

Fall 12-16-2016

If Only They Tried; The Complicated Crusade for Salvation in the Post-Katrina Education Reform Movement

Brooke Wanamaker
University of New Orleans, brookeforamerica@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wanamaker, Brooke, "If Only They Tried; The Complicated Crusade for Salvation in the Post-Katrina Education Reform Movement" (2016). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 2254.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2254>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

If Only They Tried
The Complicated Crusade for Salvation in the Post-Katrina Education Reform
Movement

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English
Professional Writing

by

Brooke Wanamaker

B.A. Political Science 2006

December 2016

Peace to the villages, war to the palaces!

Dedicated to the memory of Dr. Joel Olson.

Acknowledgements

Foremost, I'd like to express my gratitude to Dr. Randy Bates for his tireless efforts to bring this piece to fruition from among the volumes of notes and records I kept during my first year as a teacher. His guidance and wisdom was fundamental to the creation and completion of this thesis.

Thanks also to Dr. Elizabeth Steeby, Dr. Dan Doll, and Dr. Patricia Austin for their contributions to this thesis, who asked poignant questions and encouraged me to improve.

I'd like to appreciate my mentors who got me through my time at Dejoie and beyond, including my dear colleague Mac Mackenzie, my program director Rachel Kuck, my friends and allies David Hand, Kelly Trevino, Dr. Megan Osterbur, Tracy Hunter, Barbara Blackwell, Ashley Prevost, Jerel Bryant and even (or perhaps especially) Tess Kelly. And thanks to my students for their occasional patience and constant life.

Thanks for countless readings and support from Leah Cassou and Amber Gershman, whose passion runs in my veins. Thanks to Scott Aarestad, whose life is lived in proportion to his tremendous courage.

My husband, partner, teammate, and moral compass is James Wanamaker II. I'd rather have you.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	v
Chapter One: New Rules.....	2
Chapter Two: Youthful Ideas.....	4
Chapter Three: The Achievement Gap.....	14
Chapter Four: Constant C. Dejoie Elementary.....	23
Chapter Five: Walter.....	33
Chapter Six: Spiraling.....	41
Chapter Seven: We're Listening.....	58
Chapter Eight: Make Good Choices.....	72
Chapter Nine: Prove It.....	77
Chapter Ten: Community Voices.....	89
Bibliography.....	94
Vita.....	95

Abstract

Education reform is shifting the landscape of New Orleans public schools, where alternative certification programs are thriving and changing the demographics of core teachers. This study follows a Teach for America (TFA) Corps Member from 2007 (just after the historic flooding from Hurricane Katrina) who brought a promise of innovation through idealism and green wisdom. The teacher's preparation and motivations are shown to be problematic. Examining the assumptions and privileges that underlie the import of inexperienced talent to urban education systems, this study considers the ways that community voices have been lost or undervalued in New Orleans schools. The thesis tracks five unique student experiences in two schools over nine years, with accounts of the daily life of students and educators, some of whom are effective and make marked contributions to the community. The study concludes that care should be taken as reform continues to make schools better for kids.

Keywords: education; white privilege; teaching; New Orleans; Teach for America; gentrification

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Chapter One: New Rules

On the first day of school in 2016, my job was to stand in the doorway of a school in New Orleans East and tell predominantly African-American parents that they were not allowed to proceed beyond that point near the front office and had to bid their children goodbye from where they stood. Some took this with patience, patting their uniformed sons and daughters on their heads or giving them kisses and high-fives, while others squawked at me, wanting to meet the teachers, personally hand in their fresh, new school supplies or were just not yet ready to close the chapter on another milestone in their babies' lives. For me, it was a simple task in a busy moment, but for some of these parents, it may have seemed another senseless directive from a white transplant, someone from outside the community, shaping their experience and their children's education.

Most of my colleagues were engaged in similar tasks. Someone stood on the other side of the hall, receiving parent complaints about bus stops being too far from their homes or being located too close to busy intersections or requiring their young children to cross major streets. The principal, a tall, young white man from Ohio, popped up periodically to soothe a concern or voice a new command. Parents repeatedly muttered about how "disorganized" the system was, but went about trying to follow the rules without too much protest. This was the new way schools worked in New Orleans. Everything was innovative, little was familiar, and no one remembered how things were when the parents were kids. Those had been the old days. These days, almost everything has changed.

One of the things I do as the Director of Enrollment Strategy at Vivid Schools is answer phone calls from parents who are calling because they are completely lost in the byzantine system of charter networks in New Orleans. My number is splashed on the main page of our website and each individual school page, so a call to me marks at least the second step in the process of finding a school for your child, after searching the web for charter school networks in Orleans Parish. I send parents on their third, fourth, fifth steps and beyond, as there is still plenty to do before the children can actually attend school.

The maze of charter schools includes more than 90 individual programs serving PK-12th grade, most of them divided up between the major charter networks in the city, though there are some schools that are “one-off” charters not owned by a management company. Parents may not simply walk into the school down the street and enroll their children—they must participate in a centralized enrollment process and choose one program from the ever-increasing menu of schools. While they ruminate on what makes a school experience positive for their children, the schools themselves are involved in a free-market struggle to convince them that they have the winning program, the place where their children will thrive. These schools direct a portion of their precious funding each year toward brand recognition and public relations. It is common in New Orleans to hear radio advertisements peddling extra-curricular activities or to see bus shelter ads with the professionally-photographed faces of local students under pitchy headlines begging parents to consider a school’s quality academics and strong community. In part, my role at Vivid, which represents seven schools and more than 4,000 students, is to

orchestrate these advertisements and ensure that parents know about the open-enrollment programs at my schools.

Chapter Two: Youthful Ideas

“DO YOU WANT TO CHANGE THE WORLD?” When my eyes caught the headline on the front of a full-page brochure near the counseling center during my junior year in college in 2005, my current work of analyzing spreadsheets and negotiating ad contracts wasn’t what I had in mind. Today’s minutiae are not the stuff of yesterday’s dreams. The brochure, put out by the popular and controversial non-profit Teach for America, was loaded with images of bright young teachers leaning smiling over the desks of even brighter and younger students, representing the vision and hope for a future where all children would receive the world-class education they deserved. I, at 21, with my ability to write excellent term papers, serve tables at a Mexican restaurant, and charm professors into recommending me, would be the key to this storied future, and I would not just change the world, but save it from itself. I could, according to the brochure, be a real classroom teacher, after just a summer of training, teaching students in poor communities how to reach their potential. I didn’t think to wonder what kind of value and goodness existed in the status quo. I didn’t wonder who else would do it if I didn’t. I took comfort in my feeling that my green wisdom could be put to use in these gleaming scenarios of poverty and hopelessness.

These days the world my husband and I occupy is made up of the cracked streets of Central City in New Orleans, the same part of town where I spent my first year as a teacher. We walk our dogs under the oak trees and over their roots. We pass crowded

neutral grounds where our neighbors have set up chairs and tables and while the days away, commiserating. We are happy here in a renovated little house, just big enough for an eventual child, and consider ourselves lucky to be in close walking distance to the Mardi Gras parades. Our neighborhood is gentrifying rapidly. The apartment we rented in 2009 went for \$650 per month until it was purchased and overhauled by a French man, who now charges \$1600 for the unit. The nearby Irish Channel has been through a similar refurbishment, and now most of our friends, like us, cannot afford to live there. Two of my schools are in the Irish Channel, and one of the biggest concerns I face in my role at Vivid is their struggling enrollment numbers as our traditionally low-income families move out to the East, where rent is cheaper.

On either side of our renovated creole cottage, there are older, single, black women living in houses they have owned for almost two decades. On the right is a woman who used to work for the city's traffic department. Her front door is only a few feet away from ours. She hates dogs, especially our border collie and our pit bull that bark incessantly at her as she walks to and from her car. She hates the horrible sounds of their aggressive howls, the smell of their poop wafting from our yard to hers, which we try to pick up daily but often forget, and the fear they spark in her as they follow her from the other side of the fence with their teeth bared. We know this because she tells us so. She referred to my husband as an "ignorant ass" a few weeks ago when he weed-whacked our grass onto her car. When he offered her a gift card to the car wash down the street, she admonished him further to stay out of her yard with himself and his grass, and refused the olive branch outright. Each day, we dig deeply to find smiles to greet her as she scowls at us.

On the left, our neighbor is much kinder, sharing jokes and stories with us on the occasion when she isn't begging us to call the city about the blight next door. Enough of us call, she figures, and the city will finally do something about the house to her left, which is overtaken by cat's claw and features sagging siding and all shattered windows. Its only tenants since the storm, she tells us, have been rats, snakes, and crack addicts, though I've never seen anything or anyone coming from the house. The structure behind us, with its backside cozied up to our back fence, is in a similar state, though that house proudly displays a sign with a development company phone number which, when we called it, was answered by a man who reported that the two story building was being retrofitted into "upscale condos."

Up until recently, my husband and I would be visited daily by Ms. Ellenora Simpson, the woman three doors down who would pace the short street, raging with dementia and having the sweetest kind of countenance. She would comment once, and then again two minutes later, about how nice our new planter box looked and how she'd like to "steal" some of our delicious peppers (which we couldn't seem to drill into her are ghost peppers, recognized as some of the hottest, virtually inedible, peppers in the world). It was late in the summer when we realized we hadn't seen her in awhile. She'd fallen down her stairs and been taken away in an ambulance. My husband and I found ourselves wondering if she'd ever be back, and if not, whether her house would be purchased by an enterprising white couple with no kids and two dogs, like us.

In the mornings on weekdays, my husband and I dart off to our respective offices—his Uptown on the top floor of the local clothing store where he manages distribution and

mine on a beautiful part of Carrollton Avenue in an antique school building from generations past. When the mold in the office excites my allergies, I head to a coffee shop or one of my campuses, and continue my work of running the admissions program for the network, which was founded in 2009. This might mean searching our systems for a child whose parent erroneously reassigned him to another school or analyzing the effectiveness of a particular ad campaign by inspecting text code responses. It also might mean coordinating a shirt order for the network staff, depending on the day, but we're a team and there's always a new challenge. Many of my colleagues are Teach for America alumni as I am, and many are also childless homeowners and transplants who have come to the city since the storm. Many of us plan to stay here for the long-term and face a common conundrum of how to handle the charter school network as future parents, not just as reformers. The system remains extremely divided on socioeconomic lines. We'd still be considered pioneers to send our children to the schools we work in, and we'd still be sending them through a pipeline with nebulous successes in graduation rates, college matriculation and academic culture.

For generations, most young white families in New Orleans have been completely removed from the entire public school system, with only tiny pockets of integrated schools. The vast majority of white parents shell out for the five-digit tuition prices of sending their children to the schools they went to themselves, parochial and secular private schools. Those who are lucky defy statistics and have their children tested and accepted to one of a few integrated public schools, Type 2 charters, where there is no tuition but the children are still exposed to rigorous academics and achieve test scores that rival the higher-performing schools in other parishes. A statistically minor fraction of the white families in the city do choose to send their kids to other public schools,

lower-performing ones, but on the whole the system is stark enough that many white parents are unlikely to have ever heard of the “OneApp.”

Starting on the first Monday in November, the city’s centralized enrollment lottery launches its Round One. On that date, parents are able to go online or go to a school or centralized resource center to list their preferences on an application called OneApp and have a shot at getting into their top choice charter school. There are no traditional public schools in the city that enroll students based solely on their address. That window to apply lasts until the end of February, with results of the lottery being released in late March. Parents unsatisfied with their placements, or those who did not participate in Round One, will have the chance to submit in April and May during Round Two, after which a second lottery is run. If that placement still isn’t adequate, parents can choose from whatever openings remain by visiting a central site during Late Enrollment in July and August.

The path to healing the still-broken public education system in Orleans Parish is long and its course is hotly controversial. My own contemporaries have flocked to New Orleans as part of an education reform movement that has made dramatic gains by many measures and caused dramatic setbacks by others, depending on who is reporting. There is a sense among the reformers that we are participating in a grand coup that will ultimately redefine the ways that American school systems run, while the prevailing sense in many other circles is that great harm is being done to local control and school communities. From the way children are expected to walk, sit and speak in classrooms to the fine points of funding allocations, the massive changes that have flooded the system in New Orleans since the devastating floods that followed Hurricane Katrina in 2005 are rippling through the community and getting to the very heart of modern civil

rights. For my part, I simply want to help pave the way for the long-overdue school integration that my activist ancestors envisioned in the waning days of Jim Crow segregation.

My own privilege is staggering, though my life has not been without its traumas. As a freshman at Northern Arizona University, I thought a great deal about my struggle to manage my weight, the pain of experiencing my parents' brutal divorce as a preteen, and my own surreal and uncomfortable ordeal of being excommunicated as a young child from the orthodox Christian sect that most of my family has participated in for generations on both sides. These challenges were visceral to me then, and I didn't conceptualize myself as the recipient of any privilege. I walked into Joel Olson's critical race theory class with the idea that I would certainly drop it. After all, I thought, there's no reason to single out race as the key distinguisher between people when there are so many other things that divide us. The only way to move past race, I thought, was to stop talking about it. Then I learned about the ways race was bound to identity in American history. I read Frederick Douglass and I read about John Brown. I read *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *The Souls of Black Folk*, and I was exposed to the arguments made in the article "Race Without Color" by Jared Diamond. Three years and many sociology classes later, I emerged with the conviction that the defining issue of my generation would be racial disparities in opportunity. Now, in 2016, I'm finding that I appear to have been right.

The historic Black Lives Matter movement has taken shape in the past several years, while I've been toiling over the admissions program at a predominately African-

American charter school network. In that time, the national eye has become trained on rising conversations about race in America, a country still defined by both overt and concealed racial tensions. The movement, which started as a social media hashtag designed to generate discussion, has made its way into American history as the most recent chapter in a long struggle for civil rights. Back in 2004, when I first was exposed to critical race theory, it was popular even among liberal Americans to dismiss discussions of race in the name of colorblindness, which we thought was the proudest moment in race relations. We were post-racial, we thought, and the enlightened way to approach race was to leave it alone. The few people of color in my high school were met with a kind of patronizing quietude about their situation, and it seemed to me then that it would be a serious transgression to even ponder the differences between us.

Dr. Olson pierced that notion in its heart. “The cross-class alliance,” he said, pacing across the front of the room, “keeps the power classes alive.” He was obsessed. A white man in his late 40’s, who moved and looked like he was 25, Dr. Olson changed my life. His intense passion for setting the world right one semester at a time was contagious; he was the person I wanted to be. “The story of white America is a story of oppression, a story of intentional and systematic racism. Our participatory democracy is a lie, built on slavery, and founded on the denial of minority rights. You will see, through our texts, that the America you know is binary, white and non-white, and that the opportunities and privileges of whiteness are astonishing.” This was his promise to his students, who sat in amazement at a professor so energetic and persuasive, talking about something so incredibly taboo.

The remarkable thing about Dr. Olson’s philosophy was that, in it, no one was evil. My generation had learned that “racists” were a breed of people, not like us, who

burned crosses and wore white sheets. They were loud and separate from us and they were bad. We were good. We didn't talk about race. Dr. Olson's painting of racism was based on systems, not people, and for him the menace that lurked in America was an institutional one, one that we could all unite against. His lectures never vilified individuals, but spoke of the insidious way that American institutions operated with racial inequity. He demonstrated through research how the earliest settlers in the colonies had been desperate to quell rebellions from the growing class of European immigrants struggling to survive in the new world, and capitalized on xenophobia by specifically marketing the notion of "blackness" as a grave and stark distinction from "whiteness" and one that could be wielded as a weapon of control. Without race, Dr. Olson argued, the poor white settlers had nothing to stop them from rising up alongside the enslaved black men and women, which represented a threat to the power balance of the budding colonial society. With the intentional introduction of racial difference by the elite, the whites had little to comfort them beyond the simple but malevolent conception that if nothing else, *at least they weren't black*.

Throughout my undergraduate education, and in the years since, I have come to see my life as a series of advantages and opportunities. My heritage is Norwegian and French, so I'm unequivocally white. While my parents weren't exactly wealthy, I never wanted for anything in childhood. My father was a computer engineer, so I had early and consistent access to the latest technology. My stepfather worked in pharmaceuticals, and his financial future was secure. In addition to moving around frequently, we also traveled extensively across America, and before I went off to college in Arizona, I had either lived in, vacationed in, or at least driven through all but about five of the contiguous states. My schools, though there were many over the years, were always

high-scoring public schools that never struggled to maintain standardized test score goals. I'm able-bodied and of a sufficient wit. I grew up with immense invisible privilege, and as an adult I possess even more. My consciousness and acknowledgment of my privilege began in college, but matured as I did in New Orleans, where I came to see my climate-controlled lodgings and relative ease around police officers as not just normal parts of existence but huge advantages over my own neighbors. I recognize that many New Orleanians don't wear new running shoes every season or track their runs with a GPS running watch. Their dogs don't always have consistent access to heartworm and flea medication or regular dental cleanings, nor do their families have good health insurance to cover their own medical bills. I consult with my doctors regularly, my general practitioner, my OBGYN, my therapist, my psychiatrist, and the occasional specialist. This of course is not to mention the remarkable advantages of being American, such as general wealth, the fundamental right to free expression and a voice in the body that governs me. I'm the recipient of some of the most overwhelming privilege on the globe, and try to never lose sight of that fact. My skin crawls when I think of the level of disparity between what I have and what others do and I'm still seeking an answer for the question of what to do with these gifts.

As a student in college, I was a boisterous critic of the system of oppression that defines American society; I spoke often and boldly about what I saw as the sad state of education for the urban poor, the accumulation of white privilege that has been codified and cemented through the centuries, and the myth of the existence of genetic race. When Teach for America came into view for me as a career move, I told the interviewer that I felt not that I was joining the program, but that the program was joining me. I believed that reading Frantz Fanon, Marcus Garvey, and William Lloyd Garrison had

weaponized me, and that I possessed the power to permanently and efficiently transform the lives of the students I taught. I imagined that I would be received as a young savior, whose unique energy and keen motivation would push me to great heights. I thought I was invincible. I was not afraid of anything, certainly not the youngsters, and certainly not failure, as I wasn't, at that time, familiar with the concept. Piles of high school debate awards were crowded into boxes in my parents' garage. Stacks of college papers with superlative feedback decorated my dorm closet. My transcripts were littered with A's. So far, I'd only experienced blinding success.

Chapter Three: The Achievement Gap

White, middle-class American children are outscoring their poorer, minority peers on standardized tests in grade school and have been doing so for generations. This discrepancy in achievement is the problem that young idealist Wendy Kopp wanted to solve when she created a national teacher corps in 1990. The idea behind Teach for America is to funnel some of the nation's most talented, often ivy-league graduates into the field of education toward two ends. First, the goal is to bring highly intelligent, adaptable people who are resilient and perseverant into teaching students in some of the most adverse conditions in urban and rural schools. Their combination of character strengths would, theoretically, enable them to weather long hours, low pay, unruly and undisciplined students, and many other challenges and still rise to the occasion. They could succeed where others had failed. Second, these freshly-minted (albeit nontraditional) teachers would spend at least two years in the system, learning and fighting, until they returned to their natural career paths. Once in leadership positions in myriad industries, these soldiers would know something intimately that their colleagues did not; they would have seen firsthand the achievement gap.

The statistical difference between the academic performances of minority and poor Americans, compared with white and more wealthy students, is a major foundational tenet of Teach for America's mission. That achievement gap is what motivates the entire data-driven and self-reflective movement as teachers are encouraged to use their short tenure in the classroom to move the needle, making what Teach for America calls "significant gains." For twenty-five years, the organization has been fine-tuning its selection process to locate idealists with the perfect blend of

passion, talent and persistence to make it through a two-year commitment in an underachieving public school.

Teach for America did not actively recruit at Northern Arizona University, which is a third-tier public school in Flagstaff, Arizona, just a few hours from the Grand Canyon. Amid the pine trees at an elevation of 7200 feet, NAU's outdoorsy reputation is more for marijuana than for ivy, and to my knowledge very few of its alumni have gone on to be selected through the rigorous TFA process. In 2006, I was the only one. I had been a resident assistant for two years, I had managed to maintain a strong 3.68 GPA, and I had no shortage of passion for causes I believed in. I had taken only one multicultural education class from the teacher's college, which had focused on the history of education policy and not at all on pedagogy, but I hadn't failed often when I'd tried something, and so I was sure I could handle teaching full time in an urban setting, no problem. I had the one thing I really needed, and I had a lot of it; I had the belief that all kids could learn.

In October 2006, during my last semester of college, I was sure that teaching city kids was my future. I applied for the program, and for nothing else. I had no plan B. Ever disorganized, however, I submitted my application twenty minutes after the deadline. It would be fine, I thought. A phone interview took place on the back steps of the restaurant where I had a managing job, with the sounds of delivery trucks and the bug fan blowing as the door opened and closed. I nailed it. Jonathon Kozol's books on the state of public education and Dr. Olson's passionate appeals had prepared me to discuss

how important it was to have high expectations, and how crucial it was to believe in the kids. I got so far as an in-person interview, and was sure I would have the job.

The weekend before my eight-hour interview, I hiked the Grand Canyon. My boyfriend, brother, sister, and friends had planned the trip months in advance, and we traveled into Havasupai Canyon on Friday morning. Saturday and Sunday, we played in the waterfalls, and thought we were in heaven. Monday, we hiked eleven vertical miles and celebrated with a late-night feast at a restaurant in Flagstaff. By midnight, I was headed down to Phoenix for my interview at 8am Tuesday morning, feverishly preparing my five-minute lesson plan in the car. While my brother and sister slept at the hotel, I was at Kinko's, making handouts and posters until 6am. On no sleep and a hiking high, I showered, and showed up at 7:45 in a black and white dress to greet my future. I think I fell asleep for a moment during the writing part of the interview, and I definitely cried when the interviewer asked me if I was ready for the commitments of this job.

"I am ready for something real. I am ready to spend ALL my time on something worth it, and I am ready to change the world." My eyes watered, half from passion, half from exhaustion. "I am prepared to give everything in me to this, and I believe that my success will be the success of the future." I started sobbing. "I am so ready to give this my best, and there is no better person for the job. This is my movement; I am ready."

She shook my hand after that with an empathetic enthusiasm, and I knew I had it. I walked across the street to a bar where my siblings were waiting for the report. "Well, I left crying, so who knows?" I winked. It sounded crazy, but I was sure.

I was among the 150 corps members selected to serve in the Greater New Orleans region in 2007, where a recent hurricane had wiped away any semblance of normal. A

long-failing public school system had already been in the early stages of reform when the nation's eyes turned toward the devastation brought on by Hurricane Katrina and the resulting floods to a city that would never be the same again. I knew that education reformers were pushing hard in New Orleans, though I didn't realize then that the entire district's teachers had been laid off and required to reapply for their jobs in a changing landscape of schools. Charter schools were taking hold as school leaders fought for the autonomy to innovate and rebuild on their own terms, in ways they believed would reverse the trend of students underserved and unprepared for college. I knew education was changing in New Orleans, and I knew that I was part of something significant. It startles me to look back and realize how little else I knew.

Training in Houston was a whirlwind. We were up before the sun each morning and ready for buses to take us across town to our respective schools. Teach for America's Institute was responsible for essentially running the school system that summer, so each of hundreds of new "teachers" had the task of teaching a portion of summer school classes. For my part, I was assigned to co-teach an English class with a total of four students, alongside my partner corps member, who would take on half of the job. We each led the class for about fifty minutes during the day, most of which I remember focused on coming up with delicate but persuasive ways to get the impossibly quiet students to participate. There were no behavior problems. There were no items flying through the air. During those four weeks, I was sure that if this was teaching, it was a wonder everyone didn't do it.

We spent the remaining hours of our long days in intensive training sessions. We were taught the model of lesson planning which encouraged a concept of guided practice: *I do, we do, you do*. We watched videos of master teachers from previous iterations of the corps and analyzed the successes in their classrooms, trying to mimic them in our own. The tenets of the program were drilled into our brains: generosity of spirit, relentless pursuit, sense of possibility, and respect and humility for the work. We were taught incessantly to drive toward the same result, closing the achievement gap, and had exhaustive data-mining requirements to meet to prove that we were.

Everything was tracked. Each day we gave the students a mini-assessment at the end of the lesson that would check for their understanding. That data went into a chart. Our students' behavior was tracked for participation, outbursts (there were none in my classroom), and even restroom breaks. We tracked the times it took us to complete our lectures, the weekly assessments as well as the daily ones. I tracked my own sleep and my work hours to make sure I was doing enough (I never was).

One morning, as my roommate silently made her way around the room, leaping on one foot to get dressed in her dress pants and chiffon shirt, I remained asleep. Exhausted and unused to being up before the sun, I slept through my alarms and through her entire morning routine, climbing down from our shared bunk beds, coming and going from the community bathroom down the hall, and finally clicking her heels on the hard floors as she opened and closed the door behind her, leaving at 6am for the busy day ahead. I slept through the sound of hundreds of corps members walking down the hall, gathering in the front of the building, and boarding loud school buses with their roaring engines. I slept through the eerie calm of a building totally emptied of its tenants. I slept through the mid-morning silence as the beige cement hallways stood

vacant and the scent of decades old grey carpet went unsmelled. It was nearly 11am when I finally awoke, unacceptably late for the day and totally alone.

I called my corps member advisor, who was reasonably upset, and asked him what I should do. There were still six hours left in the training day, six critical hours out of six critical weeks, yet I had no car and my school was thirty-five minutes away by school bus. I hurried into wrinkly clothes and rushed through an abridged morning routine and, on his advice, called a cab, which delivered me to the building about 15 minutes after the end of my portion of the teaching day. Eyebrows raised ever-so-slightly as I came bustling into training sessions, though no one knew quite what to say.

On the bus on the way home, I came to realize that by my brazen display of tardiness and abject insubordination, I had become something of a folk hero to a small number of my fellow corps members. They carefully approached me, surreptitiously, and whispered the questions that seemed to be on many of their minds.

“What did it feel like to sleep in? What did you think when you woke up? Did you mean to do it?” Most importantly, the thing I had unlocked that none of them had the courage or perhaps desire to find out: “What are they going to do to you?” I told them the truth. It felt fine, I was refreshed, and of course I didn’t mean to do it. Also, I had no idea what they were going to do to me.

In the end, they didn’t do much beyond a few rebukes, though I have heard that somewhere in the main offices for Teach for America, there is a file on me that includes this massive transgression as well, I’m sure, as many others. I’d be interested to see that file.

Amid the professional development provided in those six weeks was a session that had piqued my interest from the moment I saw it on the schedule. It was called,

predictably, “diversity training,” and I was interested because I felt one-hundred percent sure I could lead it. The man who did lead it was a white, Jewish, New Yorker, who assigned articles about “unpacking your bias” and ensuring you don’t employ racial undertones in the ways you call on students in class. Solutions for improving classroom diversity were simple: don’t allow yourself to be preoccupied by the differences between students. Treat everyone fairly. I longed for more on this topic, sensing that the consciousness of racial history was not as developed among my colleagues as I had hoped to find it. This was my issue. In college, I had attended an eye-opening training during which we stood in the school’s cafeteria and stepped forward or backward for every instance of advantages or disadvantages we had had growing up. Did your parents speak English? Step forward. Did your parents work schedules that allowed them to help you with homework? Step forward. Did your parents have a car? Step forward. By the end of the session we could see how racial these questions were in nature, since there was considerable homogeneity in the configuration of the front and the back of the room. I wanted to have these painful and awakening conversations with the corps.

I cornered our facilitator after the session. Our students, I implored him, have come from very difficult backgrounds, while many of us have seen little distress in our lives. When are we going to dig into the history of racial oppression that defines our students’ experiences? What about the stark reality that we are coming from the socio-economic power classes and the children we are teaching are not? What about white privilege? He replied succinctly and frankly to my inquiry. The truth, he told me, was that we wouldn’t be covering those topics because, simply, white privilege was fiction. I was stunned. How could an organization with such an overtly political mission ignore

the politics behind their work? How could the diversity trainer not believe in white privilege?

Since 1990, Teach for America has placed thousands of fresh teachers in poor and underperforming districts. Those full-time teaching positions are occupied by idealists like me who demonstrated the top characteristic considered during interviews: the belief that education is a universal right and that all children have the innate ability to learn when properly taught. The 2015 delegation of teachers was 4100 strong, with 49% people of color, 47% of whom were Pell Grant recipients, which TFA uses as an indicator of low-income backgrounds. For every low-income, minority placement made by the program, there is a higher-income, white corps member taking the place of a would-be teacher hired locally by the school board. In New Orleans, that has had a major impact. By 2010, the workforce in the Orleans Parish school district had changed substantially; charter schools have heavily relied on staffing their schools with TFA corps members with dramatically fewer local ties and teaching experience than their previous teachers. The education reform movement in New Orleans lauds this fact, praising the new blood for their marked innovations and new approach. Critics, however, have challenged it, saying that the disenfranchisement of veteran, local, African-American teachers is palpable and wrong. They point out that while innovation is important to solving the problems of a struggling district, innovation from outside the community isn't the same as organic solutions, and the movement is leaving out the student, family and veteran voices that are needed the most.

For two years, I was one of those innovative, outsider voices. I had ideas, but most of them were lost on the community I had planned to influence because, as a young, privileged, white woman, I had no basis for understanding the history that preceded me and the present reality that eluded me. The magnitude of my ignorance was astounding; I had no idea what these kids had been through, what their parents had endured, or how their previous teachers had gotten through to them in the subtlest ways, ways not measured by standardized tests. I was everything Teach for America was looking for, but not at all what New Orleans needed.

Chapter Four: Constant C. Dejoie Elementary

“Miss Gershman? Can I be honest with you?” Kimberly was making a genuine inquiry on the last day before Thanksgiving Break. “On the first day of school, we all talked about how you would be the funnest teacher we ever had. But all you do is yell at us.” She was being real in this moment, putting down her comb and turning forward in her seat. “Do you even want to be a teacher?”

In 2007, I was twenty-two years old. The previous two decades had taken my sense of identity on a long journey with twists and bends through childhood obsessions and hobbies and distastes. In middle school, I had been a fanatic for Frank Sinatra, practicing his easy sensibility, singing along to jazz standards while my girlhood friends belted out songs from N’Sync. I collected everything I could find of vintage and modern Winnie the Pooh toys (and lamps and cookie jars and anything else you could imagine) and decorated my bedroom, which grew into a museum for antique-store finds. In high school, I couldn’t settle in to a social corner; I found interesting people across campus and brought them into my life. My two closest friends were Aaron, who wore eyeliner to increase the shadowy effect he had when walking into the room and loved death metal, and Colin, whose mother was the mayor and whose father sold yachts and owned a few of his own. I had friends in the math club and on the football team. In college, my personality intensified and I became an active member of the community, working in the dorms and the student union. I grew angry often and increasingly about what I saw as the ways that the American system was rigged toward my own success. By the time I graduated, I had a singular, blinding motivation: I wanted to make the world a better place.

People I trusted, my professors, my program directors, the eloquent and inspiring Kira Orange-Jones, Executive Director of Teach for America- Greater New Orleans, had made it clear that teaching was how I could do that in a measurable, real way. According to the messages I heard from above, I could bring luminosity that didn't exist without my presence, and my decision to spend my time toiling toward higher test scores and better outcomes for these kids was actively, truly changing the way America functioned. I couldn't do this working for a corporation as my boyfriend did, selling pharmaceuticals as my father did, or waiting tables, as I had done in the past. This was my only path forward. I hadn't considered other ways to make a living, or what my future would hold for me. All I knew was that the world was broken by institutionalized racism and this was my path to fix it. I didn't know if I wanted to be a teacher, but I knew I wanted social justice, and to me these were equivalent. The school I was placed in had a statistically representative reality: test scores were low in math and reading, the student body was anything but diverse at nearly 100% African-American, and suspensions and dropout rates were sky high. This is where I found myself, though I hadn't truly grappled with the question of whether I wanted to be there or if this was where I belonged.

By the middle of the first year, everything had descended into disaster. I had become the weak link among four first-year teachers teaching middle school at Constant C. Dejoie Elementary in Central City. With no bells, we relied on each other to start and end our classes on time, and mine were always running behind. I had comprehended enough of the advice from my program director to know that I couldn't just let my students run chaotically into or out of my room, but had to set the tone with firm control and silent formations. I couldn't let screaming kids leave the room, but I didn't have an effective strategy for putting an end to the screaming. So I would wait, then I would

scold, and finally I would yell. There were some children who had an endless patience for this daily routine, always standing quietly and still. Others would start that way, but they would eventually fall into the same frustrated pandemonium that had taken over the few who couldn't control themselves. There were always several students in each class who found some relief or gratification in their power to derail my efforts. I was a puppet and those few students delighted in pulling my strings.

Things had fallen apart. I had no control of my classroom, and my sporadic and inconsistent attempts at course correction had become as tiresome to my students as they were to me. Objects flew across the classroom. Sometimes, in the wildest moments, students would blow me away with their innovation. They'd stand up and remove the detachable legs of their desks and use them to hit the backside of their classmates' chairs. They'd take the batteries out of the calculators and toss them at the whiteboard, scarring its glossy sheen with the same dent I felt to my pride. There were tranquil moments, if not days, but they were fragile. My classroom was never far from a crack in the calm. We were governed by teenage whims. Pulling me aside one afternoon, my principal remarked, not at all amused, that she was under the impression there wasn't really an adult in the room.

Constant C. Dejoie is a contemporary brick building constructed in the years right before Hurricane Katrina, after the previous location of the school was burned down by a student, who poured copy fluid onto a heater. The fire took place on May 28, 1985, when the building was occupied. In a harrowing escape, all 400 students exited the building in less than two minutes, and no children or faculty were hurt. In its new iteration, Dejoie Elementary was one of the newer schools in the city, and we felt extremely lucky to have a facility with working air conditioning when so many of the

city's schools were in disrepair. (Others in the corps reported huge fluctuations in temperature in their portables or old, moldy walls and ceilings in their buildings that had survived Katrina.) We did not appear to be at any loss for supplies. There were corporate benchmark tests and computer-based programs to help the students with their fundamentals in reading and math. Each room had new Dell PCs for student use. There were 4 sets of brand new textbooks in my classroom and a fancy, 21st Century display we called the "smart board." Every teacher had a laptop, and our grades and attendance were to be completed online. We had a technology person on staff, and we got a fresh set of tutoring books right before the big test. Things at Dejoie looked very good from the street corners.

The truth, however, was a little seedier. My smart board was installed with a bunch of giant nails right through the actual whiteboard, and the installation crew didn't remove the magnetic fraction tiles from underneath it before they put it in. When they take it out eventually, the tiles will fall on the floor, and they will wonder what was going on in 2007. It never actually worked, for about 300 reasons that seemed unsolvable. I was missing a cord, then another cord. There were no speakers, and it had to be hooked up to the laptop. Dion knocked my laptop to the floor and it took a month to get it fixed. When it was fixed, I couldn't log in for a few weeks because the password had been reset and for some reason, our technology person wasn't on staff anymore. When I finally got the password, I was still missing a cord. I couldn't send my textbooks home because we never got that bar-coding system, and my students broke the function keys off the keyboards on our Dell PC's. I had nowhere to reflect my overhead, and a few of the outlets in the room didn't provide power. The school's infrastructure was not prepared

to implement all the new policies and opportunities that post-Katrina funding had opened up.

The school's staffing left just as much to be desired as the physical infrastructure. The middle school was made up of all new teachers and the special education teacher had no experience with facilitating rigorous special education regulations. There was no behavioral support team to speak of, nor were there school-wide systems in place to address negative behaviors or encourage positive ones. Each teacher ran their own discipline entirely, supplemented only by the occasional administrative team member popping into the room to dole out suspensions and loud reprimands. The principal and vice-principal went back years with each other and the school system, had received the several Teach for America corps members against their wishes, and never quite adjusted to having a dramatically inexperienced staff. We were, like most of the state-run schools that year, struggling to bring together a cohesive vision amid the rapid changes that came down from the district office and struggling to simply survive.

I grappled with the sense that I had lost sight of my visions and my hold on my life. My heart was just as broken as my classroom in those darkest days. There was literal darkness. My apartment was a long, narrow corridor with windows on only one side, just a few feet from the next house. It never got any sunlight. Like the rest of my life, it was a mess of unfinished projects, false starts, and I couldn't keep anything in its place. One night, at around 2am, I sat on my bed with my back to the wall and my MacBook hot against my crossed legs, its digital reflection white on my face. I glanced up in the low light at my door-less closet, an architectural afterthought, and watched as a family of mice danced over a pile of my work shoes. I didn't move. I didn't know what to do, so I did nothing. I turned back to my work. Nothing felt inside my locus of control.

There were a few threads that were holding me together, it's true. I had my idealism, which I held onto with gusto, and I continued to believe that there was a greater purpose in the work I was doing, even as difficult as it was. Not often enough, but periodically, I would talk on the phone for hours to my long- distance college boyfriend (who would become my husband my greatest source of strength) about my job, the endlessness, and the ways that my shortcomings were getting me down. My mom, my stepfather, my sister and my brother were there for me on the occasions when I would think to give them a call, though I never seemed to have the basic courtesy to ask them how they were doing or comprehend basic facts about their lives. My relationships suffered from the distance. I had a roommate and some teacher friends whom I never saw, except on rare bar nights when I would drink too much, too fast. One night I was out on Frenchmen Street, treating myself, and I overindulged. I can still see the blurry images of the cars on either side of the narrow road as I drove myself home in a near-blackout, a short but lucky two-mile trip. Others who have made that mistake have ended their lives or strangers' lives or irrevocably altered their futures. I smoked two packs of cigarettes each day, stopping at a Chevron by my house in the mornings and a Shell station after work. I gained and lost at least thirty pounds.

My single, ever-present motivation, one that called out like my alarm clock in the mornings, was Walter, who was my salvation in that I thought I could be his. Walter was tall, muscular, and broad-shouldered and he cared. He cared more than I did, more than the teachers cared, and he cared more than any other student in the school. He was motivated, he was on his way out of the projects. "I got to succeed," he once wrote, "so I can get up out the projects and make my people proud. Make my mamma proud, make my teachers proud, and show them what we can do." He wanted to be wide receiver for

the Saints. I wanted him to be President. He had deep, dark mahogany skin and cherry-pit eyes. He looked at me during class with this knowing, this maturity and understanding. He could see it all and thought the chaos was a shame. He thought it all was a terrible, comical shame. He would bray like a donkey when he laughed, but I think he stopped laughing like that on purpose after the second quarter, when I, unthinkingly, mocked him in class. I really liked that laugh, but I might have killed it. I wonder if he still laughs like that today.

One afternoon in class, I ushered my thirty students into a line, ready to exit for lunch. The last few kids to be released from their seats to the line were my trouble-makers, habitually gabbing or drumming their desks loudly after being asked to stop. My patience was as thin as it as ever was halfway through the school day, after the morning energy had worn through and before the afternoon boost. As I waited for the disrupters to quiet down, the rest of line got anxious, and the tension built even as I tried vainly to keep calm. Finally, with the slightest hint that their antics had abated, I directed the last few students to join the line. As they did so, I moved to the front of the room, leaving them near the computers. Just as we began to exit the class, a screeching noise poured from my computer speakers—one of the students at the back of the line had turned them to full volume and put on some kind of video or music. I closed the door and ran back to the back, where Dion's eyes were full of mischief and mirth. I shut down the computer and told him to leave it alone. I walked backwards toward the door with my eyes trained on the back of the line, and just as I opened the door again, another computer's speakers screeched with a similar cacophony. At this, most of my class began to react, some in hysterical laughter, others in frustrated impatience. Before

long the line had scrambled and the room filled with more noise. I charged to the back of the room with all my emotions on blast.

“Turn off the speakers, now!” My eyes, I imagine, must have looked just like my mother’s do when they harden to angry ice. Dion, at 5’10”, was standing at the computer as I went to it, and as I reached the speakers to make the commotion cease, he grabbed me by my shoulders, pulled me toward him and thrust his knee into my ribs. I lost my breath, and the room’s noise increased with gasps. I stumbled backward. He stepped toward me, grabbed my neck, and threw me behind him, where I knocked my head on a wooden bookshelf, sending books in all directions. In shock, I wobbled to gain my balance. I was speechless. The class was alight with whoops and laughter, and I locked eyes with Walter, who was shaking his head slowly, stunned. Dion had the look of a child much younger than himself, scared but thrilled at the same time, unsure of what might happen.

“Did you see that lady hit me?” he asked no one and everyone.

The students continued to yell and riot, even as my neck was red and sore from being handled. There were those who watched silently as a few of the students came around to what Dion was suggesting. They started in saying, “Oh, you hit that boy” and “Oh, Miss, you down bad” as Dion continued to egg them on. Before long, there was a small but committed group of students, led by Dion and Louis (Walter’s brother), who were either actively lying or perhaps hadn’t seen what happened and chose to believe that I had somehow started a fight.

The principal seemed whole-heartedly ready to believe their wolf-cries, telling me that an “investigation” would be launched. I knew that I didn’t ever touch him, because I was there, but for a second, with all the witnesses who backed him up, I wondered if

maybe I had. Did I make that happen? Was I aggressive and enraged? Was there something in my eyes that had given him cause to attack me? It was Walter's rendition of events that reminded me that, truly, this was not supposed to happen in a classroom. This wasn't right. He saw it all, and thought it was an injustice.

I was instructed to ask my students to go down to the office and give their version of events, which in itself undermined any sense of authority I tried hopelessly to grasp. I wanted to send Walter, but he sat quietly when the mob mobbed down to report my imaginary offense. Everyone knew he would tell the truth. His word would have been believed. Later, he nonchalantly approached me and said, "Miss Gershman, you know I don't like to get involved in all of that."

"I know, Walter," I said, forlorn. "I understand." The very reason he commanded so much respect in the building was that he didn't get involved and that he was more mature than any of us. It was drama, and he was busy getting smart.

"But, what happened today was wrong. And I ain't gon stand for it. If you need me to talk to the principal," he said, "I gotcha." I was moved and crushed. Why had it come to this, me and Walter against the world? Why had my word come to mean so little?

He never did get involved, not by talking to the principal anyway, because he dispensed his own kind of justice. His brother, as charismatic as he was, was leading the mutiny. I walked upstairs after school after a conversation with the administration (which left me wondering if I would still have a job) and came upon Walter, who was using his strength as his voice with his little brother. Walter had Louis pinned up against a wall, with his arm across his brother's chest. He was saying something about "How

could you lie on that lady?” and “I can’t believe we are related” and all I could do in the face of this violence was yell.

“Walter! Get off of him!”

He looked at me, with his deep eyes, and then back at his brother, against the wall. In a moment like a daydream, I watched as he punched his brother in the face, right then, sending mine into a contorted shock. Letting go, he walked down the hall, out the door, and disappeared. The younger one and I were left in the hall, in a tense moment.

“I’m sorry, Miss Gershman,” Louis said, with a look of having just been punched in the face. “I’m so sorry.”

The next day, Louis went to the principal and told the truth. He admitted that he had been lying, that he had seen Dion instigate and perpetrate entirely without my participation, and he apologized to her for his part in the mess. The stories about Miss Gershman subsided, and Dion went home suspended for a few days. I almost filed a police report for the assault, but hell, I didn’t care about me any more than anyone else did. The only one who cared, it seemed, was Walter. Walter cared.

At the time, I didn’t know what to make of it. I was mortified by the violence in the classroom and mortified by the violence that allowed me to keep my job, but it felt meaningful in a hopeless way. Walter’s journey would take many paths throughout the next decade, and there would come a time when I would remember this story as the representation of all that I didn’t understand about my students’ lives. This story would be as much about my ignorance as it was about the sad reality of what Walter and I didn’t have in common. It would represent the reasons I was wrong for the job.

Chapter Five: Walter

Walter's character and insights were the primary light in my first year of teaching, a dark year. He didn't always tell the class to settle down, but when he did they always would. I used an experimental math curriculum that had been purchased for us by the district in which students would spiral through a math skill in bite-sized pieces, first starting with the most elementary form of thinking and increasing in difficulty to on-level word problems. We'd start a lesson on fractions with questions about what the concept of the number one means. We'd conceptualize a single unit, made up of many parts, such as a pizza or a glass of water. Walter could always articulate the reasoning behind the mathematical principle. He could communicate the idea that the denominator represented the total slices in a whole pizza and that the numerator showed how many pieces you had. He understood. When we got to the formulas, finally, after we'd struggled through the basics, he immediately memorized them and repeated them with ease. I would stand at the front of the room, desperately, trying to balance my own enthusiasm for my lesson plans and the horrid chaos that threatened to wreck us.

"X equals 9," a deadpan Walter would chime in with his typical effortless brilliance.

"Yes, Walter, exactly." My voice would speak only to him yet mostly to myself, over the perfect indifference of twenty-nine other students in the room who could have figured it out if they had looked, if only they had listened. *If only they had ever looked, I thought, in almost a decade of public education, they would be able to figure it out.* Eyes flashed, mouths smiled and conversation chirped across desks, and I would be still absolutely certain that the minute they turned around and thought about it, every last

one of them could see what Walter saw. I was absolutely certain that all these children could learn.

It was that blinding certainty that had transported me to the front of that classroom in the first place. The most basic things were clear even in the fog of noise and bedlam; with the right blend of magic, every child in New Orleans (and the world) had the raw power they needed to open a thousand doors. It was simple. Look, listen, watch, and learn. *I do, we do, you do.* I refused to tolerate any notion that complicated my pure idealism, largely because that was my one real tool. It was the one instrument I believed would do the very thing I had come to do: change these children's world.

Where most of my students had short attention spans and high energy, Walter was calm and deliberate. He spoke with a slow, commanding voice. His classmates would call him Martin Walter King when he wasn't listening, but they rarely dared to say it to his face. He opted to sit off to the very left of the classroom whenever seats weren't assigned, and chose to sit with friends from sports teams. He could have chosen any desk, really, and the student next to him would have felt it an honor. Where his classmates clamored to get to the top of the heap by digging on me, the schoolwork, or their unfortunate peers, he was adept at balancing the social requirements for toughness while still not joining the ruckus. He didn't always do his homework, but when he did it was complete and accurate, scrawled out in nearly illegible penmanship, wrinkled and ripped. He didn't bring a backpack or supplies to school, but he always returned my pencils at the end of the class. He didn't rap, but he encouraged his buddies to do so every chance they got. He'd laugh raucously at their rhymes, hunching up his tall body, covering his mouth with his hand, and stomping his feet, but he would never get up out of his chair and cause a disturbance. He had a strong distaste for a few of the students,

clowns, he'd call them, and he'd sometimes interrupt their antics to tell them harshly to "stop all that foolin!" He had extra patience for the girls who couldn't seem to figure out what I was saying, as much as they tried. While he wouldn't overtly help them, he would often raise his hand and repeat what I had said, in the guise of clarification, in a way that he reasoned they might understand. I relied on Walter, too much, and dreaded the rare days he didn't come to school. There were times in class that I would consciously try to channel him in my own lectures. I can see now that I didn't know the first thing about the well of emotion and experience he pulled the strength from to find that incredible voice.

In the days leading up to Thanksgiving break, I felt a change in Walter's demeanor. His laugh, which had been cautious since I teased him, seemed to stop coming, no matter what happened in class. He was cranky. His homework appeared less thorough and less often. I asked him if he was okay, and he recoiled. He got angry and walked away. I was confounded; how could this seemingly strong and sober person be so moody and dim? His light wasn't shining the way it had been. I went to his brother with the same question, asking him to give me some insight into how one of my favorite students was losing himself.

"Oh, Walter?" he said, unsurprised. "He always gets like this during the holidays. Something bad happened when we were kids. Don't worry about him, he'll be better after Christmas." I asked around and did some research. What I found was devastating. One day, when he was very young, Walter had been in car, riding through the city with his father when shots were fired. He ducked low, but his father slumped over. He'd been

sitting inches away from him while his father was killed by bullets through his brain. It had been the holidays, right before Walter's birthday. Details were scant. All that was left was the immeasurable grief and the feeling he must have had that nothing could protect him from the ugliness of the world. It was a feeling I could never have sympathized with, having never lost anyone close to me. More importantly, I couldn't understand it because there was so much in my life that did protect me and so much less ugliness to contend with. Walter came from a different world.

There was anger in me; there was mass frustration. There was sadness and desolation and always, there was stress. Stress fueled my enthusiasm and moved my muscles in lieu of my brain. My mind was steered by the constant overreactions of fight or flight. I never really ended up flying or fighting, I usually just collapsed. I fell asleep at bars without an ounce of booze in me. I fell asleep at 5:30pm in my car or my bed or my kitchen. My family was sure I was drowning. Sometimes my mom would call and it would be all I could do to sob into the phone.

Once, driving down Magazine Street, as my wild eyes checked to see if my headlights were on for the seventeenth time in three blocks, I had to pull over. I couldn't go on. I don't remember what it was that time, but I stopped, dropped my forehead on the steering wheel, and cried in such hysterics that I couldn't breathe. Stress was beating my heart, fast, and I didn't have control of my limbs. I wanted to drive into a light-post. I wanted to careen off the West Bank Bridge. I wanted it to stop. There was no peace. I couldn't call anyone; it didn't seem like anyone could understand. Everyone was so

mean. Everyone wanted something from me that I didn't know how to make. I was so far behind. I was so tired.

Other times, I couldn't bear to get out of my car on North Rampart Street in front of my apartment. I would sit in the driver's seat, alive with thought, unaware of the world, for hours at a time. I was a hostage to myself. I couldn't move.

I stood at the front of a classroom, flooded with ugly fluorescent light and surrounded by a halo of frizzy hair. I must have never looked attractive, not for even a moment. I felt I must have been the ugliest creature on earth. I didn't talk, I yelled. I yelled for nine hours straight. I screamed the same words, day after day, until my voice was inaudible to anyone who had been around long enough to tune it out. I couldn't even hear myself anymore. I had to write it down if I wanted to remember something, because even my thoughts were loud, useless cries into the noise. The noise was like Gettysburg, with volume battles waged from group to group. A student called my cell phone by accident at 10pm one night, and left a message of sheer *noise* on my voicemail. It was his house, with five younger brothers and sisters, all screaming over one another to be heard. No one seemed to be listening, everyone was content to be part of the commotion.

Many of my students must have lost hope. How many sentences do you have to make that are ignored before you just stop believing in your own words? How many times can your thoughts be interrupted before you develop the expectation that no one will ever listen to you? I saw the youngest students in the school, even, with that look in their eyes: I am never going to be heard. They are sorely on point: who is going to listen?

When talking doesn't make anything happen, action is the only alternative. If you need a pencil, don't ask for one, steal it. If someone is giving you the blues, don't talk, fight. You can never back down from a fight. We couldn't talk to each other, because no one was listening. On that Tuesday, Dion put his hands around my throat and threw me against a bookshelf. Three weeks later, he offered a handshake and stabbed my palm with a tack. My car was covered in super glue, red paint, and spray painted "FUCK YOU" across the windows. I found my keys in various hiding places throughout the room, because you can lock up everything else, but you can't lock up the keys. Action is only way to drive it home.

Over the period of two months, I kept a box in my desk of objects that had been launched into the air in my direction. It housed broken pencils, paper balls, textbooks, calculators, and magnetic fraction tiles that I had left on the board. I called the police in a few times, but everyone seemed to want someone else to deal with it. No one really seemed to care. I wasn't a person, I was a teacher, and it was fundamentally my responsibility to individually and entirely control my classroom. This movement wasn't about me. If a student wants to throw something at a school official, and not one of the student's peers would ever say who it was, there wasn't much that could be done. Snitches get stitches.

"What I would do," a veteran teacher advised me, "I would go to the front, face them, and give them two examples. Example One: You don't get it? Hopefully you will next year. Example Two: You don't get it? Hopefully you will next year. Then sit down. You are making this harder on yourself than you need to. I don't play with all that."

Was she right? In some universe, where there are kids who cannot be stopped from the antics of eighth-grade, and who are not interested in completing their

education, she was right. That was how you showed them. That was how you taught them not to play. But not here in my vision. Not in my classroom. On some level, I suppose didn't care that they were throwing things. I was offended as a person, but I didn't care. As long as they came to school, heard positive, reinforcing messages, and had some piece of idealism in their lives, that was my part. They didn't seem to care much either. About me, about themselves, they didn't seem to care whether or not they learned it next year.

Then there were moments that made it all worth it again. There were correct answers on daily assessments. There were smiles and hugs from the girls and playful jabs from the boys. There were questions they asked me, about what life was like where I came from; somewhere else in their minds, somewhere soft and easy. There was the final ten minutes of the day, when some brief relief was in sight. There was so much laughing. The kids were hilarious—they told jokes and rapped so cleverly. There were random dances in the middle of third period, pure joy, and moments when I couldn't possibly understand a word they were saying.

“What's a good reward for our next celebration?” I asked the class.

“Reason crayons,” Keith said, grinning.

“What? What is that?”

“Raisin cranes!” He repeated.

“Seriously, what are you saying? Can anyone tell me what he's saying?”

“Ms. Gershman, he's saying we want reason cranes.”

I stood bewildered in the front of the room.

“Chicken fingers, Ms. Gersh! Raisin cranes!”

Weeks later I drove by a local chicken finger chain and a light went on in my head.

“Oh!” I said to myself. “Raising Cane’s!” I’ve since developed a taste for the simple, delicious fried chicken fingers at the chain restaurant.

Chapter Six: Spiraling

My immaturity as a teacher and a professional was predictable from my life before the corps. I had worked in jobs that didn't require the level of poise that would be necessary to command a classroom. Restaurant jobs didn't require business dress; they had uniforms. I could lead my residence hall wing with private consultations, a few residents at a time; as a resident assistant, I never had to address large groups, certainly not large groups of children. The closest thing I had had as preparation for a classroom was when I competed in speech and debate in high school and college—and the audience in those events wasn't bouncing off the walls. Conversations with my principal and Teach for America's program director always started and ended with strategies for grasping some sense of classroom management, but these mentors spent dismally little time in my room and I couldn't connect the dots between their ideas and my reality. More than anything, I just didn't have that personality, that gravitas, to establish my authority, and despite their best efforts and my longing to master it, I just didn't know how.

Almost a decade later, I know a lot about what I was missing then. I've led professional development sessions with teachers and kept the presentation clear and concise. I've slowed my rapid speech way down when I present. I've stood in for teachers in full classrooms during state testing and never struggled with the anxiety that a child won't respect my authority as an adult. I know now as I engage with students of all ages in the hallways of my schools that it isn't a game you play but a stance you take, a way that you don't brace yourself for a child's insubordination but assume authority because you are not a child. I didn't have any idea how to do that then. I was frustrated. I was lost.

I was confused all the time: when does second period end? And they played with me because I didn't know how not to let them. They played with me like a toy doll. They broke my wall clock by throwing a calculator at it. They set our class computers to another time zone. When I finally got a digital clock, the alarm was set to buzz in the middle of my lesson, and they went to lunch early on countless occasions by moving the time forward. I tried to order a watch, but it was stolen off my porch before I received it and I didn't have the wherewithal to place a complaint. At least once, we were fifteen minutes late because one of the pranksters didn't realize the folly of setting the clock behind.

An epic war was fought in the room over pencils and pens. I went through multiple strategies to get them writing utensils before abandoning it altogether and giving out detentions for students who came unprepared. First, I gave them pencils when they needed them. Seventy dollars' worth of pencils later, I created a system. Check out, return, sharpen and repeat. They broke my sharpener. I got the kind of sharpener you can't break. Someone stole it. I got them mechanical pencils to avoid the sharpening process altogether. They stabbed each other with the lead. I switched to pens. I numbered the pens by writing on them in Sharpie. They spent the five minutes it took to remove the marks. I put labels on the pens to identify them as mine, but they peeled the labels off. I kept a pen accountability binder, with a place to record who took them and if they were returned. They stole the binder. Finally, most of the kids just slept through class rather than take the detention for borrowing my pens.

I taught out of order, always back-stepping and realizing I should have spent more time on the basics before I launched into the curriculum. Some of them learned everything I taught, and could graph linear equations with any white kid in Connecticut.

Most of them tried once, failed, and never gave me another minute again. At times, I made it unattainable and too hard. My class was notoriously boring, because I didn't know how to make math fun without allowing negative behaviors. When I tried to do something engaging, I ended up defeated on the concrete yard, covered in paper streamers, wondering what had gone wrong.

The whole school staff, including myself, never let up on blaming my inadequacies. I was always confronting the hostile sighs and eye-rolling of faculty who felt as hopeless about my classroom as I did, as hopeless as the kids did. In that first year, Walter seemed to be the only one who had any faith in me. My struggles were proving them right. I couldn't fight any harder, I could give it any more time. I ultimately, simply, didn't know how.

"You show no signs of experience. You are not a teacher, you never will be a teacher. Go home." Rashida's letter from second quarter left me a crumpled milk carton, too big to fit in the trash. Much later, after the state standardized test, she stopped me in the hall and said something halfway redeeming.

"I guess I admire your enthusiasm, Gersh. You know me better than any teacher I ever had." I did know her. I had known her for twenty-two years, because she was exactly like me, in many ways. Maybe we were the same. Maybe I was an angry, mixed-up kid too.

Rashida was brilliant and ultra-motivated. She was small for the eighth-grade, but beautiful in her wide eyes and infinite smile, when she bothered to smile, sporadically. I related to the inner rage that fueled her and the way she constantly fought to find herself amid the volume and commotion of class. I had been that kind of student in grade school, too, and the only blemishes on my otherwise luminous record

were incidents of insubordination against rules and teachers I felt inadequate and trite. I had had the same kind of fire inside me, but I existed in a place that was built to handle an active imagination and challenge an accelerated wit. This wasn't that place. We were built to remediate and bring structure to disorder. Our school was built on principles of salvation, not cultivation, and all she needed was to have her own budding personality reinforced. Like me, she turned to anger when someone else might have turned to sadness. She was strong, but she was stifled, and, as it did me, the system was tearing her apart.

By March, I was a malfunctioning android, a broken machine. I couldn't remember why sunsets were beautiful or why jazz mattered. One Tuesday, I drove to Alabama at midnight and parked on the white sand beach. I left the headlights on while I slept and woke up to a dead battery and a manic high that would collapse before the day was over. No spontaneous escape could revive me. I was dead inside.

Looking back today, I can see that my lesson plans were often masterful and well-planned. I had creative ideas for how to engage the students and bring their learning to life. Once we drew a giant coordinate plane on the school yard and each student had to find and become an ordered pair. I encouraged the children to think of an equals sign as a wall, in which the items on each side were equivalent. I used my manipulatives constantly, despite knowing that they would often turn into flying objects. During the first few weeks of school, I successfully broke down all of the hundreds of state standards in middle school math and spread them out as digestible pieces across a scope and sequence that would, still today, be of value to curriculum designers. I wrote

ambitious and balanced unit plans for each few weeks, always basing my lessons on the *I do, we do, you do* model and on the importance of reaching stated learning objectives. My lesson plans weren't singular, but cleverly differentiated for students with different knowledge and learning styles. I had a plan for everyone, even my special needs students, and I never gave up on trying to make it interesting.

My students' behavior problems were the single most significant barrier to student outcomes in my classroom, so I designed and implemented dozens of different strategies to bring order to the room. We had a paycheck deduction system in the class. I created a set of moveable visual cues to show the class their distractions versus my expectations, and would use these items as a way to make sure every student clearly understood that I was never satisfied with the noise. I didn't sit at my desk, ever, but instead constantly paced through the commotion to find students who would benefit from a slice of my attention, whether struggling academically or acting out. Each day, I burned through every ounce of my fuel trying to find the right combination of activities and personas that would quell the noise. I tried yelling. I tried the silent treatment. I experimented with taking an expression of disgust, or serenity, or even hurt to get kids to behave. I dropped my voice a few octaves. I dyed my hair dark red. I dressed up nicer, then tried dressing down. My lessons started to incorporate some of the slang I overheard in the classroom, so the kids would hear me say "ya heard" and "ya digg" and take notice for a moment, before that too became old hat. Sometimes, I would surprise them with a rap I'd written and rehearsed the night before, often about the lesson but occasionally just to aggrandize myself. These moments were very well-received by the students, to the point that I wondered whether I was actually a talented rapper or if it

was just the novelty of a white woman in a pink dress making clever rhymes that held their interest.

I planned incessantly, every day, to try to come up with the right thing to say and do as a teacher. I persevered despite the chaos because I couldn't accept failure when the price was so high. I knew that I couldn't give up and go home because the kids didn't have that option, and if I was gone, I thought, there would be no chance of salvation. And I had nowhere else to go. One thing Teach for America had correctly predicted was my tenacity and the strength that I would find to pull myself together and get back in the game day after day. They knew from my profile that I would never give up.

There were two kinds of ruined days: the kind that I spent all night awake planning for, and the kind for which I wished I had. Almost every day was a ruined day. *There has to be a reason this is happening*, I theorized. *There has to be a way this will all make sense*. As I lit a cigarette, I thought, *I just hope I live to see it*.

“Will y'all please chill out and let the lady drink her two Diet Cokes?!” The kids loved to poke fun at my habits. I had my addictions and the students noticed them instantly. Where stress failed to keep me running, caffeine picked up the slack. Two bottles of Diet Coke a day sustained me through December, then I started needing more. The more stress I felt the more I turned to nicotine and caffeine. How the perfect teacher across the hall survived drug-free, I could never understand.

I often justified her perfection by thinking she must not have had her heart in it. How could she? Realistically, in retrospect, she was just built for this job. Her expectations were clear from the first day, she was mature, rational, and professional;

she was *so conscientious!* It was annoying. By the end of the year, I was willing to admit it: she was far better at all this than I was. She never would have been seen on a Saturday, in a dirty old t-shirt and jeans, smoking a cigarette, yelling at little kids across the street, imploring them to stop shrieking. She would never have done a planning binge until 4 am and then been too exhausted to deliver the lesson she had wasted herself giving birth to.

Ms. Hemphill literally wore a different, fabulous, outfit every day. With a thin waist and a beautiful, young face, she was always there to remind me how easy this could be if I could just get my head in the game. Students who tormented me and made the top of my list of disrupters were silent angels in her classroom, just thirty feet away. Parents would hear from me after school, in some of the thousands of calls I made home to stem the flood of misbehaviors I faced daily, and unbeknownst to me, she would have made a quick call earlier that day to tell them how sweet and sensible their child had been for her. I heard somewhere that everyone makes mistakes, and then, when I met Ms. Hemphill, I realized it couldn't be true. I told her that once, and she gracefully sighed in denial. To disprove my point, she thought for hours and finally came up with a time that she had made a mistake. I guess she was eight when it happened. God help me, some days I couldn't even look her in the eye.

Where Ms. Hemphill was my inspiration, Mr. Jordan was my strength. He was a tall, beautiful black man, with the kind of gracefulness that John Fitzgerald Kennedy must have had. He taught the kids English, across the hall, and I'm certain that at least a few of them only came to school in the morning because Mr. Jordan would be there. As much as I craved the approval of the principal, I would have done anything for a kind word from him. He didn't drive a car, which always impressed me. He was from New

York, the bigtime. With one side of his chicly wrinkled shirt pulled out of his long, comfortable chinos, he would swagger through the hallways, understanding and knowing exactly how I felt before he even saw my frazzled desperation. He shrugged a lot. He laughed. Deeply, from his knees, he would chuckle at the ridiculousness of our mutual existence.

Maybe he was Walter, all grown up. He said he was sick of it, and threatened calmly to quit at least five times through the year. The students looked up to him (we all did), and he always inspired a confident trust. I was sure that Mr. Jordan, as well as Ms. Hemphill, could do no wrong. They never stammered in the office to explain themselves. They never second- and third- and fourth- guessed their decisions. Mr. Jordan's unruffled tone is what sold me, from the first smile. I met him first when I came to New Orleans, at the copy machine of Dillard University during Orientation, where he stood gently making copies for reasons unclear to me.

"Hey." I was nervous. This man was picturesque and I was weary from travel and humidity. He was probably the real thing. He responded, as though we had known each other for years, with a broad grin and a head nod.

"Where are you coming from?" I asked him the only question I could imagine as I sorted through my luggage.

"Connecticut, for college, but I'm from New York." A pause. "I went to Yale."

"Oh." I walked away. I didn't feel like divulging that I went to school where Teach for America didn't recruit.

He seemed to know everyone before he met them, and could have a light-hearted conversation with anyone. He called me "Gersh" and was constantly amused by my

disasters. Sometimes he would abruptly head off my whining with a sharp, “I don’t even want to hear it, Gersh,” and I would power down instantly.

I really didn’t want him to quit. He had good cause, given the constant struggles we all faced in a school where there was little administrative support, but would have left us with nothing if he left. I wanted to scream at him that he didn’t understand how bad it could be, how awful it could have been if he were more like me. No one could talk to those kids like he could. He was the only one who listened. You could tell that even though many of these teenagers didn’t understand what it meant to show respect, they respected him. They trusted him. They could feel his strength. I felt it too, and always felt terrible after we talked. I always wanted to be stronger and more impressive for him; after all, I was sure he was Walter, all grown up.

We were all in a sinking ship together, with varying degrees of optimism. I counted on Mr. Jordan to be the voice of reality, and Ms. Hemphill to be the model for how I one day wanted to be. *I’ll be just like her*, I thought, *but maybe a little more spontaneous*. The principal was never as hard on them as me, or maybe I imagined it.

When Mr. Jordan said he wasn’t coming back after the spring standardized tests, I had to do some soul-searching and figure out what I was going to do. I sat down with my journal on a Sunday morning and tried to discover whether I could even think of leaving, despite how frantic I felt. After two hours of cigarettes and searching, I realized that there was no way I could consider walking away from what I was trying to build. So I went back to school on Monday. I went back every time.

Where I had my manic, Mr. Jordan had his calm. He must have thought of me as a lunatic, given his tranquility, but I think he envied my intensity the same way I admired his moderation. Constantly, catching him in the hall, I saw a quiet smile, and a

dull frustration. He didn't always seem to be emotionally present in the building, like he was storing up emotional reserves for another day. He worried to me one afternoon that maybe he just didn't care; maybe he wasn't really passionate about anything in his life. I saw that in him, but I was sure that one day he would find his path, and there would be no stopping him then. He had their trust, and he had their attention; if he had found the passion, he might have conquered the universe.

Straight from Texas, Miss Hemphill was not lacking for any passion, nor any capabilities. I think she was born to be a teacher; from her vocal pitch to her big, bright eyes, this was her ideal profession. Students in her class always knew what to expect, what was expected of them, and how well they were meeting her expectations. The students were calm in her classroom, sitting and resting. Students were awake; they *thought* in her classroom. There was peace and quiet, and even the most troubled students would write their names on class work pages and at least try the first few problems. She walked and moved in a positive, comforting, way that even chilled me out. She kept flawless records, in perfect lines, with thick gel ink in typewriter print. Nothing was ever crossed out on her notes, and she never wrote obscenities or doodled in the margins. At our faculty meetings, her comments were always optimistic and relevant, never desperate or sarcastic. The whole staff loved and trusted her, and the kids started to, as well, by the end of the year.

For as much as I saw my colleagues as the pictures of success that I aspired to, I know in retrospect that they faced some of the same struggles I did. Ms. Hemphill, in particular, because she was white, had to know that the work we were doing was disconnected from the local scene. We were outsiders, and we brought Yankee solutions to Southern problems. No matter that we were neither from the Northern states, our

presence in that school took the place of men and women who knew New Orleans and knew its kids. Veteran teachers, who despite years and years of a failing system, could understand the magnitude of grief and the weight of trauma. Mr. Jordan, who was also a transplant and who, like us, had come from another socio-economic stratum to be a guide for these children, had at least grown up in Harlem. But even in his wisdom and with his unique perspective, he still represented foreignness. All three of us, as TFA corps members, were brought in for the express purpose of saving these children from falling into the traps that were set for them, although we weren't the saviors we hoped to be.

There were four of us, first-year teachers from somewhere else, and three of us were TFA rookies with the same programmatic expectations and support. Next door, in the Social Studies classroom, Mr. Stewart was a new teacher as well, from another alternative teaching program that recruited new college graduates from all over the country. I didn't see much of him at all. He was a steady force, but also struggled mightily with discipline. The kids settled in to his routine, yet they were always mad about their grade in his class. Quietly, and keeping to himself, Mr. Stewart seemed to be truest to his expectations, which didn't seem to me to be as audacious as mine. He didn't ever make up an emotional grade for the students; he always had his evidence in black and white. We thought we had the most convenient setup in the district, four first-year teachers, all novices, unsullied, ganging up on the same set of 120 kids. He told me, in the end, that he hated this job and didn't need to prove something by returning for a second year. I was jealous.

“If this were serving tables, we would be working at a restaurant where the customers kept knocking over our tray as we came out of the kitchen,” he told me after

one of my frustrated tirades. He was moving to Buenos Aires in the fall, to do something wonderful with his life. As far as math equations go, I always believed that the more work you put into something, the more you would get out of it, and Mr. Stewart was going to go find a place where that was true.

Even as I set my sights on embodying Ms. Hemphill's relative maturity, channeling Mr. Jordan's resplendence, and imitating Mr. Stewart's self-assurance, there was an invisible mentor I didn't even know I was missing. Somewhere in New Orleans, there was a veteran teacher, who had for years been subtly guiding her students to academic and personal success. Somewhere there was an experienced teacher of color, one who wouldn't have ever known what to say in an eight-hour Teach for America job interview, but who knew exactly what to say to settle down a boisterous class after lunch, to draw out the last bit of focus from a flustered or frustrated eighth-grader, or to send Walter home with the feeling of warmth despite his emotional turmoil in those gloomy winter months. Their voice was one that never spoke to me. As far as my eye could see, there were only iterations of my own blind idealism.

The little I could sense of the old district scared me. The teachers on staff who had been there before the storm were passing influences on me, speaking in direct contrast to the sunny messages from my program. My idealism deafened me to their wisdom. They all seemed to possess a terrible knowledge, knowledge too depressing for me. I never wanted to know that some kids would end up dead. I didn't want be able to predict which kids will be in jail for murder before their high school graduation. The distant voices of the old guard echoed in my ears with foreboding that I disregarded. They were

creatures of a failed system, and as much as my Teach for America advisors encouraged the corps to show respect and humility for the hidden ways that preceded us, I couldn't stand to let them dampen my spirit.

In this environment, everyone was scared. The principal seemed to be constantly reacting in fear that an evaluation would go awry, while the social worker and counselor appeared to be afraid to be caught doing something wrong. Everyone was terrified. We were all nervous about angry parents, forgetting something, or looking like we didn't know what we were doing. The fifth grade teacher told me that I would get sued if I moved wrong. The principal turned down a community offer to build a playground on the yard because of the liability. There were so many kinds of sporadic accountability processes that I was sure that anyone who looked good on paper wasn't spending much time perfecting their work with the kids. There were not enough hours in the day to keep current on the barrage of paperwork and still write academically challenging plans. Everyone, even Ms. Hemphill, chose what to prioritize and what to ignore. I was never up-to-date on my portfolios, and I never had time to submit and re-submit forms to the office.

CYA, they told me. Cover your ass.

I was notorious for making short-sighted comments. One day in the office I declared, "I would rather be actually doing something than simply be able to falsely prove that I was." The ladies on the administration had given their lives to this. They knew, better than anyone, that no matter what you set out to do, you have to keep up with the paperwork. You won't last long enough to get anything done, they told me, if you don't pave a paper trail on everything. We backdated. We made half-hearted attempts, just for the record. We gave up on some kids. That was something I never

wanted to do. Sometimes I would look up from the madness and see that I had missed weeks of individual time with the quieter children.

True to Dr. Olson's legacy, I knew that no one was evil. Everyone here cared about the kids. No one did it for the paycheck (it wouldn't be worth it), everyone came to leave their mark on the future. Even the most jaded people were in it for the most virtuous cause. We were all in it for the kids. Everyone cared in their own way, for better or worse.

A seventh-grader from my third period class was one of the kids that another teacher was referring to when she said, "you'll see their names in the newspaper, but only in the crime logs or the obituaries." I cringed. He made it very difficult to teach, this child, and other kids missed out on their education while he was in the room. He left in February, and I don't know where he went. When his withdrawal form came upstairs to the middle school, two of the teachers shared a high-five. I saw that moment in slow motion; it seemed like he had died right then, with that careless gesture. They just wanted their classrooms to run, but it seemed cold to celebrate his departure. I hoped he went somewhere that would redirect his poor choices, but I knew better. He wasn't headed for salvation. He went somewhere where kids go when no one knows what to do with them anymore. He went to the place kids go when we give up on them.

Later that school year, someone with that child's features appeared on a Wanted For Murder billboard. I didn't know if it was him, but he looked like the same kid, just older and wiser in the worst way. It's been happening for centuries to young black males, abandonment; this time it felt like my fault.

The administration also showed disdain for me the day when I, in earnest, was sad that a young girl was leaving our school, even though she had been giving my class trouble since October.

“But this is what you wanted, right? We got her out of here.” The counselor was truly invested in making my classroom more effective, and would do anything it took.

“I wanted her to learn. I didn’t want her to leave. I wish we could have made that happen instead.” My colleague balked and screwed up her features in a gesture of disbelief. Maybe we couldn’t have. Of course, it wasn’t what she wanted to hear. If I had been a different person, a little more adaptable in my idealism, I would have been able to get along with everyone in that building. Ultimately, even though I couldn’t manage a classroom, I never did anything that didn’t come from an intense concern for the future and wellbeing of every kid in that school. I was never in it to be recognized as someone who followed the rules or looked good on paper. The principal liked to say that if you *actually* cared about the students, you would never find yourself on the wrong side of the system. But I knew that wasn’t true because I knew I actually cared. If that had been true, I would have been teacher of the year.

There was nothing else in my life but school. For nine months, I was Miss Gershman, the complete abandonment of a first name. I didn’t have hobbies. I didn’t have a pet. I didn’t go out. It was unhealthy. I tried everything to get in the game and upset my status as an enemy with my classes. I was working hard, but I wasn’t working smart. I spent “free time” at football games, talking on the phone to my family about the kids, writing in my journal about the kids, and, if I really wanted to reward myself, writing notes to them. That was my favorite thing to do.

“Dion, I noticed you are really smart. I figured you out. Now all I need from you is to start coming to school. See you Monday.”

“Danny, wow! You can really play basketball. Thank you for inviting me to your game. The other kids *follow* you; you are such a leader! Bring that to my classroom. See you tomorrow!”

“Jasmine, thank you for showing so much maturity in class. You are doing an excellent job. Keep up the good work.”

“Louis, get it together.”

“Reginald, I notice how well you do every day. Thank you for always being a wonderful student. It is such a pleasure to have you in class.”

“Walter, you are a leader. Your class needs you. New Orleans needs you. The world needs you. Please make good choices.”

Danny’s Mom laughed through the window of her car, with a bunch of little ones in the backseat. “You know, he read that note to his little brother. He hung it on the fridge.”

I wanted my influence to matter to them. I wanted them to know that I, someone from a foreign world, would never be the same after having met them. I never got disillusioned with the kids, I was only disillusioned with the adults. I didn’t blame the adults for their outlook, but I couldn’t stomach it. I wanted to grip my blissful stupidity for as long as I was trusted with futures. I never wanted to be afraid.

In a way I didn’t expect, I was responsible on paper. All of my bills were paid on time, my laundry got done, and I never went out. I didn’t go on shopping sprees or buy new clothes. I was in on Saturdays, and I missed out on a lot of fun. There were so many weekends when I didn’t hear what other corps members heard, guitars played on

porches or jukeboxes pelting Journey in the French Quarter. I was single-minded; I just wanted the program to work. I wanted all the misconduct to stop so I could teach them *one thing* to restore their faith. And mine.

Once, in a moment of weakness, crumpled in a heap on the classroom floor, I broke down and cried. School was over for the day, and there was a mess on the floor. Plastic fraction pieces were everywhere. I had specifically tried to avoid this, making every student promise before they took the set that they would not spill it, and would clean it up if they did. We repeated it aloud, three times. *I will not make a mess. I will not make a mess. I will not make a mess.* The mess, however, was imminent, and two students accidentally dumped a stack of trays after a decently executed lesson. They were bus riders; they had to leave. There were at least 200 pieces on the floor. One of the quiet students, small for his twelve years, came back to get something and I was caught off-guard. Maybe, I thought, if I turned my back to him in the unlit room, he wouldn't know I was crying.

“Hey, Miss Gershman. I left my booksack.” He didn't seem to notice.

“Okay. Have a good weekend,” my voice sounded whole and strong.

“You don't have to cry, Miss G,” he turned and whispered behind me as he walked out the door. “We don't mean to.”

“I'm not crying, James,” I half barked, defensively, letting a few tears down my cheek.

“I know you aren't,” he said, knowingly. He walked over to where I was bent down, picking up the tiny tiles, and put a new pack of tissues on my thigh. Wordlessly, he left the room, and never spoke of it again.

Chapter Seven: We're Listening

After school one day toward the middle of the year, when Rashida was in detention, her eyes darted in my direction with a nasty look and she remarked that she was only in there on account of “that fat thing.” I lambasted her then, finally, knowing that I had previously ignored a mountain of disrespect. I demanded a conference with her, immediately, in the privacy of my classroom. We marched in silence down the hallway, her feet shuffling and my heels slapping the tiled floor. She sat briskly at a desk and took a perfect posture, with her arms crossed and her eyes permanently rolled.

“Tell me one thing about you I don’t know. One thing. Tell me one thing that I couldn’t guess about you just from that nasty attitude. Tell me something I don’t know.” I was asking a real question, sure that she wouldn’t be able to surprise me.

“I don’t have to tell you shit.” She was annoyed. I knew, though, that she wanted to, because I was willing to listen, and she had burned bridges with practically everyone else. She was the only person in our skeleton gifted program, but her constant disrespect had kept her in hot water with all the teachers all year. I knew that she only abused me because she suspected that I cared. (She was right.)

“You certainly don’t have to tell me anything, nothing at all. I am going to, however, tell you something. And that is that you *can’t* think of anything about you that I don’t know, because you know I know you all too well. You’re just like I was, just like I am. You think you know everything and you have too much fight in you. The only person you think deserves your respect is you, and that’s exactly how I was.”

“AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!” Her sudden burst of rage and frustration caught me off guard, but didn’t shock me. I knew she had something to say. “Look, Miss G.” She

took a deep breath. “You are *nothing* like me. You had everything handed right to you, and never had to fight for anything in your life. You grew up rich and, I’m sorry to say it, *white*, and you don’t even know what it’s like to go home to a house that is always dirty. It doesn’t matter how much we try to clean it; it’s always dirty. You never had to deal with that. You don’t know me!” Her rage had turned her brown eyes to stone. She was livid.

“Don’t apologize for calling me white, Rashida. You have said so many things this year that you owe apologies for, but not that. I *am* white, and I don’t know about your life.” I wanted so badly to argue the point and insist that I worked so hard to identify myself when I was a kid, struggling in my own way. I wanted to tell her about the days when my family was falling apart and everything I knew was in limbo. I wanted to deny that I had it easy, because I didn’t want it to be true, but none of that was what she needed to hear. “Even though I am white, I still know some things about you. I can still teach you something. And if you always had to fight, like you claim, then you know how to fight to keep your mind in this mindless system.” She knew what I meant, I think. The meanness in her eyes softened and took a kind of interest in me. “You have to take every opportunity that you are offered. If you don’t, you will let everyone else decide *your* future. The future is all you have. Who do you want to be?”

“I don’t even care anymore. Who should I look up to? No one cares about me, no one is a role model for me. And you *know* I don’t respect you.” It was disheartening, but I understood her. It wasn’t the salvation moment I had been searching for, but we were getting somewhere.

“People in this building care more about you than you realize. Whatever you decide about your future, you are not going to continue to come in my class and disrespect me. I am not going to tolerate it. Now go back to detention.”

Under her breath, as she stormed out the door, she whispered her farewell. “Fuck you, Gersh.” I laughed to myself. What else could I do? I remembered saying similar things to my teachers and my parents, under my breath. She had heard me, and more importantly, she knew that I heard her. She knew that I cared. If she didn’t think I was listening, she wouldn’t have said so much. She wouldn’t have tried so desperately to make an impression. Months later, I called her on it.

“Rashida, why do you walk all the way up to the second floor to tell me that you don’t like me? It seems that, if you hated a person, you wouldn’t go out of your way to spend an extra fifteen minutes in their room after school just so they knew you hated them.” I was genuinely amused. “I’m betting you actually like me and just don’t even want to realize it.” She dropped her mouth open in disgust, and tried to deny it. Trapped, she just walked out the door. Throughout the next few weeks, I still saw her regularly, dropping in to remind me that she hated me.

I always suspected it was Edward throwing things at me in class. He would laugh so obnoxiously, so fully, and so hard at my calamities that I didn’t even care if it *was* him, I just wanted to destroy his amusement. I wanted to mute him. He was outrageous, folding himself up and losing himself in hiccupped laughs. He could hardly catch his breath. It made me laugh, too, resentfully but resigned, because no one could resist that

trap. He insisted, through a frustrating, mirthful grin, that he *didn't throw nothing, but it just be so funny when they do!*

Edward was light-skinned with his head shaved clean. His teeth gleamed white and he stayed mostly to himself. He would go through intense and cloudy moods, one moment thinking everything was blissfully hilarious and the next brooding and deep. He never got close with his classmates, probably because they had the same trouble that I did with him. I could never predict what his temperament would be from one moment to the next. He lived in the Florida Street projects in the Lower Ninth Ward and cultivated a phony hardness that never really rang true. He was proud of his street heritage, and would often reference some sort of violence or meanness that his friends in the projects would inflict if they saw the craziness of my classroom.

Once I taught him how to solve two-step equations. On a Thursday, I pulled up a chair, and *made* him learn it. $7k - 17 = 39$.

“We are trying to get the letter alone. This is your kind of math problem, Edward, because to solve it, you have to do exactly the opposite of what it says. Like, I tell you to sit down; you stand up. I tell you to be quiet; you scream. You will be good at this.” He laughed. Of course he laughed. “The opposite of adding is subtracting. The opposite of multiplying is dividing. You are going to do exactly the opposite. The variable, k, is a letter, but it stands for a number. It is lost in a crowd, but we have to get him back to his mate, just k, an equals sign and a number. And we have to work backwards.” I had his attention. He was looking.

“See, this k got multiplied by 7. Then 17 was subtracted from him, and he ended up at 39. So we work backwards to get him back to where he started. It says subtract, so what do I do?”

“Add,” he said, focused, without a grin.

“Exactly. Add. Add what?”

“Add 17.”

“Perfect.” I flipped over a card with -17 written on it, and it had $+17$ written on the back. I put it on the other side of the equation. “What does that give us?”

“Uhm...” In his hesitation, I grabbed his calculator and put it in front of him. He didn’t pick it up. His eyes drifted off into some cosmic space in his brain where numbers lived. An intense pause, then, “56.”

“Good.” I smirked. “And what next? It says multiply by seven. What do we do?”

“The opposite. Divide by seven. That gives you eight. Is it eight?”

“Your answer has to include *k equals*.”

“K equals eight.” He was sure. In determination, he pushed the cards away from his worksheet and didn’t speak again for thirty minutes. He learned how to do it, and was armed and ready to do his work.

“The last two people on earth I want to spend *my* Friday afternoon with is you two.” This I complained to Edward and Rashida, in March, when detentions were canceled and they were waiting for their rides. The principal had come waddling past in a black and white blouse, declaring coldly that she wasn’t dealing with it today. She had a hair appointment. Though I was just steps away from my car and a weekend of planning, grading and writing in my journal about my students, I couldn’t have walked away. I was stuck with them: the boy who threw things at me and the girl who theatrically despised me. Happy Friday to me. I wanted a cigarette.

“Thanks, Miss G.” Edward was laughing. Rashida wordlessly turned her head away from me, and then promptly back and glared in my direction with a sharpness in her eyes. Edward had tied an army bandana around his head and tried uselessly to explain its purpose. I didn’t get it. Rashida’s mom came soon after, and Edward and I were left. We were an odd couple on the front steps of an elementary school, me, fat and happy in a pink dress, and him, tall, skinny and tough.

“I have something for you.” I went to my car and took out a stack of flash cards with two step equations on them. “Check these out.” It was the ultimate in lame, a teacher giving math problems to a rugged street kid on a Friday afternoon. I half expected him to take them and throw them at me, considering his reputation in class.

I held up a card. It said $2p - 20 = 0$. (The zero always throws them off.) He stared intently at the card for a moment.

“Ten.” I looked at him emotionlessly. “Uh... p equals ten.”

Next card.

“I equals 12.”

Again.

“T equals negative one.”

Out of nowhere, I felt an impact on the back of my skull. Edward was in my direct line of sight, and no one else was there. Had he thrown something at me again?

“What the fuck!?” I couldn’t stop my language.

He choked on a sudden outburst of glee and descended into his perfect and all-encompassing laughter. In a second, he was staggering across the stoop, gasping for air and collapsing into his pleasure.

“How did you do that!?” I demanded, confused more than angry.

A plastic Mardi Gras cup had blown up in a wind gust and smacked the back of my tangled hair.

“You always be thinking it’s me hittin you with stuff, Gersh. But now we know,” he struggled to talk through his laughter. “Now we know it’s God.”

We shared in the absurdity of the situation, given my propensity to immediately blame him for anything that flew through the air. It was exactly the moment we needed. My call home to his mom that night was a rare one. I told her he had had a good day.

As the state tests came into view, in January and February, for the staff and students, the entire atmosphere of the building underwent a subtle but powerful shift. The kids weren’t any more interested in the curriculum but they got a collective anxiety that seemed to amp them up and put them on edge. The number of suspensions rose. Behaviors intensified. There was more crying in class and more unprovoked aggression. Walter had recovered from his gloominess, for the most part, but as the weather warmed he started to talk more grandly to his classmates and more frequently called them names. The stakes were higher, and you could sense that everyone was stressed. For fourth and eighth grade students, a failing score on the test meant being retained in their level. My eighth graders had been hearing all year from all their teachers that these tests were their opportunity to prove to the world that they weren’t what statistics dictated they would be. The tests were their one chance to show how we had saved them.

I doubled down. I stayed each afternoon and put on a LEAP study class for students who wanted to come. The content I taught changed depending on the kids who attended, which varied with the day. In these informal sessions, I was freed from the

regular unit plans I had built for the normal day, and had the autonomy to have fun and be interesting. I was quick to send students out of the classroom for the tiniest misbehaviors, since they didn't have to be there, and I managed to set up a single hour during those two months when I could teach with relative success. Students who had problems on that day's lesson might choose to stop by during the study class to ask for help. I would usually end up with fewer than ten or fifteen students, ones who either wanted desperately to have a chance to learn unimpeded by chaos, or those who didn't feel like going home. It was a mix of seventh and eighth graders, though some would bring their little sisters and brothers from the primary grades.

I kept a small corner of the whiteboard open each morning to jot down notes about what I would talk about afterschool, and some of the quieter kids would gently tell me not to worry about going back over difficult coursework in class. They'd tell me they would be there afterschool. I didn't directly mention the program to my principal or my colleagues, for fear that formalizing them could ruin the magic. A few weeks in, I had made significant inroads with kids, not just academically, which was precious, but with relationships. Edward was a regular face. Daily, without fail, Rashida would stop by on her way to the buses and say something mean, which I would ignore. I saw Walter there on occasion, mainly to ask one relatively advanced question and then promptly leave. It was a haven for the quietest students to come in and let their personalities peek through, personalities that were more vivid than I could have imagined from the ways they disappeared in the boisterous din of my classroom.

The impact of my afterschool study sessions started to slowly bleed into the regular school day. In the weeks leading up to the test, I had gained some faith. Not in my ability to lead a classroom, which remained sourly unchanged, but in my ability to

structure an interesting lesson. I realized that, although I wasn't saving anyone from anything, I could actually teach kids, and they could actually learn from me. Even in the bustle of those unruly classrooms, if I stopped getting pulled into the fray, kids wanted to hear me. They wanted to learn. We began to talk to each other, even over the screaming of the few students who never stopped. We started to have conversations.

On the Tuesday before the LEAP test, I got hit in the face with a book. It was a math textbook, 500 pages, with a thick spine and a hard cover. As I looked up from checking a student's work, which he had done correctly, I felt a hard, dull thud in my brain. I could feel the grey matter clunking against my skull, and my nose smashed against the back of my eyes. It was abrupt; it had no origin. The sweet faces of my students were uncharacteristically studious, no one amused or looking guilty. Everyone seemed to genuinely have no idea that my world had just been rocked.

"What the— !" I didn't cuss. A beat passed. "Okay. That's it." I wasn't actually calm, I was more offended, physically hurt and metaphorically contorted than I had ever been, but I sounded calm. I was in more pain than I could ever remember being, at that moment. I was bewildered. I had no idea who threw it. "I cannot tolerate this." I walked out of the room, and regained my orientation in the hall, in perfect silence. When I came back, it felt like something serious had happened. The mood was somber, though the kids had retreated into gossip amongst themselves. Some seemed to be puzzled about what had happened, others were unsurprised and went about their lives.

"I am not the man." It was a monotone comment that seamlessly left my mouth as I stared out at their faces. No one even seemed to hear it. I heard *myself* say it, though, and said it again. A little louder.

“I am not the man!” This time it turned a few heads. I said it again, and again, until every kid in the class was either laughing or listening. It was the moment I had been waiting for, when I could say what I was *really* thinking.

“I am not the man! Oh no, baby. You will meet the man one day.” I was Thurgood Marshall; I felt historic and poignant. “When you meet the man,” I said, pacing across room, my sudden soapbox, “you will need all of your battle. That’s right, you will need all the battle you have in you. He will try to slow you down, shut you off, and try to kill every part of you, and when you have no energy left, he will destroy you. You think, sitting in my classroom, that I am the authority you have to fight. But I am not the man! I am the last stop on a sad train to being defeated, and I have everything you need to win that war. I’m trying to give it to you, but you fight me.” I had their attention now. “We are in this together.”

“Miss Gershman, if you ain’t the man, then who is the man? You sitting here workin for the man, maybe you just don’t *know* you the man.” Ricky made a valid point, except I couldn’t see it. I never felt I was working for the man. I had spent years learning about oppressive authority and how to fight it, and I had come to stand here and be their rescue, not their tyrant. I would never be that voice in their lives, the ‘you-can’t-do-it.’

“The LEAP test is the man,” Walter said slowly, but with an inspiration like he, too, was a civil rights leader, addressing his people. He was serious. He understood.

“That’s right, Walter. The LEAP test is the man. So let’s talk about this. What are we trying to do in here?” I asked an honest question, and got the honest answers I was after.

“We are here to learn!” Jaylynn jumped up on her chair in the middle of the room. Towering above the confusion, she cried, “we are not here to act a fool!” The

students snickered. She descended, and excitedly skipped to the front of the room. Insisting that we institute a policy that only one student talk at a time, she begged me to cancel the lesson and let us just talk. “That’s all we want to do is talk. We know things, but no one just lets us talk!”

I obliged, of course. They talked, and I listened; I was consumed by the topic. Why aren’t we like the students in rich schools? What is different between this school and the schools that propel kids to college? What is a *white* school? What was happening on that same day in the private schools just miles away, populated with kids who seemed so alien to my students?

“We can be quiet in church,” Ricky said, curiously. “Why can’t we just listen when the teacher is talking? I can’t understand anything because it’s so loud! I know the Bible; why don’t I know math?”

“It’s our class. We just got to decide to work together. Eventually Darnisha will shut up and quit laughing.” Darnisha blushed and giggled at Walter’s blunt comment, and suddenly Kimberly turned the heat up on Darrell.

“Who the hell you think you are, coming in late and then making all kinds of noise? We got thirty people in here, and you act like you the only one!”

“You are an idiot, Darrell.” The class was calling him out. “You throw paper balls and cut up like you don’t know you in a classroom. If you don’t know math, there is only one way to learn it, and throwing things ain’t gonna do it.”

“I... I...” He stammered. “Man, it ain’t only me!”

“You know the country thinks we dumb. You’re the only one in here who is dumb. It’s like you want us all to be dumb. Some of us are trying to learn.” Jayden said.

“Shut up, Jayden!” Walter yelled at his best friend, out of turn. “You just as dumb as he is, and you’re the one making all the noise. Don’t act like it ain’t on you, it’s on all of us.”

“This sure is a school for black children.” Rashida piped in, only once. “Miss G, I don’t know why you come back here every day. We ain’t gon learn nothing.”

The next day, I was surprised to see fourth period entering the room in a perfect, silent line. Not one of them spoke for the entire period, not even to answer a question. The only exception was one careful comment by Walter as I walked by his desk.

“We listenin, Ms. G. You ready to teach?”

It wasn’t the revolution I had hoped it would be, and it wouldn’t last through the semester, but I knew then that it was possible to reach these kids with the right message. Somewhere out there, there was a mentor who could bring out their potential.

On the last day of school, the sun was shining in New Orleans. The air felt crisp in the earliest days of summer, and I was filled with a palpable sense of relief and exhaustion, even as the bright day began. I had survived it, worse for wear but generally intact. I said my farewells to the graduating class, many of whom had passed the tests and more still who were going on to high school because they had already failed and repeated the eighth grade and had received a waiver from the district. Some were staying behind. I gave Walter a book from my days with Dr. Olson, knowing it was beyond his reading level but feeling it was critical to give him a sense of my perspective to bolster his own. The inscription read “make good choices” and I sincerely hoped he would. With a little bit of luck, I believed that there was nothing that would stop his brilliance from shining

through. He had confided in me weeks earlier that he wanted to go to a school with a bad football team so he could be a star, and I told him to aim high. I told him he'd be a star wherever he went, and that his only chance to get catapulted into collegiate football was to compete with the best players and rise to the highest standards. By the last day of school, though he had passed the state tests, he didn't know clearly where he was going to high school, as those were the days when enrollment wasn't centralized. He and his brother would have a tough journey ahead, going individually to schools to discern which had openings and fighting to get on their rosters. They'd have to approach each school individually.

Rashida knew exactly where she was going to high school. She had been accepted to Xavier College Prep, a private school with a historically black student body and a great reputation for sending their kids to college. She had been excited when she was accepted, after passing the state tests with mastery, running around from teacher to teacher waving her acceptance letter.

"I'm out of here! I'm going places! Look, Ms. Gersh! I'm going to college!" On the last day of school, she sat perched on the stairwell and looked out disdainfully at her classmates playing on the yard. I was proud to have made some progress with her finally, though I could never accurately say we were close.

Edward wasn't there on the last day. He hadn't passed the tests. After the results came back, his attendance was sporadic, and his mother said he was feeling sick. I had no idea where he would go in the fall, but I knew he wouldn't come back to Dejoie. He'd already had his two years in eighth grade. I missed him.

As the final day ended, and the students paraded off the yard and on to their future, I stared out my big windows and watched with a complex storm of emotion. I

didn't know what the next year held in store for me, though I knew that the principal was planning to make changes. I knew that I wouldn't start the next year with the same enthusiasm with which I had started the previous one, nor the same hopes or dreams. My knees were weak with sadness for the missed opportunities and failed connections that I was finally closing the door on, but I held onto an optimism that kept me upright. Whatever was behind me, another year of opportunity stood ahead, after a critical summer of healing, and I looked forward to what my eighth graders could accomplish, if only they tried.

If only they tried. It was a testament to my own stubborn ignorance that I believed that the only thing standing in the way of my eighth graders' success was their own willingness to try. For every effort these children made, an obstacle waited, whose scope I couldn't even imagine. Their journeys were just beginning.

Chapter Eight: Make Good Choices

Several years later, I gave the cashier at the grocery store checkout a second, closer look. Her cheeks were more plump, her eyes possessed a sad wisdom, but she was the same girl. It was Rashida. She wore a black polo with the store logo in bright red and a headband to match over the skinny braids she had fastened behind her head. As the recognition dawned on me, it occurred to her who I was as well. She couldn't help her mouth forming a vivid smile, though I could see her trying. Her eyes burned with emotion; a heavy sense of nostalgia obscured the slightest shame. She hadn't thought of me in as long as I hadn't thought of her, and neither of us had the faintest idea that we'd find ourselves a few feet apart from each other, forced to confront a shared past that we'd each been trying to put behind us. It wasn't until we sat down and talked at the outside tables in the summer heat that I would understand her pain.

She perched on the edge of the chair and glowered at her fingers as she toyed with the grates on the surface of the table, her mind heavy and her voice low. She was older, and I could tell that the years had drained her energy and her rage. I knew from experience how her anger must have been like a wall, standing between her and what she thought she wanted. She started by telling me about the people we knew in common, whom she'd seen more recently than I had. She told me about Ricky, working in the kitchen at a local four-star restaurant, with three beautiful daughters and a pleasant wife he had met in high school. She mentioned a few of the kids who had gone on to college, though she had lost touch with many of them. Some other kids, she said, were working at various service industry jobs, still living at home with their moms. Some had babies. Rashida was reluctant to share anything about herself, sighing and

smiling as I tried in vain to steer the conversation to her own high school years and beyond. Finally, desperate to change the subject, she perked up.

“Have you heard what happened with your boy?”

“What do you mean, my boy?” I asked.

“Old Walter sure been in the papers these days, I’m surprised you haven’t heard.” She stared down at the metal grates of the patio tables, smiling in a cruel, hesitant way. I stared at her, wide-eyed. My mind raced. *In the papers?* I thought. *Is he running for office?*

“Apparently,” she said, slowly, drawing out my suspense, “he been busy with them other boys, shootin em up. He shot my cousin’s friend.” My chest tightened and my heart froze. “They caught him just a few weeks ago, running away from the cops.” When my expression stiffened and I couldn’t come up with anything to say, she laughed.

“Betcha weren’t expecting to hear that. You thought that boy couldn’t do no wrong. But you know that be happenin all the time. The smartest ones get the most stuck.”

I stared at her, trying to reconcile this new information with the world as I understood it and not being able to do so. My stunned face, mouth agape, seemed to encourage her.

“Me, I got kicked out of high school for having too much sex with the wrong people. I ain’t even wanna tell you about that. We black kids, Miss. You never gonna know us.”

I thought back to her comment that she had made years before, the one where she’d admitted finally that I had gotten to know her well. I longed for those days again when they were just kids, and their mistakes were just funny, the artifact of childhood.

Rashida left me there in that stance, saying something about getting back to work and me releasing her with a small and unfeeling farewell, and I stared down at my new bananas with the feeling of my heart breaking in my torso. I found my phone and searched his name in the browser. Sure enough, I was confronted with his familiar face looking back at me from an unflattering mugshot, in an orange jumpsuit with the metal and cement of the jail in the background. The news story was sparse in detail, but covered the basics. A sixteen-year-old boy had been standing at his bus stop at 7:00am when a black Mercedes-Benz rolled up. Shots were fired and the boy died on his way to the hospital. DNA had been found in the car matching Walter's, and he was apprehended and booked for the crime. Sources said that he had bragged about the killing in the days that followed. I read voraciously, looking for some hole in the story that would keep it from being true. I scanned the comments, half expecting to read something from Walter's brother, or his mom, anyone to say this was wrong and couldn't be. Instead I saw the same vaguely racist, hateful commentary that this kind of story always inspired.

“Hope he'll be waiting for the prison bus.”

“It's getting harder to argue with Bill O'Reilly after stories like this.”

“How sad, a kid waiting for the bus. What a low-life.”

He wasn't a low-life. He was my Walter. And now, he was in the prison system.

On occasion, I run into Walter's brother. He's doing well for himself. His mom is losing her mind, he says, with Walter in jail. One day he'll get out. None of it's true, he insists. Someone has to be lying on Walter. It can't be true. (I still feel the same way.)

The graduations at Vivid Accelerated High School are always some of the brightest afternoons of the year. My current role on the network support team for Vivid Schools affords me the chance to regularly attend. The school serves children 16-21 who have fallen behind in their credits and structures the non-traditional program to expedite their path to a real high school degree, sending them to higher education and even offering dual-enrollment with a local community college. I've never been to a graduation ceremony that didn't have me in tears. The stories of the Accelerated High School are harrowing. Some of the graduates are students who were shot and missed years of school because of unfathomable recoveries, barely able to speak and relearning how to walk. Some had unexpected pregnancies that catapulted them out of their sophomore classes or their senior prom and into the world of 40-hour work weeks and expensive childcare. But each of them comes to their commencement with a steel resolve to finish school, some the first in their families to do so. Graduation is always a loud affair. In the Fall of 2015, fifty graduates walked the stage of the Tulane Lavin-Bernick center, to the uproar of shouting friends and families. One of them, I noticed, was Edward. His head was still shaved bald, and his chin still had the same protrusion and his eyes still laughed with mischief everywhere he looked. It had been a long seven years for Edward, I could tell, and when I cornered him in the hallway, he told me that he credited everything to his aunt. She had got him into a counseling program after he dropped out of his high school, and steered him clear of the violence he witnessed in the projects in the ninth ward, where he was born and raised.

“Ah, Ms. Gershman,” he said, perpetually joking, “I woulda stayed crazy if it weren't for her.” He had found a community voice that spoke loudly and clearly to him. She saved him, the same way I had always fantasized about saving him, though she

hadn't been to any ivy league schools. His aunt, a New Orleans native and a veteran of the city, had the voice to see him through. He was beaming with pride. Next up, he told me, was community college and from there, who knew. He had never felt more capable. At twenty-one years old, he had finally done what Walter and Rashida had never had the chance to do: live a fulfilling childhood and make it into adulthood unscathed.

Chapter Nine: Prove It

These days the charter schools are different from what I saw then. When I'm in classrooms, I see a critical mass of focused children, often actively engaged in the teacher's lesson, working in groups and on their own. My network takes on the city's lowest-performing schools and transforms them, all grades at a time, into functional, structured centers for academics and educational culture. The hallways are lively with posters and bulletin boards that brightly celebrate student achievement and the pursuit of learning. The faculty does morning meetings at sunrise each day to discuss the priorities for the day and center themselves on the school's mission. There are teams of behavioral interventionists in each school that support classroom management. The network support team manages the administrative details that keep traditional school leaders from focusing on coaching and culture-building, so our principals are empowered to be superlative forces in their schools. From an enrollment perspective, I carefully watch as students transfer in and out, and have infrequent but powerful opportunities to observe children in the classrooms and see how much has changed.

One of those opportunities arose in the 2014-15 school year, when I had the chance to spend time with two lovely girls from our top-performing school in the heart of the Irish Channel. These young ladies taught me a great deal about how classes have changed.

Jacie and Aliyah can't think of any particular reason they've been friends since kindergarten, but it's pretty clear. They have a lot in common. Both of them have stood

in the neutral grounds of New Orleans' avenues during Mardi Gras parades and caught beads from passing floats. They each spend about twelve hours on weekdays in an all-black uniform with all-black shoes. They share a precise and efficient schedule with the same teachers in the same school. They both love math. Of course, they are different too, and Aliyah's sharp gaze is all her own. Jacie's voice is flat and her eyes are kind.

Each of the girls stands about sixty inches tall, though Jacie is a little taller. She smiles widely and shyly with her lips closed, her eyes calm, her face round. She wears black glasses with thick lenses that rest neatly on her plump, light brown cheeks. Her hair is carefully weaved into long braids that drape down her back in perfect, tight coils. She slouches in her chair. Aliyah's posture is deliberate and proud as she lifts her chin to laugh. Her toothy grin is full of self-assurance and her short but boisterous hair is pulled back loosely from her face. It shoots out in spirals like a messy halo. They both wear gold earrings that match the gold Destiny Academy logo on their shirts. Jacie's are post earrings, small with little round balls. Aliyah's are bigger: she wears hoops that extend down her neck and flash with color.

When I meet them, the girls are eager to tell me about their day. They've been circulating through a heavily regulated agenda since before 7:00am, but their energy is still high, eight hours later. And it's not over yet. There is still plenty to do before they make it to bed. Aliyah and Jacie live directly next door to each other, and they attend the same afterschool program, so for the rest of their day they will be as inseparable as they have been in class. At 3:00, they are sitting in a large computer lab on the third floor, working on their homework. The space is the size of two regular classrooms, with more than 50 computers for student use and just as many kids hard at work. The walls are made of concrete blocks painted in aged white, but the ceilings are high and the room

has an open feeling with big windows and bright, fluorescent light. They look up and see me, then immediately stand up and grab their folders, ready to move. They're used to making quick transitions. I can feel their anxiety when it comes time to go. They're used to being rushed.

I am one among dozens of adults that the girls will see in a school day. Many of those adults are the very people that New Orleans needs, the exact veteran and community voices that will draw out the best in these kids. This is Destiny Academy, where each classroom has two teachers and usually an additional support person to keep everything running smoothly. I am a stranger from the district office and I'm trying to learn what it's like to be a kid in a New Orleans charter school, where some of the hardest work in America takes place. I'm here to observe the kids and learn something about how the real experience of charter schools has changed since I taught, eight years prior. Aliyah and Jacie can show me, as I shadow them throughout their long day. By the time they've reached this homework jam session at 3:00, I've already seen them pore over work in all the core subjects as well as in business class and writing. Everything they learn is tied to state standards, the sets of expectations that are measured on standardized tests. The classes are designed by a large team of people ranging from school-level faculty to back office curriculum experts with an emphasis on mastering objectives; there isn't a moment to spare.

To think of a student attacking a teacher, throwing her into a bookcase, or even turning on loud music on one of the computers is ludicrous. The Dions and Louiss of yesterday are under control, as everything is under control in this world. Here, the Walters and the Rashidas are class helpers, with extra hard work to keep them busy and keep their minds occupied. A paraeducator, likely an African-American woman from the

New Orleans community, is in the classrooms waiting for the chance to approach the mastery students and challenge them with higher ordered thinking and more ambitious questions. Walter would have been pushed here and when he got one answer right, another, tougher problem would have been waiting for him. Rashida would rule the Robotics team and win state championships and compete in national tournaments. At Destiny Academy, Edward would see the counselor when his manic-depression started to become a distraction for the class. There are community resources in this world.

While the girls work on homework of three-digit multiplication and defining terms like *supply*, *demand* and *barter*, I do some reconnaissance. I learn that each girl is currently going with a boy, and for fourth graders, that means they've made a declaration to each other and are, for the moment, sticking to it. I learn that Jacie has a sister and three cousins who live in her house, which is right around the corner from the school. Aliyah lives next door with her mom and her brother. The school is in a neighborhood in the tenth ward, a few blocks from the river, on the edge of the projects. They are just a block away from the local Walmart, where there is constant traffic and bustle. They are too close to the school to take a bus, so the girls walk home together. In the fall when the sun sets early, I imagine them walking in the darkness. In my decade of living in New Orleans, I've never walked that route at night.

Aliyah nestles close to me, looking at my notebook and brushing against my leg while Jacie keeps her distance, a few chairs away. Aliyah is multitasking, writing her answers rapidly on the page while she darts back and forth on my cell phone, showing me her favorite music and shows. Both girls love movies that come from generations past, like the musical Grease from 1978 and Clueless from 1995. They were both born in spring of 2005. They were both born in New Orleans. They were infants when Katrina

hit in August of that year. They were eight years old when the murder Walter is accused of took place. They've grown up in the shadows of tragedy and rebirth. They are part of a generation of learners that represent the hope for a new school system, one that completely reinvents the way children are expected to be taught. These girls and their classmates hold the future of educational equality. I come from a generation of teachers who operate with the intensity of this charge, and Jacie and Aliyah can feel the pressure. They feel it when they look at the walls, which are covered with reminders about the objectives they must master. They feel it when the teachers hurry them through the hallways, back to class, back to learning.

Though they have four more years before they graduate Destiny in the eighth grade, the girls have already set their sights on a particular high school. They know, even though they are young, how important their choice of high school will be to their chances of getting in to a good college, which in turn is critical to helping them realize their potential. Jacie wants to be a teacher, maybe math since that's her favorite subject. Aliyah wants to be an entrepreneur and open her own salon. They have a trained counselor on staff, a New Orleans native, who works tirelessly throughout the year to carve out a space in their minds for thinking about bright futures, despite the obstacles they face. They've heard of almost every high school in the city, and they have Destiny's help when it comes time to apply. They agree that Tulane University's campus is beautiful, and that it would be nice to go there, but first they'll go to Warren Easton, a charter high school on Canal Street with an excellent marching band and a great reputation for academics and culture. Before any of that, of course, they have to finish the fourth grade, and to do that they have to finish their homework, they remind me. I let them work.

Aliyah is ahead of Jacie on the math handout. Jacie copies some of the answers from Aliyah's paper. I ask her why. She doesn't know, she says, and starts to do the problems on her own, with some difficulty. Their homework is carefully typed and printed with the day's date and clear instructions. Each of their classes has assignments like this daily, in a standard format, and there are consequences for those who don't get them done. Anyone who is missing homework in the morning will have detention after school. When Jacie realizes that she's somehow neglected to pick up a copy of her science homework, her eyes widen. She scurries off to her science classroom to pick up an extra copy, and Aliyah laughs.

“She doesn't want to get the late shift.”

There are myriad school-wide systems in this world. The physical and personnel infrastructures are reinforced by every morning meeting, staff newsletter, and district professional development that is offered. Every effort is a coordinated one, and each teacher is supported by remarkable resources designed to keep the school functioning as a team. New teachers, coming to the district with the exact same training as Ms. Hemphill, Mr. Jordan and I, have not just their program director and an occasional word from their principal to guide them, but two instructional coaches, several sanctioned, organized observations by district and school-level support, and usually a co-teacher whose example they can follow each day. When children act out in classrooms, Destiny Academy has dedicated behavior support people to step in and remove them to specifically designed spaces for behavior recovery that feature sensory and emotional redirection and often a licensed therapist to get at the root of the problem. Destiny Academy is a crew, and no student or teacher is permitted to flounder.

This morning at Destiny Academy, the cloudless day started early, while the sun was still finding its way up. The principal and many of the teachers meet the kids as they enter the building. “Are you ready for today,” he asks brightly. “I’m excited.” The staff collects the students’ backpacks, which aren’t allowed inside for security purposes, and checks their socks. Along with the standard black polo with the school logo on it and standard black pants and shoes, the kids are required to wear all-white or all-black socks. A boy from the sixth grade, “tried to be stylish today,” so he’s on a bench outside changing from navy blue socks to borrowed white ones. The school building is decades-old moss-stained brick, though the walls are covered with vibrant paint and inspirational messages. Everywhere there are smiling staff members and reminders about the importance of education. “Every day is a new beginning.” The hallways smell like fresh air and cleaning supplies.

By 7:02, the fourth grade cohort files in to Ms. Morgen’s room silently in an organized line. Aliyah and Jacie go straight to their seats in the middle of the room. They know exactly what to do. All they carry are their black folders, which contain last night’s homework, a grade-leveled book they read throughout the day, and a portfolio of some of their best work. They know to get started right away on the work that is projected on the screen by a fancy smart board, one that has all its pieces and consistently works, asking for six sentences reusing vocabulary words from the day before. As in all their classes, there are two teachers in the room. One is checking homework meticulously, one student at a time, while the other is walking around saying hello and making notes on his computer, branded with the charter network’s logo. There is branding everywhere, on the homework, on the student’s shirts, on the walls—it is

important for charter schools to establish a brand identity. Destiny Academy is marketed as a STEM school with a science, technology, engineering and math focus. Vivid schools are funded by public money, but have the autonomy to act as an independent company with their own governing board.

Jacie's feet are in black flats as she rests them forward in her seat. Her shoulders are relaxed against the back of the chair and she rests her hands on the desk. The air in the room is crisp, almost a little cold, just chilly enough to keep everyone awake. Each minute of her day is accounted for. A clock timer on the screen counts down the seconds as the class finishes their warm-up, called "Charge-Ups", and starts on a new idea. Today, in math class, she is learning how to write equations for word problems. The teachers explain the concept with white boards and loud voices, and the students follow along in call and response. The pace is quick, and each of the kids has their papers checked and their answers verified. It's not easy to hide in the classroom, with only 17 other students and two teachers. Jacie's hand shoots up in the air during independent practice. She's not sure she understands. There are three other hands raised. The teacher tasks Aliyah with helping Jacie. Of course that works out great for the girls, who work well together all the time. They stay on task, talking exclusively about the assignment. The whole class is working on a tight timeline with a clear objective: to learn the skill and answer questions on a daily assessment, the "Prove-it." Each of Jacie's five classes will end with a Prove-it, challenging her not only to learn an entirely new concept in each class but to prove to herself and her classmates that she has become proficient in the skill. Jacie was on a list of those whose Prove-it was 100% correct from yesterday. The class celebrates with a loud and unison "GOOD JOB, JACIE!" There are 12 students on the list.

There is a healthy sense of competition in the classrooms of Destiny Academy. Jacie's class is encouraged to beat the scores of another homeroom in which all of the students mastered the skill for that day. Jacie is the first row, and her row is encouraged to be the quietest, most on-task. The students' scores are broadcast from day to day, so the kids are also challenged to beat themselves, to keep fighting and to always "prove it."

These kids are in a district that consistently scores lower on standardized tests than the state average, and some of the highest performing districts in Louisiana show data twice as high. Destiny falls under the Recovery School District, which was created after the hurricane to address the failing rates of student mastery in schools in New Orleans and Baton Rouge. In 2010, the school that occupied the building was state run and failing on all cylinders. It was the lowest-performing school in the district on math and reading scores, earning a School Performance Score (SPS) of an F, scoring 48 out of a possible 150. Since then, since it has been chartered by a non-profit organization with its own rules and regulations, the state-assigned SPS has raised to just short of a B. Teachers use standardized tests to write their curriculum, working backward from what the kids will be expected to know, and each day is a critical chance to teach new and important skills. There is no downtime for Destiny Academy. Every minute counts. When the kids are challenged to prove it, they are charged with showing the city, the state, and the country that all kids can learn. Between their at-risk neighborhood, their parents' low-income status, and their minority background, Jacie and Aliyah are challenged by a set of statistics that overwhelmingly count them out.

Jacie fidgets in her chair. Her hand is raised again, for the third time in math class alone. She needs attention. She needs a job to do. The teacher makes her way over toward Jacie and tells her, "Yes, you can help us out in just a minute." Jacie turns back

to her work. It's a page of word problems with multiple choice answers. She's obviously been trained; she's annotated the problems by circling words, underlining phrases and crossing some of the answers out. I count ten problems, five of which Jacie has answered correctly, two she has answered incorrectly, and three that are ignored. Her neighbors are all on task, working under threat of point deductions and silent lunch, which is assigned for offenses like having to use the bathroom and getting up out of their seats without permission. Jacie takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes. She lays her head on the desk. It's almost time to go to English.

A decade prior, when my bustling classroom was full of vitality and chaos, there were no standardized point deductions. There were no school-wide behavior systems that clarify and solidified expectations from class to class, hallways and lunch. These classrooms are a picture of control, where students are treated to a militaristic regime of rules and regulations. Learning outcomes are paramount and the place for individual personality is in dance class after school, or, plainly, at home. Uniformity and compliance are celebrated. We're doing better by many measures, but have we become *the man*?

In all of her classes, all of the time, Jacie has a clear set of instructions. Teachers allot between 4-6 minutes for each activity, constantly jumping from one item to the next. If she finishes early, which she does on her English quiz, she gets out her book, The Last of the Really Great Whangdoodles, a novel about an imaginary creature that lives in a whimsical fantasy land. She likes it and looks forward to reading it. She has almost finished the book. When Jacie has a question or wants to answer one, she emphatically raises her hand, her fingers wiggling and swatting the air with anticipation. Aliyah is less

enthusiastic. When Jacie gets bored, she wraps up her long braids on her wrist and twists them into themselves.

Split into micro-assignments, the class period passes quickly and suddenly it's lunch. The students eat in their classrooms while they continue to work. Today, the lunch trays got stuck in the elevator, so the students go straight to reading class. About an hour behind schedule, lunch comes in paper bags from the kitchen. Finally, the girls are allowed to eat their warm pizza and kidney beans. With lunch comes a break from work, but it's only for fifteen minutes, during which they are required to keep any conversations to a quiet minimum.

During lunch, my attention starts to wander. I find myself wondering if I've missed calls or emails while I've been at Destiny with the girls. Usually, I work for many hours in front of a computer, but I am accustomed to an occasional social conversation or a brief distraction to break up the passing hours. I jump around on projects. Jacie and Aliyah have almost no distractions in their day. They are allowed few social moments, stolen between tightly timed activities in quiet classrooms. Students sit facing straight ahead, encouraged to be in a scholarly stance with their hands folded on the desk and their eyes tracking the speaker in the room. They walk in silent lines, squaring with the bodies in front of them and avoiding any gaps. They are trained by their teachers to stay on task for hour after hour without breaks. That's what it takes, they'll tell you. That's what it takes to really prove it.

In their afterschool program, Jacie and Aliyah are glad to have a break from the rigid structure of the day. They are still hard at work on their homework at 4:20 when they

get ready to leave for their next item, another afterschool program put on by their church. They'll go home from there, where they are eager to change out of their school uniforms. Then, they'll play with each other and the neighbor kids for an hour or two before returning home to dinner and a bath. After dinner, Jacie will do the last of her homework before going to bed. For Aliyah, whose mom works until 11:00 pm, she knows she'll have to wait for dinner or fix it herself, and expects to have some energy left to do her homework in the middle of the night. Tomorrow, they'll be back in class at 7:00, ready to prove it all over again.

Chapter Ten: Community Voices

Destiny Academy in 2016 is, in many ways, worlds away from Constant C. Dejoie Elementary circa 2007. While the staff at Dejoie was peopled largely by audacious newcomers with no idea what they were up against, the company that runs Destiny was founded by a New Orleans native with decades of public school education under his belt. Dejoie was a district school, constantly trying to keep up with all the new ideas and smart concepts that the state wanted to see in action in the schools, with teachers being the last to know about constant changes. Destiny is bottom-up, and enterprising teachers have the immediate and real opportunity to shape the policies that their school will adopt. Autonomy is sanctioned at Destiny where alienation and individualism dominated Dejoie. Destiny's program has an interim setting built in, where students are never removed or expelled, only moved to a higher-support environment where they can unpack and disarm their negativity. Dejoie was quick to remove students from the school when possible so they could take back control. A first year teacher at Destiny would boast a ton of extra development and supports that didn't exist in the early days of Dejoie Elementary, and Destiny is a place for kids to learn and grow, where Dejoie often seemed like a holding cell. At Destiny, there are some community voices represented by a more diverse teaching staff, whereas Dejoie missed a lot of opportunities to reach children with voices they could relate to.

I am different too. At Dejoie, I was unsure and frenetic. Circumstances regularly careened out of my control. Today, I keep my cool in crisis situations, which are far fewer than they were then. I'm taking my missteps seriously rather than personally. I've had nearly a decade of professional growth to guide me as I work in the district office for

Vivid Schools. As a teacher I flared, often without taking the time to think. Now I'm working on my mental health. Medications regulate my extremes and keep me from crossing into rage and aggression when my emotions escalate. I do yoga now. I know how to relax. Like the schools in New Orleans, I have evolved in the last nine years.

Despite the incredible growth we've seen as a public school district in Orleans Parish, Louisiana, there are some important problems with where we are now. I'm softer now and the fight in me has cooled. I used to have the same energy that fueled Rashida, and now we both burn less brightly. The vitality in the eyes of students was out of control in 2007 in my classroom, but now students are ushered from class to class without a moment to collect their thoughts. Students are pushed harder than ever to challenge themselves, but there is little time for critical conversations that could help children to develop their personalities. We are a hawkish regime these days, where students walk in silent formations in the hallway, with their fingers held up to their mouths, while their posture in class is scrutinized and their hands are expected to be crossed on top of their desks. Character is built on hard work and respect for authority in the classrooms of Destiny, but its students don't have much time to play.

That trend is changing, and I see plainly that the staff of Vivid is fully aware of the problem. We've removed the tape lines in the hallways, taken the posters down that dictate a scholarly stance, and are starting to loosen up on things like the color of socks kids wear. We're working on pulling away from language like "prove it" since we don't want to indoctrinate children to believe that they have to prove anything to be full citizens of their country. We don't want to treat them like criminals. We're focusing our efforts on bringing in local talent and community partnerships to our schools, whether that's working with local groups like EdNavigator and Liberty's Kitchen to support

parents learning more about the way we are preparing their children for life or being more present in their lives after they graduate from Vivid Schools. We're starting to acknowledge our politics, and see that this isn't just a matter of getting students to look up from their distractions and engage with their learning, but in creating a system that is less privileged for white, middle class families and more fair for Jacie and Aliyah. We're building the movement to include a global look at what obstacles our children face and preparing them to reach their potential by widening the field.

For my part, I'm working on integrating the schools. When I stopped teaching, I spent a few years serving tables and pondering my future. In 2011, I rejoined the education reform movement, working with special projects in the back office at Vivid Schools. I've since gained five years of experience navigating parents through the changing system and advocating for families. As Director of Enrollment Strategy, my job is to do more than simply advertise our programs on the radio, but to consider where our schools will be in two, five, ten years. Will we still have schools designed for students who are academically behind? My work is to cultivate a diversity at our school sites that extends beyond defying the odds and works with students across socio-economic lines. My work is to convince higher-income families (white, Latino, Vietnamese, black, and otherwise) that the right they have to a free public education is real, where their vision is now clouded by cultural differences. This isn't work I can do alone. I need the school principals to devise inclusive methods of bringing out the personality in every one of their students. I need teachers to inspire mastery of academic material across the district, not just in gifted pockets.

Each winter, all the children of the city stand shoulder to shoulder on the streets of St. Charles Avenue and shout the very same thing to float-riders in the Mardi Gras

parades: “Throw me something, mister!” I see them, eyes alight as they reach for stuffed animals, toy spears, rubber balls and strings of beads, not noticing the differences between them. There, on the parade routes, these children are all New Orleanians: musical, cultured, hot-sauce tolerant kids with a special understanding of fun and also loss, and they aren’t separated by tuition dollars or opportunity. My vision for my schools is to replicate this joy in the classroom, a place where kids can be themselves but also the best versions of themselves, and make those classrooms represent an excellent education for every child.

For all we lost when Walter became entangled in the drama of child murder, or when Rashida fell off her college path because she grew up too fast, there are a hundred children like Aliyah and Jacie who now believe that the world is at their fingertips. I know that no one is responsible for having saved these children, as they didn’t need to be saved. They needed to hear what Edward heard, his own voice echoed in the voices of mentors from his own community, helping guide him through the challenges of his own culture, a culture that’s been resilient and powerful in the face of centuries of adversity.

As our schools develop into the thriving centers of diversity that I know they can be, we need to integrate local voices into everything we do. Perhaps the idealism and tenacity of young privileged college grads can take us some of the way, but those experiences can’t capture the critical importance of Walter’s father, Rashida’s mother, or Edward’s aunt. The way forward is paved with organic innovations that stem from the community as well as from outsiders, working together. We still have a very long way to go.

As the buses pulled away from Dolores T. Aaron Academy on the first day of school in 2016, I couldn't stop thinking of the students who were starting out a new year. For many of them, charter schools are all they've ever known. Schools with foreign faces in positions of authority, with bright, shining messages of hope plastered all over the walls and in the smiling countenances of their teachers, who seem to believe that anything in the world is possible. Paired with the voices of their parents, their friends and families, this unyielding optimism has to give them a sense of hope, if nothing else, that we are working tirelessly to share our privilege and embrace them for who they are and who they want to become. Despite a long history of public education being used to whitewash and indoctrinate, I hope that our new students see their school as a product of the strength in their own community, combined with the idealism that says that no matter who they turn out to be, they are Americans and this is their country too. We'll continue to take that with us as we responsibly rebuild a school system that lost itself in one of the country's worst disasters, and remember that it takes more than idealism to build a foundation, but the work of an entire community.

Bibliography

Buras, Kristen L. *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance*. New York: Routledge, 2015. Print.

Diamond, Jared. "Race Without Color." *Discover* 15.11 (1994): 82. Academic Search Complete. Web. 20 Oct. 2016.

Du Bois, W. E. B., *The Souls of Black Folks*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1961. Print.

Foote, Donna. *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach for America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. Print.

Kozol, Jonathan. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. New York: Crown Pub., 1991. Print.

Olson, Joel. *The Abolition of White Democracy*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2004. Print.

Twain, Mark. *Pudd'nhead Wilson ; And, Those Extraordinary Twins*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1922. Print.

Vita

Brooke Wanamaker (formerly Gershman) lived in many different cities and states as a child, including North Dakota and California. She graduated from high school in Gig Harbor, Washington. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in Flagstaff, AZ at Northern Arizona University and moved to New Orleans to teach in 2007. She remained in education and currently works as the Director of Enrollment Strategy at Vivid Schools. She is married with two dogs, Maisie and Lando.