public education, it launched them on a writing journey which would span the next ten months of their lives. I particularly enjoyed reading these papers at the beginning of each year. This was how I got to know my students as each academic year got underway, by getting inside their heads through their essays. It was in this fashion I began to become acquainted with Andreas.

As I said earlier, I liked to think of myself as an open-minded person, and when I picked up the first essay Andreas turned in, I made it a point to put aside all the pre-conceived notions which had made their way inside of my head as a result of the conference the administration had had with all of his teachers. Having thus prepped myself, I began to read.

Whoa, I said to myself about halfway through his essay. This kid can write. But wait, they had already said he could write. That's why he was on the newspaper staff. So, I kept reading and by the time I had

finished with his first essay, I had come to the conclusion that whatever else might be said of young Andreas, he definitely had a head on his shoulders. My curiosity had been piqued. I wanted to know more, but I didn't turn to the Special Education department for their expertise. It wasn't a case manager to whom I wanted to speak, nor did I turn to his IEP. I decided to simply allow Andreas to tell me everything I wanted to know, and to do so through his essays.

What I learned as the year progressed served as something of an eye opener for me. Andreas put his heart into his writing, which was easy to see with every paper. Regarding the topic of public education, he held a number of strong beliefs which he argued with considerable passion. Not surprisingly, he wanted to see more done for Special Education students and presented some powerful arguments as to how it should be done. I found his written work to be excellent. His was indeed a sharp mind which seemed to relish the prospect of making distinctions among several conflicting opinions on any given subject. Since the bulk of the work any student does for me is writing, Andreas seemed to be in an ideal situation, as my particular priorities regarding teaching played directly to his strength.

My impression of this student continued to grow with every passing week. Regardless of the issue, whether it be racism, a woman's right to choose to bear a child or seek an abortion, or the never-ending crisis in the Middle East, Andreas proved himself more than capable again and again. His writing skills were excellent, and in terms of analytical skills he was the equal of any student in my honors sections. Did he struggle with my tests? He did indeed, but the same could be said of most of my students, so he certainly wasn't alone in that regard.

By December of that year Andreas was filling out applications for college. He asked if I'd be willing to write him a letter of recommendation to accompany his applications. I was only too happy to comply. When I sat down to start writing, I began thinking about how much this young man had taught me in the space of less than a semester. I've always admired people who defy the odds, people who are willing to scrape and claw their way to a finish line despite the negative expectations of others. I'm referring to people who will

patiently listen while someone else says they are not capable of doing such and such and reply simply, “watch me.” These are people who leave the so-called experts dumbfounded as they proceed to accomplish exactly what they are not expected to do. Obviously, I was one of those “experts,” and Andreas proved me wrong in the process of proving his own academic abilities.

What lessons did this student teach me that year? He taught me the importance of heart, and in the letter, I wrote for him, I made it a point to note something to the effect Andreas had a ton of heart. He well knew his own weaknesses, that for him studying for tests would ever be a struggle. At the same time, he refused to allow this drawback to become an insurmountable obstacle. Similarly, he would not allow his status as a Special Education student to relegate him to lower-level classes when he was sure he could handle the more demanding challenge of honors classes. He reminded me of a song popular in the early sixties which talked about a goat who kept ramming a dam, determined to crack it. Why? Because he had high hopes. So did Andreas and to back up those dreams he consistently displayed some of the best character traits any of us could ever hope to exhibit. I’m talking about patience, perseverance and tenacity. He was determined to beat the odds, and he had no intention of settling for anything less. On graduation day, as I watched Andreas walk across the stage to accept his diploma from our principal, there was a sense of pride and satisfaction in my heart. I learned a bunch from that student; lessons which made me a better teacher going forward.

How did he do when he reached the next level of his education? I heard back from him after he had just finished his freshman year in college. He had come through just fine, which came as no surprise to me. He was one of those people I believed would make a difference in this world of ours, and I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to play a limited role in his life. More to the point, I am grateful for the role this young man played in my own life. He opened my eyes to aspects of my chosen field to which my own pre-conceived notions had made me blind. Which of us could be said to have been the teacher and which the pupil?

Few students had affected me to the point at which I made changes in the way I did things. Andreas was certainly one of those. Among others who have altered my approach to certain aspects of life were Isabella and Wilson. The former was a student in one of my general -level classes in the mid -nineties. I had assigned her a term paper, and the topic she chose was the environment, specifically water conservation. In her paper she chastised people who leave the water running while brushing their teeth. I confess to having been one of those folks, or at least I was. She estimated the loss of good water at about a gallon per brushing. I thought about it. Turning it off while I brushed my teeth was a small thing. It certainly wouldn't take much of an effort on my part, and it would make a difference, albeit a small one. So, I made it a point to turn off the water each time I brushed my teeth. Isabella, my thanks!

Wilson managed to alter another aspect of my life that, although not related to teaching, was still a considerable change from my accustomed way of doing things. I am not particularly fond of spiders, except daddy longlegs, which I think, are kind of neat. Aside from this one species, I like to avoid spiders. I dislike sharing my space with them whether that space be my vehicle, my home, or my classroom. Speaking of my classroom, there must have been a colony of wolf spiders somewhere in the courtyard outside of my classroom. At least I call them wolf spiders. As babies they are gray in color, but as adults they're black and furry, and they jump in any direction at the drop of a hat. In any event these little critters seemed to show up in my classroom with a frequency which was somewhat disturbing for a fellow like myself who suffers from varying degrees of arachnophobia. For most of the seventeen years I was in that classroom prior to the arrival of Wilson, I would dispatch said spiders almost as soon as I would spot them, with an exception or two to which I will allude later in the chapter. Wilson changed all of that.

It was in the fall of 2000, fairly early in the first quarter. As usual I was assigning two, two-page essays a week to my honors Government classes, and as usual I was falling behind as far as reading these papers was concerned. The pile of papers on my desk was growing. Wilson was in my sixth period class, which was the last block

of the “gold” day. We were on an A/B block schedule which meant I would meet with this class three times in one week, two the next. My memory of the exact nature of the particular incident has dimmed somewhat. I am not sure if I upset Wilson by killing a spider in my classroom or if I did so by complaining about a certain rather large species of spider which built huge webs and which appeared all over the outside of my home every September. In any event, Wilson didn’t say anything to me verbally, but as I started catching up on my grading, I encountered one of his essays. I don’t remember the political issue which was the focus of that assignment. I do remember reading his explanation and response to the assigned material. And then I found something extra. He had written about a page and a half on the topic itself, then he totally switched gears. For another page or so, he offered a passionate plea for the lives of the spiders I was no doubt planning to kill. He spoke of the intricacy and beauty of their webs, the grace of their movements and of course their usefulness in eliminating other pesky insects. Suffice it to say I was moved. Wilson had succeeded where numerous others had failed. I stopped killing spiders...at least for a while.

In the comments I made on his paper, I informed him I had indeed been moved and that I was impressed by the quality of his arguments, not to mention the passion with which he had presented them. I told him I couldn’t make any guarantees, but I would make an effort to avoid taking the life of any spider I encountered. After all, arachnophobia doesn’t simply disappear, at least not in my case. In the classroom it meant finding a student who did not share my fear - I encroached upon Wilson a number of times as the year passed - to escort any spiders found in my room through a window back to the courtyard. At home... well, suffice it to say it took a lot of willpower to walk past those intricate webs with their huge spiders and not reach for the Raid. Wilson, with one well-written emotional plea, changed an aspect of my life I never anticipated would ever change.

Earlier I spoke of Andreas, a member of the class of 2000. There was another student in that graduating class who was also a source of inspiration for me. His name was Everett, and his was a story which dated back several years prior to his arrival in my classroom. When

my older son, Justin, was in the seventh grade I asked him if he'd like to go see *Species*, a newly released Sci-Fi movie. He said yes and asked if he could bring a friend from school, to which I replied in the affirmative. We picked up his friend and headed for the theater. As I was buying the tickets, I noticed the movie was rated R. I recalled one of my favorite Sci-Fi movies of all time, *Aliens*, which is a rather violent flick by anyone's standards. I assumed *Species* was along the same lines and that was the reason for the rating. Wrong. I goofed. The sexual content was rather explicit. I like to think of myself as a reasonably open-minded person, so I believed Justin could handle it. However, his young friend was my responsibility for the next couple of hours, and I questioned my judgment in taking someone else's child to a movie which contained so many sexual messages. I figured I'd just not make an issue of it, and we could all just watch the movie. At evening's end, we dropped him off at his house and headed home. I thought no more of it.

Two years passed. I remember Justin telling me a classmate of his was moving from Manassas to Ashburn and would be attending Broad Run. He told me he was a smart kid and would be enrolling in the honors classes. I told him the chances were good I'd have him as a student in one of my classes. Over the next couple of years Justin would often ask if I'd seen Everett yet, and I always replied in the negative. At the end of Justin's Junior year, he said I should look for Everett in one of my honors Government classes when school opened in the fall. Sure enough, when I saw my rolls for the coming year, there he was. However, I had no memory what he looked like, but I figured I'd find out soon enough.

On the first day of school during my fourth period block I called the roll. When I came to his name, I finally met Everett. He was not at all what I expected, although to be honest, I really had no expectations. Everett was a rather free-spirited member of the school's thespian troupe. He was tall, quite thin, with a pale complexion and long, straight, black hair. It was still August and quite warm as it tends to be that time of year in the Washington area. In spite of the muggy conditions, Everett was dressed all in black in the style that many referred to as "Gothic." He wore black boots which reached nearly to

his knees, and the fingers of both hands were adorned with heavy silver rings of various shapes and decor. I was surprised he still had the backbone to dress this way after the Columbine tragedy. Most of the kids who had so clothed themselves had made different fashion choices after that incident - some as a result of new rules being rushed through by school districts, others simply because they tired of being viewed as potential killers simply because they chose to look different than the vast majority of their peers. For this reason alone, without having said a word to him aside from calling his name, he had made an impression on me.

“Do you remember my son, Justin?” I asked.

“Of course,” he replied with a smile. “You took me to see *Species* with him when we were twelve.”

“That was you?” I gasped, and his smile broadened as he read the surprise on my face.

“Yep,” he nodded, and several of the kids cast curious glances in my direction.

“Oops,” I returned his smile, “I didn’t know that the movie was rated R, or at least why it was rated R,” I explained.

He said something to the effect he certainly wasn’t complaining, and I figured it was time to leave well enough alone. Then something dawned on me. During the previous school year, I remembered Justin telling me that Everett had lost his mother. I recalled hearing of a horrible motorcycle accident in which one of our students lost his mother, but I never put two and two together. The accident happened on one of the two-lane country roads leading out of Leesburg. Everett’s stepfather and his mom were on the motorcycle heading toward Ashburn when a deer darted out in front of them. The bike went down and the car following them was unable to stop in time.

Everett and his stepfather stayed together for a few months but eventually parted company, leaving Everett on his own with no place to call home. This was why I grew to admire him, and this was why this young fellow became yet another source of inspiration for an aging government teacher. Many kids, maybe most kids in that situation, would simply have given up and dropped out of school. Not so with Everett. He stuck it out despite the fact the odds were stacked heavily

against him. He got a job, found a place to live and stayed in school. Whatever images his choice of appearance may or may not have projected, this kid had true grit.

I remember Thanksgiving of that year, and my heart was aching when I thought of Everett alone with no family to be among. I couldn't bear the thought of it, and I told him so. I also invited him to spend the holiday with us. I knew Justin would enjoy seeing him again, and I knew we'd have plenty of food. He smiled when I asked and thanked me for thinking of him, but he said there was no need to worry. He had already made plans to join his girlfriend's family for the Thanksgiving holiday, so he was sure he would be fine. I told him the invitation would remain open, and he could come by anytime he wanted. As it turned out, he and his girlfriend came by in the evening after supper but in time to share some dessert with us. My wife, Lacey, who was a drama teacher, really enjoyed his visit because she had someone to talk theater with while the rest of us were watching football.

Everett didn't have the easiest senior year. How could he? At the age of seventeen he had to fend for himself. Housing, transportation, insurance, food... All the things kids took for granted simply because they were furnished by mom and dad were things he had to work hard to obtain for himself. On top of all that, he had school to contend with, and his schedule was full. He could have dropped my class at any time and gone to an academic level class. This would have spared him the mountain of essays my honors kids had to write, but he chose to stick it out. He struggled at times and missed his share of classes, but he always caught up, and in the end, he made it through.

Graduation day arrived, and all of us gathered at the Patriot Center at George Mason University. The entire faculty was there as we always were, and as I watched Everett cross the stage to receive his diploma, I felt a deep sense of pride for him. I could not replace his mother or father, but I could still feel that sense of pride and satisfaction at what this young man had been able to accomplish on his own. Like Andreas, the odds were not in his favor, but he chose to persevere, and in so doing became a source of inspiration for this teacher.

I'd like to say he went immediately to college, and he was most certainly qualified and more than capable. The circumstances of his

life, however, made it very difficult for him to pursue higher education at that time. He had no choice but to work full time. Yet, I had no fears about his future. I knew he would do just fine, and if he decided to go to college, he would find a way.

The ways in which lives can touch in this field we call education are endless. The kids I've mentioned thus far in this endeavor, are but a selection of those who have touched my life throughout my career. Each time a student invited me to accompany him or her to our annual Academic Excellence dinner, my life was touched. The three students who nominated me to appear in *Who's Who of America's Teachers* all had an impact on me. And then there's the Agnes Meyer process.

I never thought too much about the Agnes Meyer Award. I always thought of it as something for teachers far better than I, and as for the possibility of my ever being nominated, well, I simply dismissed it as being far too remote. Apparently, I was wrong. One morning in the fall of 1999, one of our assistant principals, Ron Petrella, called me into his office. I wasn't sure why, and my first thought was that I was in trouble again, as I did have a tendency not to keep my mouth shut when perhaps common sense would so dictate. I walked in, said hello, and smiled while I stood there with an inquisitive expression on my face.

"Did you know that you're about to be nominated for the Agnes Meyer Award?" he asked.

"Me?" My jaw must have dropped halfway to my knees. "You've got to be kidding."

"No," he said with the mischievous smile which was his trademark. "The Espey family has decided you should have this award."

I was dumbfounded. In the next couple of minutes, I stammered about how I didn't think I deserved an award of such a nature, that Agnes Meyer should be reserved for teachers who truly merit such recognition. He replied the Espey family thought otherwise, and besides there was no harm in being recognized. I thanked him for the information and left his office to return to my next class. To say I was stunned would surely be an understatement, but I'll have to say it was

a happy feeling. I think I may have walked on air for at least part of the way back to my room.

I knew nothing of this nomination process, and I wasn't even sure I was supposed to have been informed, so I kept it mum aside from telling my family. I had taught John and Brian Espey. The latter had been an anchor of my debate team through the mid-nineties, and their younger brother, Steve, was now on the debate team as well. The idea they thought that highly of me certainly warmed my heart.

February of 2000 rolled around, and the committee had the responsibility of choosing a winner narrowed its selection down to five. I was not among those five. I received a letter from this committee congratulating me on my nomination and presenting me with all the letters written by the Espeys on my behalf. I showed the material to my department chair, himself an Agnes Meyer winner, and he told me the letter and the package meant I didn't make the cut. I can't say I wasn't disappointed, but I wasn't at all surprised. There were some fine teachers in our county, and just being nominated put me in some rather lofty company.

For the longest time I couldn't bring myself to read those letters. Then one morning when I was on duty in the attendance office, I had to call Mrs. Espey to verify a note for an early dismissal for Steve. I had thanked her weeks earlier for the nomination, and I had read the letter she wrote. Now that I was on the phone with her, she asked if I had read the letters John and Brian had written. I was ashamed to say I had not, and I hastily explained I've always had a hard time dealing with compliments. When people start telling me I'm a good teacher or a good coach or that I've made an impact on their lives, I would get flustered and quickly find myself at a loss for words. She replied that reading her sons' letters about me made her cry, and she thought I should read the letters soon. Who was I to argue with that?

Arriving home that evening I searched the pile of books, envelopes, notebooks, bills and file folders on my desk till I found the nomination package. I pulled the material out of the envelope and sat down to read. When I was finished there were tears in my eyes and one hell of a lump in my throat. I showed them to Lacey, who had the

same response. I couldn't remember the last time I had been so deeply touched by another person's words.

Came the spring and with it two invitations in the mail. Both John and Brian were graduating from college in May, and both asked me to be at their respective ceremonies. John was graduating from George Mason University, and Brian was graduating from the University of Virginia. Both were receiving bachelors' degrees in computer-related fields. John's graduation from GMU was on the evening of the 20th of May, Brian's from UVA was on the 21st, which happened to be my birthday. A couple of weeks prior to that weekend I got a call from their mom inviting me to a graduation party for both boys at their home in Ashburn. I've never been one to turn down a free meal and cake for dessert. They only lived two or three minutes from school, so I went directly over that Friday right after school. It was a delightful party, good food, good company, and lots of pictures. A picture was taken of John, Brian, and me, which now occupies a prominent place in my own collection of memories. From their house we proceeded to George Mason University for John's commencement exercise.

The arena was rather full if memory serves, and crowds of people were moving in all directions around the concourse seeking their seats. The Espey family and I managed to get separated for a few minutes, but I soon located them and took my seat to watch the proceedings. By evening's end my heart had again swelled with pride. John Espey received an award as the top student in the group receiving degrees in Information Systems. Quite an evening, that one.

Early on the morning of the 21st, I was on the road from Manassas to Charlottesville. Less than two hours later I was on the campus of the University of Virginia, Mr. Jefferson's University as it is often called. I met the Espeys at Brian's dormitory, and from there we made our way by foot to the "lawn," where the initial ceremonies were to be held. For someone who loves history as much as I do, this was an awesome experience. One cannot stand on the lawn at UVA with the Rotunda overlooking everything and the old dormitories flanking the area without being bathed in an aura of history. To top it off, I got to

watch the graduation of one of my former debaters, one who had been key to three of our state championships. Talk about a birthday present!

As the initial ceremonies concluded, the rather substantial crowd began to disperse, with each candidate making his or her way to their respective colleges for the next round of ceremonies and the presentation of their degrees. Brian was matriculating from the E-School, the electrical engineering school, widely believed to be the most difficult college at the university. At the end of his first semester, Brian Espey rose to the position of number one in the E-School. This coveted spot was one he would never relinquish. I sat there with his parents and smiled with both pride and satisfaction as he was given the award as the top student in his graduating class. It was quite a weekend.

At that point I had been teaching members of the Espey family for about ten years. In their letters to the Agnes Meyer committee, both John and Brian pointed to me as the person who provided much of the motivation for their academic success. Whether this was so or not I cannot say, but I can say that both graduated from college with high honors at the top of their classes on my birthday weekend in the Spring of 2000. It served to remind me once again of just how fulfilling and meaningful this job of teaching is. It was a timely reminder, for it came at a time when my commitment to the profession was beginning to waver - primarily for financial reasons. Yet again I was comparing my situation to that of my friends in the private sector, and I couldn't help but feel frustrated by the fact I was still living paycheck to paycheck. That weekend with the Espeys put an end to my wavering. They had thanked me in countless ways for the role they believed I had played in shaping the lives of their sons. They kept telling me I had a gift, that I was able to reach kids and that I did so in a way that mattered. I'm the one who should have been thanking them. They reminded me of what is truly important about my chosen profession, and that reminder came at a perfect time. To add icing to the cake, it looked like better financial times for Loudoun County's teachers were on the horizon.

To close this section on the Espey's, I want to note the graduation of Steve Espey from Broad Run. He was in one of my honors Government classes and an integral part of my debate team for the

2000-2001 school year. Over the years I've seen the younger siblings of very successful students crack under the pressure of trying to measure up to their older brethren. At the beginning of the year, I made it a point to take Steve aside. I told him to never live in anyone's shadow and to go through life forging his own path. There was no verbal reply on his part, just a nod and a smile. I think he already knew what I was talking about and, in point of fact, it may have been unnecessary for me or anyone else to say a word. He followed his oldest brother to GMU.

In the fall of 2000, I had an experience with a number of former students which I will cherish to my grave. Somewhere in his fourteenth or fifteenth year, my son, Justin, became a hockey fan, and for reasons I can't explain, the Boston Bruins became his team. By his senior year he really wanted to journey north to see them play on home ice in Boston. Having rarely ventured too far above the Mason-Dixon Line, I figured the time had come for me to take a look at the Northeast, so we took two trips to see the Bruins in the fall and in the spring. I'll have to say I rather enjoyed myself.

In the fall of 2000, we planned another trip, but this time with a few wrinkles thrown in. I had a student in my fifth period Government class named Melynda, whose older sister, Hannah, had been one of my students from the class of 1994. Hannah had married another of my students, Wyatt, and Melynda told me they were living in Boston. We began exchanging letters and e-mails, and we arranged to meet for dinner at one of the pubs across the street from the Fleet Center. In addition, there was another of my former students, Carter, a member of the class of 2000, who was now attending Boston University. After we picked the game, we wanted to see, I e-mailed all these folks, and we decided to meet at a place called The Harp that Saturday evening. Eagerly looking forward to seeing them again, I hopped into the car with Justin and headed for Boston.

The situation became a little trickier than I had anticipated. Justin had also arranged for us to meet a couple of his friends and fellow Bruins fans from New Hampshire in Providence, Rhode Island early on the same day for lunch. He had also planned to go to a Providence Bruins AHL game with them after lunch. So, we met them by the

Providence Civic Center on Saturday morning and had lunch in a delightful Italian restaurant a couple of blocks away. After the Providence game, Justin and I departed hell-bent for Boston. We were supposed to meet Hannah at 5:30 outside of the pub. I think we were about twenty minutes late. I remember seeing Hannah standing outside of the Harp as we drove past. I honked the horn and waved to her so at least she'd know we had finally arrived, though another ten minutes passed before we found a parking spot and walked back.

After introducing Hannah to Justin, we went inside and asked for a table. While we were waiting, we were joined by Carter, the more recent alumnus who had graduated that June. I had told them to look for the guy wearing a Boston Bruins jersey. It seemed like close to half the people in the pub were so attired. Folks were no doubt gearing up for that evening's game across the street. The four of us were soon seated and had ordered dinner. I figured it would be un-American to make a trip to Boston and not try a cup of New England clam chowder, and I must say it was excellent.

As we wolfed down supper, I managed to catch up on old times with these students. Carter was a freshman at Boston University and quickly filled me in on his first semester of college. Hannah and her husband had both been in my 5th period Honors Government class in the class of 1994. She had recently graduated from Northeastern University. Wyatt had also graduated recently from a music conservatory. They were considering a move to New York with an eye toward getting into the music business. Wyatt was supposed to join us, but we weren't sure if could make it prior to my having to leave to go across the street for the hockey game. Hannah said he had a surprise for me, but she left it at that.

Naturally, our conversation focused heavily on school. We talked a lot about education in general. Both Carter and Hannah, six years apart as my students, spoke approvingly of my approach to teaching with its emphasis on reading, open discussion of opinions and a strenuous regimen of writing. Both seemed to agree my class had gone a long way toward preparing them for the rigors of a college curriculum. No teachers could hear these words from the mouths of former students and not come away satisfied, but it was something that

Hannah said that has become one of the most memorable moments of my career. She looked at me and told me that of the classes she had taken in high school, mine was the only one that was real, and Carter nodded concurringly. As these words sunk in, I was taken a little aback, and my phobia about compliments began to rear its head. I shifted my gaze from Hannah to Carter and received the aforementioned nod.

For a person who spends as much time as I do engaged in public speaking endeavors, speechless is a word I can seldom use in reference to myself. For a couple of moments, I was completely speechless. I said thank you, of course, but that hardly seemed adequate. I mumbled something about that whole reality thing being one of my priorities, but what I really wanted to convey was how gratifying it was for me both to hear such a thing from her and to have it validated by a student whom I taught six years later.

Several minutes passed until Wyatt arrived and with him still another member of Broad Run's class of 1994. This was the surprise to which Michelle had alluded. It was Warner, who had also been in that 5th period class with Hannah and Wyatt. Now there were six of us around the table, and the reminiscing kicked into fifth gear. We talked and laughed our way through the rest of the meal, with the three older alumni sometimes checking with Carter to see if I was still doing this or that or talking about this issue or another. In the end my heart was simply flooded with warmth. What an evening this had been! Here I was six hundred miles from home having dinner with my older son along with four former students from two distinct points in my career. As I said earlier, I will cherish the memory of that night in Boston as long as I draw breath.

All too soon, we had to say our good-byes as it was time for Justin and I to scoot across the street. Hannah had thought to bring her camera, and we took some pictures. One was with me and the three kids from 1994. In this picture I seemed to have acquired two sets of rabbit ears. Imagine that. The second picture was of Carter from the class of 2000, and myself.

As a footnote to this wonderful mini-reunion, I next saw Hannah at graduation in June. Her sister, Melynda, who was graduating, told

me Hannah would be there and would be sure to find me. As the commencement exercises got underway, the faculty precedes the graduates in the procession onto the floor of the Patriot Center. We divide into two lines and sit in two rows on either side of the graduates, facing the students themselves with our backs to the families and other guests. Early in the ceremony I heard someone behind me calling my name. I turned and saw Hannah standing on the lowest walkway near the lower row of seats. She told me she had copies of the pictures she had taken, and I nodded back to her to let her know I'd come get them after the ceremony. Afterward, I located Hannah and Melynda outside of the main entrance to the Patriot Center. Hannah gave me the two pictures we had taken at the Harp. She also gave me their new address in Southern California. Instead of New York, they were giving the West coast a try. Four classmates from 1994 were making a go of it together along the Pacific. I had no doubt they would all do well. Those two pictures now occupy a place of prominence in the scrapbook of my teaching memories.

In the Fall of 2000, I received a telephone call from Claire, the mother of Easton who had been captain of my 1999-2000 debate team and a state champion. She told me of her intent to nominate me for the Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher Award. I told her I had already been nominated the previous year, and I really didn't think I was Agnes Meyer material. She insisted this was something she really wanted to do, and so was launched my second nomination for the Washington Post award. Speaking here from a perspective of which emotion is a critical component, I can readily point to the 00-01 school year as one of the highlights of my career. The efforts by Easton's family to land me the Agnes Meyer Award were key to this being so, not to mention the previously discussed trip to Boston.

Looking back over thirty-eight years in high school classrooms, I can say most of them were wonderful years. That of 2000-2001 was exceptionally so. As I detailed earlier, I made it to the final five, which qualified me for a ceremony at a meeting of the school Board at which the top five were recognized individually, and the winner was announced. Just being in that company was an honor. Ron Petrella was right when he said it's nice to be recognized. For me it was a neat

experience to come before the School Board for a different reason than a state debate championship. It occurred to me these people on the Board were no strangers to me. I recognized most of them and they me. That in and of itself felt rather good.

That spring the emotional highs came one after the other. In April, during our Spring Break, I made the trek with five members of the debate team to compete for the state championship. Other schools, particularly Blacksburg, had a definite advantage in numbers, but I still liked our chances based on the strength of our limited number of entries. We ended up taking the switch-side cup and the Lincoln-Douglas cup. The other two cups were split between two other schools, allowing us to claim the AA State Championship for the seventh time over a ten-year time period.

Later that month a faculty meeting was scheduled for a Tuesday morning. Our principal had made it a point to recognize someone on the faculty at each meeting for the last couple of years. In the weeks preceding that meeting he had reminded me several times a meeting was scheduled and that I really should be there. I figured it was my turn to be called up at the meeting, so I thought it would be best to take his advice. The meeting was set to begin at 7:45 in the morning. Try as I might, I don't think I'll ever be able to claim punctuality as my high suit. I rushed into the building at 7:47, made a beeline for my classroom, dumped off my briefcase, thermos and lunch and then stormed out for the cafeteria. In my haste I nearly bumped into Angela, a junior, and one of the keys to my plans for the next year's debate team. I believe I said hello, and I know I didn't even slow down while I explained I was on my way to a faculty meeting.

I walked into the cafeteria at 7:51 or so, to be instantly reminded by our principal that I was late. I smiled sheepishly and apologized, but I noticed the expression on his face spoke far more of relief than anger. I figured all was well. Every seat near the front was taken, so I made my way toward the rear and sat down at a table with a couple of the older teachers. It was about quarter after eight when he announced that month's staff recognition. He mentioned my making the final five of the Agnes Meyer nominees and spoke of the debate team's most recent state championship. He made it a point to give some sort of gift

to each person he recognized, and I could see he was holding a little stuffed bear with thick, gray whiskers sprouting from each cheek. I started feeling less self-conscious about the whole thing. All I had to do was walk up to the front, accept my bear, say thank-you and beat feet back to my seat. Piece of cake.

It was at this point where he sprung his surprise. He said rather than speaking himself about my accomplishments, he had arranged for a member of the debate team to say a few words. That person turned out to be Angela, the young lady I'd nearly knocked down in the hall. I hadn't even seen her come into the cafeteria, which I hope doesn't say too many negative things about how much I was paying attention. In any event, she appeared from the very back of the cafeteria and walked confidently to a point at which she was essentially standing in the middle of the faculty. Most of the staff was there, which put our number at well over one hundred. If Angela felt at all intimidated in the presence of the assembled faculty, she gave no indication. As for me, I was as surprised as a man could be. If such was our principal's intent, he definitely pulled it off. For the next ten minutes Angela honored me as I've never been honored before. She spoke of the impact I'd had on her life as well as on the lives of the other members of the team. She pointed out how much time I sacrificed with my own family in order to be at tournaments with the debate team. She said it was no accident that the team had become the most successful activity in the county. She noted how much the debate team had meant to her own growth both as a person and a student. Her concluding words drew an enthusiastic round of applause from my colleagues, leaving me feeling a bit overwhelmed by it all but awash in good feelings.

Fate supplied its own twist to this story as well. The night before I'd been sitting in front of my television looking through the channels. I came across the closing scene of the show about a public high school, Boston Public. I basically caught the closing dialogue between the principal and one of the assistant principals. The latter was lamenting the fact no student had ever told him that he made a difference or that he'd had an impact. Throughout his career, he said, he had longed to hear those words from a student, but he had resigned himself to never hearing it.

I kept thinking about that closing dialogue. Of course, it was pure Hollywood I had witnessed on the television. The show itself seemed more frequently geared to fantasy than the every-day reality of the world of public education. Still those few moments at the end of that particular episode left a mark on me. I felt sorry for the character, and I wondered what it would be like to go through an entire career in education and never hear those words. That thought flashed through my mind as Angela continued to speak. Then the reality struck me. Not only was I hearing those words, but I was also listening to them being delivered as a tribute before the entire faculty. The Good Lord indeed works in mysterious ways. That morning I felt truly blessed. I was reminded of Lou Gehrig's farewell speech in which he claimed to be the luckiest man alive. I was feeling that way myself. Another memory to carry all the days of my life. Without question, this was one of the highlights of my career and a moment to be cherished.

Twice I had been nominated for Agnes Meyer. I figured I may or may not be nominated again, and if I was, I may never win the award itself. Even if I did, I did not think the emotional high I experienced the morning Angela addressed the assembled faculty of Broad Run could be matched. Agnes Meyer winners were feted at a fabulous dinner by the Washington Post. Here they received a check for \$3,000, and a large crystal apple. There was no way on earth the money or the apple could ever come close to equaling what I experienced at that meeting. However, it was the nomination itself which put me in a position where the principal felt some sort of recognition was appropriate. It was Easton's family who made this possible, and I hope they know how deeply grateful to them I will always be.

For the next two or three weeks, scarcely a day would pass without one or more members of the faculty taking me aside to say what a wonderful experience that must have been and to compliment Angela on the eloquent and confident speaking style she demonstrated. As I said, a precious moment that one.

In my humble estimation, the vast majority of teachers in this country, particularly those who have taught for a spell, could sit down and recall incidents in their own careers quite similar to those I've detailed thus far in this chapter. Year after year most teachers will look

up on any given day and see a former student in their doorway. Lives touch in this fashion all over the country, generation after generation. Each year it seems there are wedding invitations and birth announcements involving former students. The luckiest among us get to teach the children of former students. At that moment, I had yet to count myself among that number.

As the class of 2001 headed toward graduation, there were two more ceremonies I would like to share with my readers. The Church of Jesus Christ, Latter Day Saints, has a sizeable population in the eastern region of Loudoun county, Virginia. That Spring, the Ashburn Church decided to have an evening ceremony so that each of their children from the 6th grade to the 12th could honor a teacher of their choice. Two of my students, Keanu and Nathan, made me their choice. It was to be another heart-warming experience.

I actually arrived at the church on time and was escorted to my table by one of the young people serving as ushers. On one side of each table sat the teachers being honored. Opposite each teacher sat the student who had selected them. At my table there were a couple of other seasoned veterans, Ed and Roger. If my math skills are not failing me, between the three of us, as of 2001, we had logged fifty-one years of experience at Broad Run. At other tables around the room, among the teachers being honored were Mary, Patrick and Amy. All three of them had once been students at Broad Run. Ed, Roger and I had taught them all at one time or another. Now each of them was a teacher at the school which had played so critical a role in their own lives. Each of them was able to reach kids, and each of them had touched the life of at least one of the students in that hall. That thought itself touched me. The ceremony itself was rich in the symbolism of the community. For me it was something of a head rush to be sitting with Ed and Roger, an older generation of teachers being honored while our former students were being similarly honored by a new generation of students. I had a sense of the torch being passed and the wheel turning as the wheel should. A fine evening it was.

The Keynote address for the event was delivered by the president of the church, and I found his words especially meaningful. He made note of the humble nature of the gift provided by the church to the

honorees, which was a wooden, red apple. He said that in the grand scheme of things any gift offered would just be a trinket. He pointed out if any of us wanted to see our true reward, all we had to do was look across the table and there we would find the living monuments to our efforts in the classroom. What a thought! What a beautiful thought! I glanced across at Keanu and Nathan. For just a moment I saw in their faces the faces of the many hundreds who had endured my perhaps obsessive passion for writing through the first twenty years of my career at Broad Run. There was a smile on my face. How could it be otherwise? We who heard the call, who had earned the distinction of being called “teacher,” were being embraced by the living monuments to our work. We were indeed blessed.

I commend the members of Ashburn’s Church of Jesus Christ, Latter Day Saints, for making the effort to recognize and thank the teachers of their children. Community bonds already sound were strengthened that Sunday evening. It was clear the education of their young people was a high priority among the members of this church. I had known many of these people for years and had taught a bunch of their kids. I had found them to be consistently supportive of our school’s programs, both academic and extracurricular. This I think is one of the most vital ingredients for the success of any public school. When the ties which bind the school with the community are strong, good things happen.

The words I heard from the president of the church that night stayed with me. A couple of weeks later the Loudoun Education Association held its annual dinner to honor all twenty-two of Loudoun County’s Agnes Meyer nominees. This annual event was held at the Laurel Brigade Inn in Leesburg, Virginia. The restaurant itself is steeped in history, and the colonial fare found on the menu is simply excellent. Following the meal itself, a ceremony begins in which something from the nomination package of each nominee is read aloud. That person is then called forward to be presented with an inscribed Jefferson cup. Each of the nominees then says a few words in response, and the ceremony proceeds to the next teacher.

The words “living monuments” had been stuck in my head since the event at the church. They inspired me, as did the gentleman who

had spoken them. I had given some thought to it in the days preceding the Loudoun Education Foundation dinner since this was my second time at the dinner and I knew I'd have to say something. I wanted it to be something meaningful, and the comment about our living monuments was one of the most meaningful things I'd heard in a while. When it came my turn to speak, I mentioned the Teacher Recognition Reception in Ashburn and spoke about the impact those two words had on me. This became the theme around which I built my comments that night, and I returned to my seat satisfied my colleagues in that dining room shared my enthusiasm for two simple words and the idea they conveyed.

Twice, at that point, I had attended the LEF dinner at the Laurel Brigade. Both times I had come away feeling very good about the strength and character of our community's relationship with the school system. Of more meaning to me personally was the sense of family I had experienced both times. I confess in younger years I may have been one of those who snickered when our superintendent would speak of the entire school system as a family. I hope I can say I grew both as a person and a teacher over the years because family is the exact word which came to my mind when I think back to those two dinners. Our superintendent at the time, Dr. Edward Hatrick, was always there for the faculty, as were several members of the School Board, folks from Central Office, members of the Loudoun Education Foundation and several prominent people from the business community. The teachers in the spring of 2001 group of nominees spanned the entire spectrum of the school system from kindergarten to 12th grade. Included in the group were representatives of the Special Education Department and one teacher from the alternative school.

The part of the evening which did the most to bring family to my mind was listening to the other teachers speak about what the nomination meant to them. Here I found a lot of good things in common, the same enthusiasm for teaching and the same love for young people. Those two characteristics alone can combine to create an outstanding teacher, one who can reach kids, and in so doing inspire a desire to learn. When you have listened to over forty teachers who vividly display those traits you can't help but feel the bonds which

drew us together and made us a family. Except we were a family set on a mission, that being to educate the children of Loudoun County.

Looking back, I have to say I had a wonderful career. Academically, I believe I had challenged my students to be knowledge seekers, to know all they can learn of the world around them and to be active, committed citizens. I think I can make a claim to have built one of the better high school debate programs in the commonwealth. I base this assessment not on the championships we had won, but on the size of the program and the number of kids who were able to compete on a regular basis. That kind of competition helps them develop into sharp-thinking individuals. That said, I want to repeat my belief I am hardly alone in this respect. I think most teachers in my generation can look back on their careers in the classroom with the same level of satisfaction.

This has been a chapter weighted heavily with my own heart-warming memories. The reader may notice most of what I've presented thus far involved honors students or members of the debate team. I suppose it would be nice if everything involving the job of a classroom teacher revolved around awards, recognition, and championships. In a perfect world, perhaps it would always be that way, but a perfect world this is not, nor ever will be. Many of the closest relationships I've experienced as a teacher arose from situations most of us would prefer to think never happen. They involved kids upon whom life has not always smiled. In closing this chapter, I'd like to detail two examples of what I mean by this.

Early in my career at Broad Run, I met a young fellow I'll simply refer to as Cassius. He was enrolled in one of my general level Government classes which at the time was the lowest level in Loudoun County's tracking system. Though September of that school year was the first time I had met him, I was familiar with his last name as a result of older siblings I'd taught in the years prior to his being in my class. When you hear the same name frequently called to the office over the PA system, or when you see it frequently on the absentee list, particularly the section which lists the kids who are suspended, it's easy to draw conclusions. All I knew about Cassius during the opening

days of the term was that his older siblings seemed to have spent a lot of time with our various assistant principals.

Time passed, and I learned more about him through class discussions on various issues which was something I emphasized no matter what level I was teaching. I found him to be a person who used his mind and who wasn't at all afraid to speak it. We developed a mutual respect... an affinity of sorts. I think he saw I did indeed care about him, as I cared about all the kids in my classes. They mattered to me as a group, and they mattered as individuals. Cassius, however, was one of those kids who simply wasn't cut out for school. Why? I don't know that I could venture an adequate explanation. I just knew, as the weeks passed, he was missing an awful lot of school. In my experience, the kids who missed that much school usually didn't make it. Some would drop out. Others would be simply kicked out. Still others would make an effort to stick it out, but their excessive absences would make it impossible to catch up. At some point well into the first semester I figured Cassius would end up gone for one of those reasons. I resolved to do whatever I could to keep him in school, but I was enough of a realist to know I wouldn't be surprised if the day came when I'd have to strike him from my rolls.

Eventually that day did come. Too many years have passed, and I honestly can't remember whether he was asked to leave due to excessive absences or if he simply decided to withdraw. Whatever the reason, he was gone. It saddened me to scratch his name off from my roll-book, but scratch it I did, and the year continued.

Weeks passed then news of a tragedy came to us. It seemed the brother of one of our former students had shot himself, committed suicide by taking a gun to his head. Moreover, he had apparently done it in the presence of that former student. The student was Cassius. My heart broke when I heard this news. I could feel the pain I was sure he was feeling, and I wanted to just sit down and cry, but this isn't an option when you've got a classroom full of kids in front of you. I wondered if it would be appropriate for me to try to contact him. I really knew very little about his family or his situation at home, and at a time like that, I was thinking it would probably be best for me to

mind my own business. In the end I simply included this young man in my prayers, hoping God would intervene and ease his grief.

Only it wasn't the end. Several days after the school received word of the suicide, Cassius showed up at school. I don't remember what period it was. I couldn't tell you whether the class seated in front of me was honors or academic or general. I just remember my door opening and seeing the eyes of my students all shift in that direction. I also remember how quiet it became in my room when the door opened. I turned to face the door and there he was. I said hello to him, and he in return said hello. This was followed by a couple of moments of awkward silence as each of us searched for words. It was he who broke the silence by asking if he could see me for a few minutes. I agreed at once and asked him in, but it was immediately apparent he was not comfortable coming into the classroom. So, I had to make a choice. There were more than twenty-five kids sitting in my classroom at the time, and they were my immediate responsibility. The young man at the door was no longer enrolled at the school, and I imagined there may have been a question about whether or not he was even allowed back on school grounds. It didn't take a genius to see that at this particular moment the needs of that former student standing in the doorway took precedence over those of the class seated in front of me. I think most of the kids in my room that day were of the same mind. Nor was there the time or luxury of dreaming up and administering some sort of emergency lesson plan, though I concede the possibility of a better teacher being able to come up with one. I told the class to sit tight and wait for me to get back, and then I gestured to Cassius to step out into the hall. I followed him, closing the door behind me.

He still didn't seem comfortable with the circumstances, as there were people in the hall at the opposite end. Without speaking, we both decided to exit the building through the double doors to the right of my classroom. These were the days prior to the major remodeling of the school when I could still park my car five seconds from my classroom. We stood on a covered sidewalk leading to the entrance to the 300 hall. Today that area is inside the building. It's part of an informal common area of sorts in the back of the school. In those days it was all too often a wind tunnel which chilled kids to their bones as

they moved from the 100 to the 300 hall or vice-versa. We stood facing one another, he with his back to the cars of faculty members parked along the grass. I had no idea what I should say or how it should be said. Then again, I had the feeling he hadn't come to listen. So, I waited. Finally, he began to talk about it.

I can't recall the exact words we exchanged, nor could I tell you how much time passed with me outside. He told me his brother had killed himself, and I replied I knew because the faculty had been informed. Then he told me the story of exactly what happened. His brother and he were alone in the room. His brother had the gun in his hand, pointing it at his own head and declaring over and over he was going to kill himself. His voice began to break as he explained to me how desperate he felt and how he was doing his level-best to talk his brother out of making that fatal choice.

Just then the door to my left opened and a woman who had been a strong member of the school's science department and who had recently become our first Dean at the time, stepped outside from the 300 hall. As she approached, I remember her asking me what I was doing outside of my room, but then she recognized the young man who was occupying my attention. I believe she knew at once where I needed to be. She moved quickly past us and indicated she would cover my class as she disappeared back into the building.

Cassius continued his story, emphasizing the helplessness and panic he felt when it was apparent his brother was not going to heed his pleas. The way it was being described gave me the sense the two of them were not stationary in the room but rather moving around one another, always remaining in close proximity to one another, with one intent upon taking his own life and the other pleading desperately for him not to.

I remember him glancing to my left or right frequently while he was telling me all of this, always avoiding eye contact. Then he stopped suddenly and brought his eyes to mine. His lower lip was quivering, and it didn't seem to me he'd be able to maintain his composure for much longer. He began to speak again, but his voice was breaking, and the words came out in a stammer. He told me, despite his fervent pleas to the contrary, his brother had pulled the

trigger. He described the immediate result, but I'd prefer to say no more of it here.

I was horrified. My first thought was selfish and focused on how badly it hurt me just to hear him tell the story and to picture it playing out in my own head. Then I was ashamed for thinking of my own discomfort. I couldn't imagine the horror Cassius must have experienced or the pain which must have wracked every fiber of his body in that instant. I searched for words but found none. Basically, I just stood there more or less dumbfounded.

By this time, he appeared on the verge of breaking down. His eyes filled with tears. He wanted to cry, but he fought it. Maybe he thought it would shame him to break down in front of me, or perhaps he was afraid he might be thought less a man were he to cry. Whatever the reason, he was trying hard to maintain some sense of composure, but he was fighting a losing battle.

I couldn't really take much more myself, and I figured no words from me would ease the pain which had such a grip on him. I did what I think most folks in my place would have done. I beckoned him to me, taking him in my arms and embracing him as a father might his son. I let him know it was okay for him to cry, and the words had hardly left my mouth when he began to sob. With his head on my shoulder, he let go of at least some of the grief which gripped his heart. He just wept.

How long we stood in that tearful embrace, I can't remember. I just recall there came a point where his sobs were not so deep, and he was no longer shaking. At last, he pulled away and stood straight again, using one hand to wipe away a couple of lingering tears. I asked if he needed to come in and sit down for a little while before going home. He said he was okay, and he needed to be going. He thanked me and said good-bye, then turned and walked away. That was the last time I ever saw him.

I watched him disappear from view, which gave me a little time to regain my own composure. Then I returned to my class. The Dean was there when I stepped through the door. She asked about Cassius, and I said he seemed to be okay and had left the school grounds. As she was

leaving, I thanked her for coming in with my kids. She replied with a nod and a smile which said she understood, and then she too was gone. I looked at the faces of the twenty-five or so seniors, classmates of Cassius, who sat in front of me. At this point my memory draws a blank. I have no idea what I said to them or what I did for the rest of that day. How much time did I spend outside with that boy? Couldn't say. I can say this, however, those minutes were among the most meaningful experiences I had in the thirty-eight years I spent as a classroom teacher.

I suppose the time has come for me to connect some of the dots in this chapter. The reader may recall my opening of the chapter with a discussion of an editorial by Thomas Sowell and speaking of a need to rebut much of what was said in that editorial. The first thought which came to mind when I read his arguments was the memory of the afternoon Cassius came to see me after his brother's suicide. I have no idea why I was the one he sought out that day, but I have never ceased giving thanks for the opportunity to be there for that boy at a moment when his need was great. As the memory of that day flashed through my heart, I asked myself what my GPA or my class rank at the University of Maryland had to do with anything. Would my shoulder have been a more suitable place to cry had I been able to boast a 4.0 GPA through college? Somehow, I doubt it.

My point is teachers are called upon to wear a wide variety of hats every day. Much of the impact we will have on the young people charged to our care will manifest itself in ways which have little to do with test scores in spite of the insistence of so many politicians to the contrary. That experience with Cassius does not make me unique in any sense of the word. There are tens of thousands of teachers out there who can point to moments in their careers, not necessarily of an academic nature, which had profound meaning in their own lives and those of their students. Put all those aforementioned hats aside for the moment, and let's just talk about the academic aspect of public schools. Good teaching is far less about transferring knowledge from one head to another than it is about inspiring students to seek knowledge on their own. A teacher who is able to spark intellectual curiosity on the part of his or her students tends to be more successful

than one who can recite an encyclopedia of trivia. However, I seem to be getting ahead of myself. There's a chapter coming which will focus on what I feel might be thought of as effective education. That will be the time to take on the nay-sayers. This is the chapter about the way lives can touch one another through the venue of public education. I want to conclude it by highlighting one more example of this aspect of my career, but first I needed to vent just a wee bit. Blasted editorial!

I remember a spring semester in the late nineties. There was a young, black student whom I had yet to meet, who liked to concoct and sing rhymes as he made his way from class to class. I think I heard him rhyming in the halls for weeks before I actually saw him. His attire and the way he carried himself seemed to fit a lot of the "gansta-rap" stereotypes of inner-city youth. I didn't know his name and had no idea what grade he was in, but his confident demeanor was distinctive, and I knew I would remember him once I'd seen him for the first time.

I never did find out his name that year. The term ended with me still wondering who the walking rapper was. The opening of the next school year brought me an immediate answer. My fourth period government class was on the general level and included maybe fifteen kids. This was prior to our making the shift to a block schedule, so all our classes met every day. On the first day of school, I knew I had this young man in my class before I even walked in. It was impossible to miss the rap lyrics coming from within the classroom. When I entered the room, I saw three young black men sitting directly in front of my desk. I recognized the young man who seemed to be able to come up with a rhyme at the drop of a hat. I simply didn't know his name. Calling the roll took care of that. I'll call him Jaime.

The world would probably think of a friendship growing between Jaime and myself a highly unlikely event. I am a white man, southern by the grace of God as the saying goes. My heroes growing up were men like Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis. Jaime was a young, black man from an inner-city situation well to the north. As unlikely as it may seem, we hit it off right away.

I found him impossible not to like. To me he was warm and friendly, sometimes charming to a fault. There was a streak of irreverence about him when it came to the established order of things

which I found appealing because some of that same streak runs through me. I found him to be bright and energetic, and he was never afraid to voice his opinion, whether or not he was called upon to do so. His ability to rhyme was just amazing. No matter the circumstances, the subject matter or the time of day, Jaime could come up with a rhyme. He had formed a rap group with several other people - both friends and family - and if memory serves me, they were very much in demand in our area.

There was, however, another side of Jaime. Though he lived in the suburbs of Loudoun County, Virginia, he found it difficult to put some aspects of inner-city life behind him. If pushed too far, he could be quick-tempered, and was not at all averse to using his fists to resolve conflicts. If I may be allowed to use the jargon of the young at that time, he ran with a crew, a group of young, black men, most in their teens and twenties, who brushed against the law all too frequently. There were kids at school who loved and admired him. By contrast there were others who feared him, and they were not particularly enthused about some of his antics. The administration of the school eyed him warily. From a disciplinarian standpoint he sometimes posed a challenge. Perhaps he was at times viewed as a time-bomb waiting to explode.

As we progressed deeper into the school year, my opinion of Jaime continued to rise. He helped spark life into a class which otherwise may have seemed tedious to the other kids. I've been told at least some part of this stemmed from the way I approached teaching, though I don't know this to be the case. In any event, my approach to teaching government to honors classes wasn't radically different than the way I approached a general class. I liked to focus on controversial contemporary issues no matter what level I was teaching. This meant frequent discussions, and often my role in those discussions was simply that of a moderator. I liked to let the kids bounce their ideas off one another, and I felt this exchange of ideas was one of the most valuable things which can happen in a school. I can't think of too many issues we shied away from in our discussions. Name the issue and my kids were probably arguing about it in class and addressing it in their weekly essays. Some of these matters go straight to the heart of deeply

held beliefs, which can make for some rather heated arguments. I can say with some degree of satisfaction I never allowed a discussion to get out of hand, though I'll admit to a couple of close calls. Every discussion we had came with an essay attached - much to the chagrin of many of my students - no matter the level of the course. The general level government class of which Jaime was a part was particularly enjoyable for me if for no other reason than the level of participation on the part of those students. Jaime was my spark plug in that class.

When thinking about his future, writing and performing rap music were never far from Jaime's mind. Here we found something else in common. Not the music, mind you. I'm one of those baby-boomer types. I listen to oldies stations and classic rock. The sixties and seventies were my time so far as music goes. I had written and published several novels of historical fiction and had thus experienced the copyright process a number of times. At one point Jaime said he had written enough songs to fill a CD, and he was ready to send some of it off. I asked him if he had copyrighted his material. Essentially, he had yet to consider that aspect of his music, so I cautioned him against sending anything to other people without the protection of a copyright. I had extra applications for such protection from the Library of Congress in my briefcase, so I gave him a few copies and walked him through the forms themselves. Over the next couple of months, he kept me apprised of his progress as he copyrighted his material and prepared to send it to producers.

The school year drew to a close and once again faculty and graduates filed into George Mason University's Patriot Center. Saying good-bye to Jaime, and his pals from that Government class proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated. I had grown attached to them during the course of the year and knew I would miss them. More than that, I was afraid for them. These were three young black men coming of age at a time when one in four of their peers in the city of Washington had been drawn into the criminal justice system. Among their age and race, homicide was the leading cause of death. The prospect of any of these three adding to either set of statistics was troublesome to me at the very the least.

During the next academic year, Jaime would stop in often, sometimes entertaining my classes with his latest rhyme. In addition, he had friends and younger cousins at Broad Run, so there were a number of kids who kept me somewhat informed about him and his whereabouts. Seeing him show up at my classroom door from time to time always brought a smile to my face. I had grown rather fond of him, and by the same token, as I've already said, I feared for him. The circles in which he made his way were dangerous. Yet Jaime didn't seem to mind flirting with danger.

A day came when tragedy struck one of those circles. A shooting incident took place at a cafe in Sterling. When it was over, a young man lay dead. The local papers made it one of their leading stories, and we at school were quick to get the details second-hand from kids who were themselves hearing it second-hand. I heard the victim was kin to Jaime. I remembered hearing Jaime speak about him in conversation during one of his visits to my classroom. I knew he had to be hurting, but I heard nothing from him.

One afternoon a student opened my classroom door in the middle of my fifth period class. She told me Jaime was down at the office asking for me. For a moment I had a feeling of *deja vu*. I felt like I knew what he wanted, and it would be best for me to be there for him. For a second time I looked at a class full of kids and told them to sit tight and wait for me to return. Down to the office I walked. Jaime was sitting at a table in the conference room in the main office. At the opposite side of the table sat one of our assistant principals, Ron Petrella. I checked in with one of the secretaries of the front office and asked her if she could find someone to cover my class for a few minutes, then I walked into the conference room, closing the door behind me.

Jaime glanced up as I came in and stood to greet me with a hug. He resumed his seat, and I took the seat next to him, only I shifted the chair, so I was sitting perpendicular to the direction he was facing. We started to talk, and fairly quickly it was Jaime who was doing most of the talking. Mr. Petrella and I listened. Jaime's mood alternated between anger, grief and frustration. From time to time, he would stop, and his eyes would fill with tears which continued to run straight down

his cheeks. Then he would continue, sometimes raising his voice, wondering loudly why this had to happen and repeating that his cousin was dead and there was no reason for it to have happened. Where was the sheriff? Why hadn't the killer been caught? Then he turned to face me, and I knew I was about to hear the whole story.

He had to pause a couple of times to keep his composure, but he relayed the story of the shooting to us in meticulous detail. It occurred to me for a second time in a decade I was listening to a former student tell me about the last few minutes of the life of someone they held dear. As before, what I was hearing hurt me deeply inside. I had known Jaime for the better part of two years, and I had grown rather attached to him. It was painful just to witness how much grief he was in. When he finished the story, he reached the point where he could no longer contain this grief and began to cry. I reacted the same way I did all those years ago, taking him into my arms and letting him vent that grief on my shoulder, shedding a couple of tears of my own in the process.

It didn't take long for Jaime to regain his composure. We let go of each other, and he turned to face Mr. Petrella again. I had shared Jaime's grief with him, but now that he had said all he had to say, I had a few words of my own which had been anxiously awaiting their turn. I had heard every word he had to say, and the tone in which it had been uttered. Too much of what I heard had breathed new life into many of the old fears I held about Jaime. To be blunt, I was terrified he might take the law into his own hands and seek his own revenge. Two horrifying visions flashed through my head in the space of a heartbeat or two. In one his quest for vengeance left him in the same place as his cousin - dead. In the other he was successful but found guilty of murder and sentenced to life in prison. I couldn't bear the thought of either scenario. At this point I launched into my own tirade.

"How many more young, black men have to die?" I demanded. Did he want to be the next statistic? I pleaded with him not to carry a gun, not to seek vengeance on his own, to let the law handle it. I told him he owed it to all the people who loved him, including me, to not risk death or prison over this incident. I ranted for five or ten minutes about the tragic useless deaths of so many black men over the last decade or

so, at the hands of other black men. When would it stop? Why did it have to continue? Couldn't he choose a different course? Could he find the will to rise above it and put it behind him? I knew he had a decent job, and I reminded him of that. I was looking for every reason I could find to urge him not to do something which would ruin or possibly end his life. I mentioned his mom and his girlfriend and how much they loved him. Finally, I was out of breath, and I think I may have repeated everything I'd said two or three times. I could only hope something I said would sink in.

The three of us sat back in our chairs and exchanged glances. All of us knew everything had been said which could possibly be said. Mr. Petrella and I had responsibilities elsewhere, and Jaime seemed to sense we couldn't tarry too much longer. He rose to his feet and said he had to go. I walked him out of the office to the exit. I hugged him close, praying it wouldn't be the last time I saw him. As he was walking out of the building, he turned and called out, "I love you, man!"

"Hey," I returned, "I love you, too! Now take care of yourself!"

A couple of months passed, and I didn't hear a word from Jaime. The investigation of the shooting culminated in the arrest and extradition of the suspect from somewhere in the mid-west. Then from his friends I heard news which sank my spirits, just as the school year was ending. Jaime had been arrested. He and another fellow had accosted someone, robbed him and beaten him rather badly. The thought occurred to me that Jaime had simply found someone else on whom to take out his frustrations, and now his future was full of question marks.

A few weeks into the next school year, Jaime popped into my classroom one afternoon. He hadn't checked into the office first as regulation required, but he said he wanted to talk with me. Months had passed since last I'd seen him, and the sight of him brought an instant smile to my face. We chatted for about an hour, which included the last ten or fifteen minutes of my 7th period class. I wanted to know everything that was going on, especially regarding the status of his prosecution. He had yet to come to trial. His attorney and the commonwealth attorney were doing a lot of negotiating which

suggested to me some sort of plea bargain might be in the offing. He said there was a strong possibility he would end up doing jail time, but he was prepared for it. In the meantime, he was still writing songs, and he had been hired for a number of live performances in and around Washington. He seemed a far different person than the grief-stricken young man I listened to and spoke with in the conference room several months prior. From an emotional perspective he seemed to have grown considerably. More than anything else that afternoon I just listened. I said a few things, mostly along the lines of encouraging him to keep heart, stay straight, and see the whole thing through, but for the most part I just listened.

The next day one of the assistant principals took me aside. Apparently, word of Jaime's most recent visit had reached the office and alarm bells had begun ringing. I was asked to tell Jaime not to come to school anymore. In the eyes of the administration, his past association with the crew along with his present legal difficulties stemming from his part in the assault for which he had been arrested, were sufficient reasons to ask him to stay away. I was hardly in a position to argue with that logic. They had the security of over 1300 students and faculty as their responsibility, and their position regarding the potential for trouble was justified.

I had my own perspective on the whole thing. Jaime was a former student with whom I had struck a friendship. I wasn't in a position to say one way or another whether I was having any influence over him at all - good, bad or indifferent. Nevertheless, I was unwilling to simply sever our ties. My gut feelings told me the relationship was a good thing. When I looked back over the two years since I first met him, it seemed to me whenever I had advice to offer, his ears were open, so I had no inclination to ever add my voice to those casting judgment on him. He had his share of problems to be sure, many of which he brought on himself, but to me he was a hell of a kid with a warm heart and a strong, feisty spirit. I did as I was instructed, of course, telling him how the office felt about his visits, and he should stay away from the school. I also made sure he had my home phone number and that I had his.

Not long after that the wheels of justice finally ground to a conclusion regarding his status. He called and told me that he had received a sentence of six months in the county jail in Leesburg. He asked if I'd stay in touch, and I said I would.

I'm inclined to say most teachers would agree once school is in session, the best laid plans of mice and men do indeed frequently go astray. He could only receive visitors one evening a week, and that limited the time available to us. As he was serving his sentence, I was able to speak with him by phone a couple of times, but my obligation to my students - grading papers, preparing lessons, etc - and my after-school schedule with the debate team left me little time or energy for making the trek into Leesburg. Nevertheless, I had told him I would come and see him, and as the weeks became months, I began chastising myself for not making a better effort to get to the jail during visiting hours. Finally, I put other considerations aside and managed to get there for a visit with Jaime. At this point, if memory serves, he had already served four months of his sentence.

I had never visited someone in jail before. When I was a cop myself, back in the early 70's, I had transported many a prisoner from our holding cells at the station to the county jail in Rockville, Maryland. So, I was more familiar with the procedures of law enforcement than the needs or desires of relatives and friends of the incarcerated. I checked in with the officer at the main entrance and submitted to the necessary procedures required of visitors. Once cleared, I joined a throng of people in a longish, narrow waiting room. There were perhaps a half dozen cubicles in which a prisoner could sit opposite his visitor with a thick pane of glass separating the two of them. Conversations in the cubicles took place over telephones. As the clock reached the designated hour, prisoners were led from their cells to the visitation room. One by one they filled the jail-side of the booths until there no more vacancies. I remember Jaime being among the first round of prisoners to receive visitors that night. I stood to the back as people along the entire length of the room moved forward to spend a few minutes with sons, brothers, fathers or friends.

I was not the only person there to see Jaime. I remember seeing four or five people crowding around his window to get their turn at the

phone, including his mom and girlfriend, who cradled a toddler in her arms. I felt it proper to keep toward the rear and wait my turn. In some ways I felt guilty. I wanted to see him, but so did the people who loved him most. I knew how precious those minutes were for his family, and I felt guilty for being there because my presence would deprive them of at least some of that time.

Five or ten minutes passed with Jaime trying to accommodate as many of those in the cubicle as possible. From where I was watching, he certainly seemed as animated as ever. Then we made eye-contact for the first time, and his face broke into a wide smile, equaled I'm sure by my own. He asked the others if they would make room for me, and I stepped forward to take a seat at the window. For some reason I forgot about the phone and tried to speak directly through the glass. He laughed at me and gestured toward the phone, which I then picked up and used.

Time would not allow us the luxury of a long conversation. More importantly, people were waiting to return to that phone. I wanted him to know I hadn't forgotten about him, and I apologized for taking so long before finally coming to see him. I told him I was firmly in his corner and would so remain. I asked him not to lose faith, but to remain strong because freedom was only weeks away. I pleaded with him, as I had done before, to turn away from a world that offered a future of more incarceration or possibly something worse. He told me he was already making plans to do so, that his employer was holding his job for him, and he felt things were looking up. All too quickly we had to bring our conversation to an end. I raised my left hand to the glass partition, he his right, and in this fashion, we said our good-byes.

I next saw Jaime on the last exam day, an hour or so after the last students had departed the building. He had been out of jail for several weeks and had apparently decided to interpret the wishes of the administration in such a way as to prohibit his visiting during school hours. Who was I to argue?

It turned out to be a rather pleasant visit. He was back at work and seemed to be enjoying it. He said he and his girlfriend were talking marriage, and if these plans reached fruition he intended to adopt her little boy. More so than in any of our prior conversations he told me

about his life as a young boy growing up in New York City. Apparently, he saw very little of his father, and the life of the streets was the life he called his own. When I was young, we used to call that the school of hard knocks. Jaime had definitely exchanged his share of knocks. In the final minutes of our chat, he assured me he was doing his best to keep straight and stay out of trouble, even to the point of alienating old friends from the crew who wished to see him back among their number.

Another year passed before I saw him again, almost to the day. Three years had passed since his own graduation. He came in on one of the last workdays just before graduation. I was in the middle of breaking down my classroom when I looked up to see him in my doorway with that same infectious smile. He wasn't alone. With him was a little boy of three or four years. I dropped what I was doing and greeted him with an enthusiastic hug. I noticed a ring on his finger, and he quickly informed me he and his girlfriend were now husband and wife and he had adopted her son as his own. We spent close to an hour together that afternoon, and he brought me up to date on his life. His eyes flashed with excitement when he detailed the most recent developments with regard to his music. He was talking with a producer, and they were putting together material for a CD. He had done numerous live performances at some of the clubs in D.C. and Northern Virginia.

"You should come see me on stage, Mr. Richards," he beamed, "I'm all energy."

"I don't doubt it," I smiled. From the first time I had heard him rhyming in the halls when he was a junior at Broad Run, I quickly came to the conclusion energy was his middle name.

He told me of an upcoming performance at Howard University which would be videotaped, and I said I wanted a copy of the tape when it became available. Everything seemed to be going well for him. He and his bride were shopping for a house, not to rent but to buy. For me it was a source of pride and satisfaction to watch him interact with his adopted son, instructing him or correcting him when he felt it necessary and giving him the kind of paternal love he himself had missed.

I couldn't help but ask how he was faring so far as the law was concerned. Had he gone back to the crew? No. Time and again he had rejected the overtures from some of his street chums. He had come to the conclusion the life they offered was a dead-end street. He went through a litany of names, some of which I recognized as having once been students at Broad Run. So and so was dead. This person in prison and that one in jail. I was appalled and saddened to hear how many of his old friends were dead or incarcerated. I said a quick silent prayer he would continue to avoid either fate.

The conversation drifted from there into the philosophical realm, each of us sharing our thoughts about life and the world in general. Then he said something which warmed my heart as few words from a student ever have.

"You're the only male who's ever been in my life," he announced rather suddenly. "I love you, man."

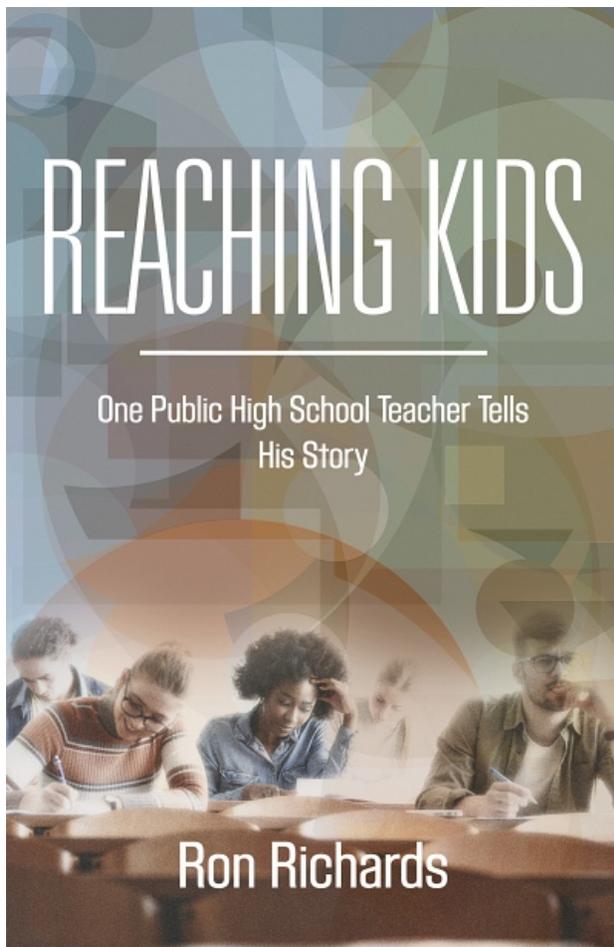
The proverbial cat got hold of my tongue straight away. There were several moments of silence as I searched for words. In the end all I could say was I loved him as well and that I would always be there for him.

Earlier I said that those few minutes spent with Cassius had been among the most meaningful of my career. Up until Jaime said those words to me, they were. Although I've not seen him since, that last visit with Jaime proved to be every bit as meaningful to me as the day Cassius wept on my shoulder. For me personally it was more satisfying because there was no grief involved. To Jaime I had become much more than a teacher assigning essays and giving tests. If what he said was true, I was the only man who had actually ever paid attention to him or given a damn about him. It was moments of that sort which never failed to prompt me to thank God I made the decision to become a teacher. No, early in my career I couldn't pay all my bills all of the time, and most of my career I drove a car which some might consider ancient. Yet as I look back over those years in the classroom, I see I have been at least a minimal part of the lives of a substantial number of wonderful young people. I had the opportunity to touch the lives of those young people, and in turn, they had a deep impact on my own life. Jaime was one of those people. I can't say he would always be

able to resist the lure of the streets. Life has a way of throwing all of us curveballs, and no one can safely predict how any one individual will react when life offers its challenges. I can only hope providence blessed him and his family richly. He had certainly paid his share of dues.

So, what exactly is the point of all this? The endless array of critics of public schools haven't got it quite right. Those who think of public education solely in terms of information being transmitted and its retention tested are largely clueless. Those activities are only part of what we do in a classroom. In a world which virtually demands two wage-earners in a family, in which both parents in a household must work full-time, or where single parents are working two jobs, guess who does a substantial amount of the nurturing of their children? Guess what else. One's class rank or GPA in college is a poor predictor as to his or her nurturing abilities.

Is there room for improvement in America's public schools? Of course. Could not the same be said of our health care system? Our legal system? In point of fact, can anyone think of a single facet of the human endeavor which is not in need of improvement? The Thomas Sowell's of this world are legion. Public education certainly has its share of woes, and it will probably continue to be the favorite scapegoat or whipping boy of politicians and opinion-makers alike. Me? I tend to derive quite a bit of satisfaction from the knowledge that during any given year of my career, I could point to four or five kids from my debate team, public school students every one of them, who could think circles around most of public education's critics in their sleep.



Reaching Kids is the autobiographical story of the nearly four decades the author spent in public high schools. The Debate team Richards coached at Broad Run H. S. became one of the most successful teams in Virginia.

Reaching Kids

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