

A Name

by Michael Copperman

Teaching: Voices from the Front Lines

The years since I taught fourth grade in the Delta with Teach For America have taken me far from the uncertain future of those children born on the wrong side of the tracks. And yet, I can still feel the texture of those humid Delta mornings, hear the rhythm of the voices of black children echoing down the halls. I still remember the sense of purpose that I had each day, knowing that this, here, mattered: a child's education, their best chance against bad odds to rise from those dusty streets and slumping tenements and find a better life.

I cannot forget the weight of that responsibility, have not been able to lay it down. I'm not alone: some 63% of former Corps members, themselves already selected at rates of 1 in 12 for demonstrated achievement, tenacity, and leadership, remain in education, though few were headed that direction initially. That change in the individual, that creation of a long-term commitment to fighting educational inequality is what Teach For America believes makes it a movement: two years may be a limited commitment, but a lifetime of influence is another kind of impact entirely.

As for myself, I have for four years now been teaching low-income, at-risk students of color and nontraditional students writing at the University of Oregon. The job is not lucrative, but I stay because in the eighteen-year-olds I teach, I see the kids I wanted to reach. My decision to stay in education is not only about the conviction that all children deserve the opportunity for an excellent education. It is explicitly personal, about a deep need, given what I saw in the Delta, to offer more. And in a college classroom, teaching writing instead of fourth grade, I can.

Consider the example of a student I taught Fall and Spring of last year—let's call her Felicia Jackson. Felicia was about six feet tall, a lanky young black woman who seemed all knees and elbows, except for a proud, upturned chin. She favored gold bracelets and chains and hoop earrings, so that a musical jangling announced her every movement. She pulled her cornrows back high and tight, which gave her a long brow that seemed almost aristocratic—until she spoke. That was when it came, the rush of words, eloquently unstandard, chaotically staccato, at once assertive and urgent and unconsidered. The first day, for example, her arm shot to the ceiling in response to my suggestion that my students call me “Mike”:

“What this is bout calling somebody who teach at the University of Oregon some Mr. Mike or what-all ever? That ain't respectful or right and don't make no sense. I'm just gone call you teacher. Teacher.”

I spluttered out something like yes.

It wasn't that Felicia was unaccomplished—she was a Gates Minority Scholar, former valedictorian of Jefferson High School, the poorest and blackest high school in Portland. Yet she had had a lot of “White teacher's help,” as she put it, with the essays that had gotten her into the prestigious Gates program and the University of Oregon. And she was, overall, rather-- unpolished. Not to mention unrestrained. The day we discussed an essay about Native American Mascots and team names, she stood up in the middle of discussion and interrupted me mid-sentence to declare:

“Stop! Teacher, stop! Now all y'all listen.” She went to explain that we didn't know a thing about being Indian. She was half Cherokee on her mother's side, and had stayed a summer with her uncle out on the reservation. And did we have any idea what it was like in a place in the middle of nowhere with some ugly little

trees, a bathtub standing in a dirt yard by a rusted out pickup truck, and a house half-falling down, walls bowing toward the middle and a tin roof with holes? Did we know why her uncle had a bumper sticker saying “If you're Indian, you're in trouble,” and did we understand that conditions were just like the author said: Everybody drinking and drinking because there was nothing else to do, teenage mothers passing crack over baby diapers. And then she told us what happened one afternoon when she went to town to get groceries, and the local high school was having a homecoming parade for their football team the Cowboys with a band and horns and the whole town there to watch. They were playing the Indians from the high school in the next county, and so all the players on the team were dressed up like Cowboys and riding in the bed of Fords, and behind each truck they dragged a plastic Indian in a noose. They went around town three times, her and her uncle waiting to be able to get through. Did we understand what that meant? Did it sound like good clean fun? Did it?

I suggested to Felicia that she knew something about something—and that here was the root of an argument, the personal example that offered a stake in the discourse, that all she had to learn to do was write it. And I would argue that while there was little ‘correct’ or standard grammar in Felicia's speech, and though working through the grammatical issues without eliminating her voice took time and effort, she had style. She had a voice that should and could be heard. She also had a long way to go to succeed at the University of Oregon—but when she saw, in conference after conference with me, that I cared, and that I wanted her only to do her best, she invested. I came to look forward to the high-waving hand, the emphatic call of Teach-er! She earned a B, a B+, a grudging A-; her grammar improved as she read and worked in her other classes. By her last essay, on identity, she wrote me not one, but three different essays about the meaning of education and its role in her identity. Each essay was excellent and different: What a higher education means to a student coming from the sort of

poverty she'd experienced with an absentee father, a mother caught in a cycle of poverty and afflicted by health issues, and her close family caught up in drugs and petty crime out of the desire for something better and brighter than what was before them. What sort of curriculum might reach a student like her, interested in so much and with so little to hold onto at a place like Oregon. What the price was for achieving excellence in the face of adversity—the personal sacrifice, the weight of everyone else's expectations.

Each of the essays would have been an 'A.' Taken together, I contemplated the possibility of the A+.

This summer, Felicia and I emailed back and forth a couple times—I'd written her a letter for a transfer to USC, but she'd decided to stay here. She wrote me an email thanking me for the letter, and at the beginning of it she wrote: "Dear Mr. Mike (I feel I should call you that now)". It was a nice letter telling me about how she worked two jobs this summer trying to help her mother make rent, how badly she missed school. Yet I took issue with 'Mr. Mike'—why was "Mike" coming from Felicia, whose calls of 'Teacher!' had punctuated my entire year. I wrote that I missed 'Teacher.' She replied the next day:

Yes, I am working very hard and taking care of myself as much as I can. I am so anxious to get back to school... I haven't read through an entire book, nor have I completed a single poem since the summer started. I had decided to go back to USC, but for some reason something is telling me my place is in Oregon right now. Some days I wonder if I will regret it, but for the most part I'm happy I've decided to stay. I'll be back on campus in a few weeks, and I'll come by.

About calling you Mr. Mike: When I was in high school, most of the teachers and students didn't have a close bond with one another. Jefferson was huge, and it was real real poor, and the

classes were forty and fifty students to a class. The teachers rarely knew the students by name, and all the students just called their teachers, "Teacher." You were the first instructor I had here, and it was a force of habit to call you, "Teacher." It seemed to have made me feel more comfortable with you because you always found it so funny. But you weren't like those teachers at Jefferson—you knew my name. You believed in me. So it seems only fair that I give you a name.

Thanks, Mr. Mike.

Felicia.

America's low-income schools are full of Felicia Jacksons, children who deserve a life better than the one they were born into. They walk the streets right now: so many bright, good kids, some loud and flamboyant, some quiet and scared, kids walking with their heads down because they don't know what else to do.

They must be seen, be named, and have their voices heard. They wait for opportunity that we must find a way to offer them.

