

TITAN OF A TEACHER

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Introduction

What is it about certain teachers? You know the ones. You had them, too. The special ones. The ones who made you want to go to school, whose classes you looked forward to. If it has been awhile, you probably don't remember everything you learned in their class. If it was a math class, and you aren't a mathematician now, or a scientist, or an engineer, you may not remember the square root of Pi or how to graph an equation. If you're not a literature professor, you've probably forgotten the definition of iambic pentameter; you may not remember who Creon was, or quite why Gatsby believed in the green light. But if you had the right teacher, there was a time when you knew these things. There was a time when you were inspired to learn them. And even if you've forgotten the details, something from that time remains. Special teachers change us. By encouraging us and challenging us, they broaden our horizons. They help us see the world in new ways. And if we're lucky, they also instill in us a curiosity and a passion for learning that never dies.

As we embarked on the journey that would create this book, our mission was two-fold. First, we wanted to celebrate some of these special teachers. There are over one thousand teachers in the Alexandria City Public School system, many of them outstanding. We knew we wouldn't be able to fit them all. But we wanted to shine a light on at least some of them, and in so doing perhaps throw a bit of reflected light on the others. Teachers don't always get the acknowledgement they deserve, and this book is in part an attempt to correct for that. The second part of our mission in creating this book was to shed some light on the educational process. From local school board offices to the halls of Congress to church basements along the Presidential campaign trail, people are discussing the state of education in this country. They are asking, how do we create positive change? By documenting and giving voice to some of the people who are effecting change on the front lines, we hoped to help inform that debate.

How did we choose who would be included in our book? Did we select teachers with advanced degrees? Did we look for teachers with high student test scores? Did we ask administrators, parents and faculty? No. We didn't. We asked students. Students' voices are not heard loudly enough in the system. They tend to be like the citizens of Whoville on Horton's dust speck. Occasionally someone with big ears comes along, but even he can stumble. When Barack Obama came to speak at T.C. Williams, he met with a group of school board members, faculty and parents, but there were no students at the table. As you read the teacher essays in our book, one common thread you will find is an effort to empower students, to give them a voice. Excellent teachers are good listeners, and often learn as much from their students as their students learn from them. In making selections for inclusion here, we followed this example. Of course, even among students there were differences of opinion. A special teacher for one student is not necessarily a special teacher for another student. Teacher-student relationships function like any other relationship;

sometimes a strong connection is made, sometimes it isn't. But what we found was a reasonably strong degree of commonality across the student body, and it was this commonality we looked to in making our decisions. That being said, there were certainly a number of teachers who were highly praised, but who for reasons of space we had to omit. Their omission is our biggest regret. But the teachers we were able to include were wonderful. As my students fanned out to photograph and interview them, the teachers we selected welcomed them.

In addition to the entirely student-produced photographs and teacher bios you will find herein, we asked the teachers themselves to write something for our book. We left it up to them what to write, as long as they addressed some aspect of education. Giving teachers a free hand in this way proved interesting. Though it was clear that many of the teachers already had quite a bit on their plates – and found it about as difficult as students do to find time to sit down and write an essay – a number of them mentioned that the exercise was a good one, that it was a learning experience to pause and reflect on what they were doing in the classroom. Reading their essays - not just one, but sitting down and reading them one after another - has been a learning experience for me, as well. It has reminded me of some of the things that I knew were important about teaching and education, but maybe wasn't paying enough attention to.

One of the strongest recurrent themes in these essays is the importance of building strong, two-way relationships with students. “The deepest rewards of teaching are based on the relationships I develop with my students,” writes Patty Lewis. “It's relationships [with students] that make me excited to come to work,” writes Matt Zahn. “Integrating content and relationship creates meaningful classroom experience, ensuring genuine thirst for knowledge and creating lifelong learning,” writes Susannah Courand. “I don't remember exactly what I learned in third grade, but I do remember that my teacher, Ms. Goodman, came to my birthday party... I worked hard in school because I had a teacher who cared about me,” writes Karen Westcott. And as one reads these essays in their entirety, one sees that the relationships the teachers are writing about are not only deep; they are two-way. The teachers you will find in these pages listen to their students, learn from their students, make sure their students are part of the decision making process.

We can certainly use insights such as these to strengthen our work within the classroom, but perhaps we can use them to improve the educational experience beyond the classroom, as well. Just as relationships within the classroom are important, relationships between students and their school/school system are important. In these relationships also, students need to know that they are being respected, listened to, cared about, trusted. And they need space within these relationships to be themselves. At my school, T.C. Williams, we have undergone tremendous changes over the last couple of years. We have moved into a new multi-million dollar “green” building. We have integrated an extensive list of new technologies into our daily routines. We have switched from an open to a closed campus. We have divided the school into “academies,” our version of “smaller learning communities.” All of these changes have positive potential in term of relationships, but have we taken advantage of that potential? One way to take advantage of it would be to bring

students into the loop and give them a voice as changes are made. But it must be a legitimate voice. One can't decide what one is going to do, and then have a conversation with kids about whether or not to do it. Kids these days are smarter than that. As Jennifer Larsen writes, "The days of respecting a teacher [or any authority figure] because of a title are long gone. For many children today, respect is not something they will give away lightly. Respect is something many need to feel directed toward them before they in turn show respect themselves." Have we been showing kids this respect? Have we been listening? Are we listening now? These are some of the questions we need to continuously be asking ourselves.

As my students and I put this book together, one of the pleasures I experienced was in thinking back on the many teachers who made a difference in my life. A product of the Alexandria Public School System myself (Class of '81), a few of those teachers are still around and close at hand. One of them, Patrick Welsh, is in this book. If you, too, are a product of the Alexandria City Public Schools and are of my era, we may have a few outstanding teachers in common. Wherever you went to school, I hope that our book stirs some memories in you, that it reminds you of some of your outstanding teachers, and the gifts that they gave you.

Taki Sidley