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MY YEAR AS A TEACHER Part 5

WHAT MR. SLONAKER LEARNED

By Larry Slonaker

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After the final bell rang on the last day of school, a few students wandered in and out of my classroom.

We chatted. Some of them picked up items I'd confiscated over the year. Lip gloss. A computer chip that played "Jingle Bells." Toy skateboards.

They'd leave with a cheery "Goodbye, Mr. Slonaker! Have a nice summer!" They were excited and happy, of course. But my emotions were bittersweet.

During the year I would take a few minutes at the end of each class to summarize that day's lesson. Then I'd ask students what they had learned. Now I was turning the question on myself. What had I learned about teaching?

Many things came to mind, but two stood out.

First, you are allotted nine months to connect with the students. When they walk out on that final Friday in June, a sense of finality weighs down on you, because some of those kids you never do reach.

Second, it's possible to get to some students you once thought were unreachable. When that happens, you feel a wonderful sense of triumph.

The key was to savor the triumphs, and not to be utterly staggered by the defeats. Otherwise, you simply could not go on.

This was another reason I came away with the conviction that teaching is so hard. It takes a special and dedicated talent to teach students how to listen and learn; how to respect one another; how to value an education.

Also, it takes a special determination to bounce back after falling short.

"Every year, you lose some kids," said Michael Tanner, an eighth-grade language arts teacher. "You can't take it personally."

If you're going to be a teacher for any length of time, that lesson is imperative.

During the last week of school, I was watching teachers pick themselves up and dust themselves off and plan how they were going to do things better the next year. For all of their frustrations, most teachers at Brownell loved the job and loved the kids.

Without those sentiments, a teacher can't be successful, no matter the number of degrees or years of experience.

There are a billion complicated ideas on how to fix public education, which would require a zillion dollars to implement. But there's actually a very simple solution. It has only three parts:

1. Attract a sufficient number of able teachers. Make teaching more attractive, by improving salaries and working conditions.

2. Help them become better. Give them all the support they need, especially in those first excruciating months and years.

3. Find the ones who want to keep teaching, and give them enough money to make them stay. If a private industry executive is great at making goals, he or she can be amply rewarded with a raise or bonus. If teachers are great at helping kids learn, they merely go on to the next incremental salary step -- the same "reward" given to the incompetent ones whose kids have to be scraped off the walls with a spatula.

Many people decry the attrition rate of new teachers. Some estimates put the number as high as 50 percent.

But that's not all bad. If you don't enjoy the classroom, you shouldn't be teaching, anyway. And many new teachers don't find that out until they've had a class and experienced the students.

No college class can completely prepare you for that experience. In middle school, you watch them change on a daily basis. Some of my kids matured before my eyes. Others remained as naive as third-graders.

One of my male students gave me a valentine that said, "I've got a crush on you!" After worrying about this for probably too long, I eventually decided it meant nothing. He'd just grabbed any old valentine out of the bag and scrawled his name on it without a thought.

Children that age are mercurial. They're trying out their personalities, and their new independent selves. Sometimes they will question authority; sometimes they will defy it.

I met a few teachers who were worn-out and bitter from all that, and it was not a pretty sight. But more -- novices and veterans alike -- were resilient, and determined to help students learn.

That described the principal, Suzanne Damm. Sometimes she seemed like a kid herself. She elaborately dressed up like a witch at Halloween. She even played in the faculty-vs.-eighth-graders football game.

"I love middle-school age, or I wouldn't do this job," she told me. "But they're not easy. Even if you like them, they're not easy."

New teachers need a lot of help dealing with the not-easy part, and the bound-to-fail part. Like many districts, Gilroy has a support program for new teachers. And like many districts, the program probably doesn't do enough.

The new-teacher program in Gilroy matched advisers (all veteran ex-teachers) with groups of new teachers. Unfortunately, there weren't enough advisers to go around. I was lucky enough to draw one, but after about one quarter, I knew it was financially unrealistic for me to pursue teaching as a career. So I dropped out of the program to enable my adviser to take on another new teacher.

My true mentor, from mid-August on, had been Tanner. Unfortunately, he suddenly went on leave from Brownell in the third quarter.

Other teachers supported me, but they could do only so much. After Tanner left, it became a little personal joke with me that I was in a class by myself. One needs small amusements, I found, to keep trudging forward.

There were rewards to help with that forward momentum, too. My evaluation from Damm was positive, and she told me she'd like to have me come back. My fellow teachers constantly encouraged me. And overall, my students did as well as the rest of the school -- and sometimes better -- in district and state testing.

But the greatest rewards came from the students themselves. When teachers do keep going, that must be what propels them.

One of my greatest nemeses, Ryan, suddenly changed his work habits about halfway through the last quarter.

He stopped fooling around in class, and applied himself to every assignment. With an effort I never would have believed him capable of, he raised his grade from a low "F" to pass the class.

On his own, Ryan wrote me a letter at the end of the year. It said, in part, "Thanks for teaching me how to be quiet. And teaching me . . . verbs and adjectives. . . . I also learned how to be quiet when a movie starts and to not draw on the desks or on my hands.

"It was a great year and I hope I still remember what you have taught our class."

Maybe I'll frame that letter.

If I do, I'll frame the card from Nathaly, too. She thanked me for being her teacher, and said she wanted to be my teaching assistant the next year, "because I think language is so easy."

At the beginning of the year, Nathaly never participated in class. She did not seem to understand any of the assignments. As a native Spanish-speaker, her English language skills were still developing. But she worked as hard as any student I had.

In December I gave students an assignment sheet with two silhouettes. On one side, they were supposed to list their outer attributes; on the other, their inner attributes. For one of her inner attributes, Nathaly had written, "Not smart."

When I returned the papers, I took her aside. "You are smart, Nathaly," I told her. I think she could tell I meant it. "Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

That spring, the students took another set of district tests. Out of all my students, Nathaly made the greatest improvement. At an awards assembly, I presented her with a certificate and a coupon for a free movie rental.

Her proud walk to the front of the assembly to accept the award is something I will always remember.

I'll also remember Arturo.

Almost every day before the start of sixth period, as students filtered in from lunch, Arturo would greet me with a question. He would ask it with a special inflection appropriate to the question's gravity.

(Example: "So, MISTER Slonaker, tell me -- what would you rather DO: work for the newspaper. . . OR . . . CHANGE a young person's LIFE?")

Usually I would respond flippantly. ("Arturo, I would rather change a young person's newspaper. To the Mercury News.")

But that did not deter him. One day, Arturo asked me this: "So, MISTER Slonaker -- Not counting your wedding day . . . what was the most MEMORABLE experience of your LIFE?"

In a bantering tone, I glibly replied, "Why, working with students such as yourself, Arturo, in an effort to improve their young minds and lives."

I had no idea at the time, of course. But that answer turned out to be true.