

Student Voices:

# What Makes a Great Teacher?



## **Collaborators Included:**

### **Participating Students:**

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Evin Cruz, University Neighborhood High School, Senior  
David Etienne, SUNY Morrisville, Freshman  
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Mohammed Hussain, Bronx High School of Science, Junior  
Jimmy Lee, Queens Vocational High School, Senior  
Percy D. Lujan, LaGuardia Community College, Freshman  
Margarita Martinez, Brooklyn Academy High School, Junior  
Angelica Petela, Grover Cleveland High School, Senior  
Nesshell Rainford, High School of Fashion Industries, Junior  
Irving Torres, George Washington High School, Junior  
Anmarie Turton, Frederick Douglass Academy–Brooklyn, Senior  
Renea Williams, Kurt Hahn Expeditionary Learning High School, Junior

### **The College Board:**

For more information on the College Board, please see the back cover.

### **Youth Communication:**

Youth Communication’s mission is to help marginalized youth develop their full potential through reading and writing, so that they can succeed in school and at work and contribute to their communities.

We publish true stories by teens that are developed in a rigorous writing program. These stories are uniquely compelling to peers who do not see their experiences reflected in mainstream reading materials. They motivate teens to read and write, encourage good values, and show teens how to make positive changes in their lives. For teachers and other staff, our curricula and training provide the tools they need to understand and engage hard-to-reach teens while helping them improve their academic, social and emotional skills.

Our work is grounded in the belief that reading and writing remain the best ways to encourage reflection and discussion and stimulate the imagination. We believe that literate, thoughtful citizens are essential to the survival of a vibrant, democratic society.

### **The National Writing Project:**

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a nationwide network of educators working together to improve the teaching of writing in the nation’s schools and in other settings. NWP provides high-quality professional development programs to teachers in a variety of disciplines and at all levels, from early childhood through university. Founded in 1974 at the University of California, Berkeley, NWP today is a network of more than 200 university-based sites located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Co-directed by faculty from the local university and K–12 schools, each NWP site develops a leadership cadre of teachers through an invitational summer institute, and designs and delivers customized professional development programs for local schools, districts and higher education institutions. NWP sites serve more than 130,000 participants annually, reaching millions of students. For more information, please visit [www.nwp.org](http://www.nwp.org).

# Foreword

In our national conversations about how to reform education, we sometimes overlook our best and most obvious resources. This is the case with students. Policymakers and educators seldom seek their advice on how to improve our nation's classrooms. This is unfortunate. Without students' input, we have little chance of successfully improving the teaching and learning process.

In order to start reversing this trend, in the report that follows, we hear from students on the critical issue of what makes a good teacher. These writers lay out for us, in no uncertain terms, those characteristics required to be effective in the classroom. These students give us this important information with style and humor.

As the nation decides how to improve education through initiatives such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we must include many voices, many more than we have in the past. This includes students, and we encourage our colleagues to seek their advice and counsel as we move forward in this critical endeavor.

**Gaston Caperton**  
President  
The College Board

**Keith Hefner**  
Executive Director  
Youth Communication

**Sharon Washington**  
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National Writing Project



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# What Makes a Great Teacher?

A discussion between teens Ebony Coleman, Kelly Colón, Evin Cruz, Brittany Humphrey, Jimmy Lee, Angelica Petela, Irving Torres and Renea Williams

How have your best teachers inspired, engaged, encouraged and challenged you? Teens on the staff of *New Youth Connections* magazine were asked to think this over — then they gathered for a group discussion about the best learning experiences they've had.

As teenagers who willingly gave up six weeks of their summer to attend an intensive writing and journalism workshop, these students are admittedly skewed toward the avid end of the spectrum. But all described both classes that they loved and classes that they hated. From a lively exchange, some consistent themes emerged: Great teachers are imaginative and expect their students to be, too. They meet students where they are, but ask them to reach higher. They love their subject, and find ways to draw pupils in.

## **Did you ever have a class that you looked forward to each day?**

**Renea:** An English class. She wasn't a teacher who played around: When you entered her classroom, she had instructions on the board for you. A couple of months ago, we were reading *A Raisin in the Sun*, and we had

to choose a character and give a soliloquy like we were that character, explaining what's actually going on in the character's mind. The teacher chose the five best and each student had to go up and read it in front of the class, and the class graded them. It was fun to hear all the stuff that people thought the characters were thinking. I always made sure I got to school early, because it was my first class.

**Irving:** I had a teacher who made us read 20 books and do 20 book reports during the year. I actually liked it — you got to choose the books, whatever you wanted to read.

**Jimmy:** Business class. At least once a day, the teacher would explain how what we learn in business relates to the real world. For example, she told a story about going into a restaurant where the menus were handwritten and looked amateurish. She went home and used Microsoft Office to come up with a menu that was colorful and appealing, and she took it back to them and said, “I can produce more of these for a small fee.” We were learning about Microsoft Office, so her story showed us how that skill translates into daily life. She also brought up personal stories about herself that helped us connect to her, and to what she was teaching us.

### **Describe a class where you learned a lot.**

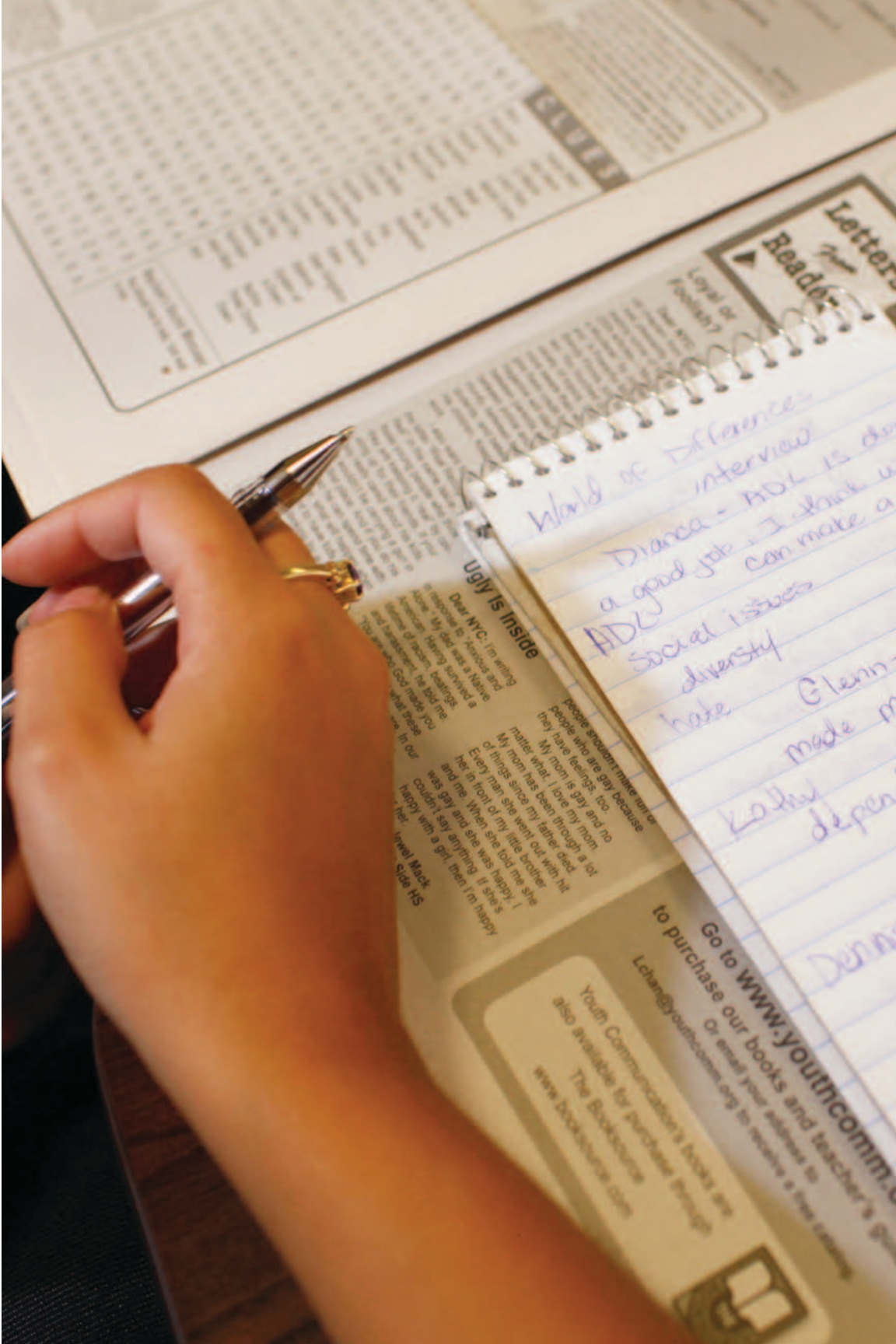
**Kelly:** Global history. The teacher's method was just PowerPoint presentations while we took notes. We went through things really fast, but not to the point where we were lost.

**Irving:** But some teachers are in a hurry and say to you, “You're wasting time, because on the Regents ...” That makes you really tense, makes you want to explode. It's not good to just memorize.

**Evin:** This year I took physics. My teacher made things laid back, so we wouldn't be like, “Oh my God, this is physics!” She'd draw us as little stick figures, and make all the questions about us: “If Evin was driving a car and he hit a wall, how much force ...?” She helped us not focus so much on the Regents, but just try to learn.

**Ebony:** Global history. We would do a lot of hands-on projects — for example, we had to learn about different religions. She assigned one to each of us, and you would have to learn the intricacies of the religion: how they did this, why they did this, what each part of the temple was — you had to really go deep.





World of Differences  
interview  
Dianca - ADL is doing  
a good job. I think we  
ADL  
social issues  
diversity  
hate  
Glenn  
made m  
Kathy  
Denn

### Ugly Is Inside

Dear NYC, I'm writing  
in response to "Aussie and  
Alone". My dad was a Native  
American. He had the  
same of racism, besides  
and treatment. He had the  
same as you. I don't know  
what those  
people should make out of  
people who are gay because  
they have feelings too.  
My mom is gay and no  
matter what I love my mom.  
My mom has been through a lot  
of things since my father died.  
Every man she went out with hit  
her in front of my little brother  
and me. When she told me she  
was gay and she was happy, I  
couldn't say anything. If she's  
happy with a girl, then I'm happy  
for her.

Leland Mack  
Side HS

Go to [www.youthcomm.org](http://www.youthcomm.org)  
to purchase our books and teacher's guides.  
Or email your address to  
[Leland@youthcomm.org](mailto:Leland@youthcomm.org) to receive a free catalog.

Youth Communicator's books are  
also available for purchase through  
The BookSource  
[www.booksource.com](http://www.booksource.com)

## **What methods have your teachers used that you would imitate if you were a teacher?**

**Ebony:** I would use visual things. But not boring videos that were produced when TV had just come out. Say it's global studies and we're learning about Third World countries — give us videos that will touch our hearts. My global history teacher used a lot of videos that almost brought us there. For example, she showed us a video about the Holodomor [a genocide Stalin committed in Ukraine]. You relate more when it's visual.

**Brittany:** My English teachers have open discussions on topics that are interesting, and you get into it; you want to have your opinion out there. For example, I remember we got into a big discussion after we'd read *Romeo and Juliet*. The teacher asked whether anyone could relate to the story personally. There was a lot of back and forth.

## **How have teachers engaged your imagination to help you learn?**

**Angelica:** My global history teacher used to read us ethnic folk tales and make us illustrate them as we thought things might look like back then. And he made us do a MySpace page for an ancient person, like Cleopatra. My computer teacher helped us design a video game — we drew all the characters, we made the background, we did the coding.

**Ebony:** In English we studied *Twelve Angry Men*, and we had to write essays on what we'd do if we were in the characters' shoes. It was almost as if we were in the story, and it actually led to a huge discussion.

## **How should a teacher manage rowdy students?**

**Kelly:** I think from the first day, the teacher needs to let the students know, "You're not here to socialize. You're here to learn, I'm here to teach." But not be rude about it.

**Evin:** What works is the teacher staying calm, not yelling, because then you're losing your cool. And kids prey on that. The moment they see you're not confident, you're out of control, they absolutely kill you on that.

## **How should a teacher engage quiet students?**

**Brittany:** I used to be quiet in social studies. The teacher would pick on me, and I'd be like, "I really don't know the answer right now!" Eventually, I'd raise my hand a lot just so they wouldn't pick on me when I wasn't prepared.







**Ebony:** There's a technique to make a student participate without being really forceful. As long as you are able to apply your lessons to something that's actually current, then that will make students more focused or interested. Even the kids you would think are a lost cause get engaged with the right methods.

There are students at my school who are very quiet, but if you know how their life is, you can use something that relates to them. So say the student's a hustler, and you know this because when they're in the lunchroom you hear them all the time. If you have a math lesson, you can apply the lesson to their life. I see that a lot and it works.

### **Has a teacher ever made you change your mind about a subject you thought you didn't like?**

**Brittany:** I never really liked science, but I had a teacher who helped me do well. At the beginning of her class, I failed all the tests. But I'd talk to her after class, I'd tell her why I didn't get it, and she'd help me out. We'd go over worksheets together. Later, I was getting above 80 on my tests.

**Evin:** I used to — not hate poetry, but scoff at it. I was like, "Poetry? What's the big deal about writing words that rhyme?" But my teacher got me to see that there are different forms and so many ways of expressing yourself within poetry. He got a spoken word poet to come to class and perform, and listening to his poem, I could visualize what he was talking about — Manhattan collapsing in on itself. He showed us a YouTube video of a reading of Dylan Thomas's poem "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," about the poet's father dying — it was like whoa, that's dark, that's deep. We read one poem that was about cupcakes, but it wasn't really about cupcakes — that was interesting. All this hidden innuendo. It really changed my view.



# Top 10 Pieces of Advice from Students for Teachers

Naturally, every student is different. “My favorite teacher ever” usually refers to someone whose style and methods happened to suit the learning style of a particular student particularly well.

At the same time, the teen writers at *New Youth Connections* magazine found considerable common ground when they sat down to share their best learning experiences. Below, individual writers articulate the “top 10” principles gleaned from the contributions of everyone in the group.

## 1. Be pushy.

Being a junior in high school was stressful. There were times when the work got so hard I felt that I should just give up and quit school. However, there was this teacher at the school, Ms. Alexander, she became like a mother to me. Whenever I have a problem, she is always there to push me to strive to do better, even when I think I’m not up to the work. She pushes other students, too. Whenever a student is failing a class or feeling depressed, she has a meeting with them and finds out exactly what is going on.



Right now I need a math credit, but I wasn’t planning on going to summer class. However, Ms. Alexander recently called my house to inform me that I should be in summer school for math so I’ll graduate next year. She gives that extra push whenever she feels that students are not willing to push themselves the extra mile. — **Renea Williams**

## 2. Make the lesson relevant to our lives.

My global history teacher taught a lesson about feudalism and the caste system, comparing it to a typical high school’s cliques and hierarchies. Since she knew that I dislike cliques, she used me to explain those who rebelled against the clergy, nobility and feudalism in general. Because she put our lives — and me — into her



explanation, I will remember that lesson on feudalism forever.

— **Ebony Coleman**

### 3. Be relatable, but please don't say: "It's time to dip, y'all!"

Teachers shouldn't act like students. You can be their friend, help them with their schoolwork, let them come to you and talk to you about their lives. But when you act your students' age and use the slang that students use — I hate when teachers do that. I have a teacher who says things like, "Y'all, it is time to dip." It's just rude and unprofessional. — **Renea Williams**



### 4. Teach us with words, sights and sounds.

A teacher should be able to teach in a wide variety of ways. If the teacher's showing me a video and then gives us a paper with the facts, and then maybe she makes a speech about it, she's using a variety of ways to teach. This makes it easier for me to learn. — **Evin Cruz**



### 5. Be consistent and firm.

I have a teacher who's too nice: She lets the students take over. When she would give us an assignment, some of the students would end up persuading her that we didn't actually need to do it. Because she wasn't very firm, she ended up being like a puppet and the students were the puppeteers. Because of this, I missed the lesson.

— **Irving Torres**



### 6. Believe in us.

One of my favorite teachers during this school year was my math teacher, Mr. Hatchett. He not only teaches well, he believes in all his students and doesn't give up on us.



Let's say one student complains that the work is hard. Mr. Hatchett will go up to the board and let the student tell him which part of the problem they don't understand. Then he'll explain

it and do another problem and let the student try it, using the same steps from the previous problem. Later, he'll call on that student all the time when doing class work so they start getting motivated. And during independent study, he's constantly asking the class if anyone needs help. Nobody is left behind, and he shows us that he believes we can do it.

— **Margarita Martinez**

### 7. Explain, explain, explain.

Sometimes you just truly don't get it, and then you need a teacher to be patient and explain it over and over again, maybe in a different way, to make sure you understand. The teacher shouldn't give up and think, "He doesn't get it, but he'll learn eventually" — he probably won't! The thing with school is that it's a snowball effect: If you don't know one thing, it's harder for you to learn other things, especially in math. — **Evin Cruz**



### 8. Use our time wisely.

In my music class, kids would talk about fights they were in, gangs and even sex. Instead of ignoring it, the teacher would spend five minutes lecturing us on how life was better and kids acted right when he was younger. Students would continue to aggravate the teacher on purpose, just to prompt him to waste time on more of these lectures. If I was the teacher, I would have simply told them to be quiet and, if that didn't work, kicked them out of the class so I could move on with the lesson.

— **Ebony Coleman**



### 9. Have clear objectives, clearly communicated.

I like when a teacher is in control, prepared and ready to teach their class as soon as the bell rings. For example, my English teacher writes "do nows" on the board so, as soon as we get in, we know what we're supposed to be doing and are ready to work. Great teachers write out objectives and also grading policy to ensure the students have a clear idea of what they will be learning and what's expected of them. — **Renea Williams**



## 10. Be a good example.

My teacher brings food in the morning and if anyone is hungry he'll offer some of his food, which is always organic and very healthy. Over the course of the year he's had an influence on people's eating habits. He doesn't look his age and is very energetic, so some students changed the way they ate because they said that they want to be like that when they get older as well. He's not only a mentor but someone that people look up to.

— **Margarita Martinez**

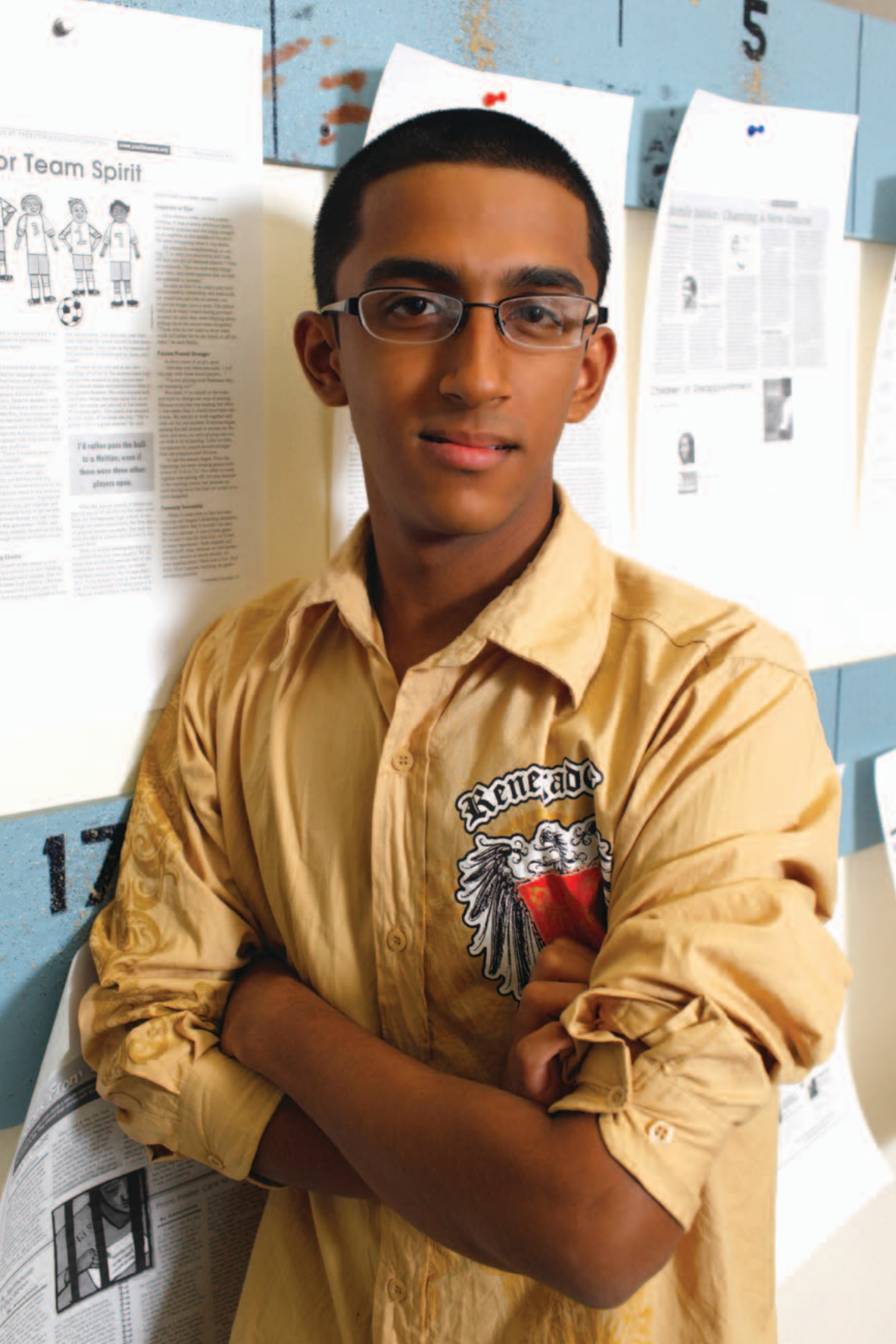


*All illustrations by **Freddy Bruce**, graduate of Robert F. Wagner High School.*

# or Team Spirit



I'd rather pass the ball to a Million, even if those were three other glasses open.





# A Tough Love Teacher

## by Mohammed Hussain

Mohammed, a strong student, argues that exacting standards are the secret ingredient to outstanding teaching. He recalls an eighth-grade teacher, Mr. Seltzer, as an exemplary model of “tough love.”

A high bar is doubtless more effective for some students than others. While Mohammed is startled out of complacency by unaccustomed low grades and pushes himself in a way he hasn't had to before, shakier students are more likely to be discouraged. Still, by showing obvious affection and regard for all his students, Mohammed's teacher creates an atmosphere that makes kids want to win his approval.

Every teacher instructs in a different way, and some methods are bound to be more popular with students than others. “Tough love” — treating students as individuals who must take responsibility, rather than as immature, prepubescent teens — isn't always what students want. But for me, it's the most effective teaching method of all.

Mr. Seltzer, my eighth-grade English teacher, was the embodiment of high standards. Tests were difficult and seemed fit for a college student.

Pop quizzes could be given at any time. He gave us a lot of homework and expected us to do it; neglecting assignments had a tremendous adverse effect on our grades.

Throughout the year, we wrote frequently — outlines, research papers, book reports — and Mr. Seltzer expected us to produce quality work every day. He graded our work harshly, checking grammar and punctuation and making sure our writing was clear and direct. Low grades were common. When I saw my low grades at the start of the year — in the 70s, when I was used to 90s — I realized that I could easily fail the class. By the end of the year, I had an 80 average. Though this was lower than I was used to, it meant more to me than a 90 from another teacher. An 80 from Mr. Seltzer was a real accomplishment.

Mr. Seltzer's "tough love" made me a better student. If we made mistakes on written work, and we usually did, we were expected to rewrite the assignment. In fact, we almost always wrote multiple drafts. Editing and revising my work — checking my mistakes and then doing my best not to repeat them — helped me enormously. Because tests were difficult, I spent days studying for them, and the study skills I developed back in eighth grade have helped me perform extremely well in high school.

Mr. Seltzer held us to extremely high standards. Still, he was never boorish or a jerk to us. We could see his affection and regard for us despite his sternness. He once commented to me that he had many children, and it was not until later that I realized that he was talking about his students. To Mr. Seltzer, we were his children and he expected us to be amazing and not disappoint him: just what he'd expect of his own children. In turn, all of his students — those who loved to learn, and even those who were not particularly motivated to do so — tried their best to live up to his standards.

*"All his students tried their best to live up to his standards."*







# Beyond the Classroom

## by David Etienne

When David moves from Haiti to New York, he isn't sure what to expect at his new school. He's relieved that his new teacher, Mr. Jean Pierre, treats him as an equal.

But Mr. Jean Pierre doesn't joke around in the classroom. Whether he's drilling his English as a Second Language students on English words or doling out nuggets of life advice, he shows a deep commitment to educating his students and helping them grow as people.

Many teens agree that teachers are most effective — and command the most respect — when they strike a balance between a friendly manner and a commitment to getting work done. “The teacher has to be serious, but not mean,” says Kelly Colón, 17. Adds Ebony Coleman, 17, “The teachers who can relate to the students but still are stern, I find, don't have issues controlling the classroom.”

I grew up and started my school career in Haiti. There was no school board, and principals only appeared once in a blue moon. Because they weren't worried about anyone else's judgment, the teachers in my public school were well known for certain skills: some for their ability to scare you with just a look, and others for their consistency in whipping kids.





Our fear pushed us to learn whatever we were assigned, so in a way, the teachers were effective. We did what we had to do, whether it was memorizing a passage, solving a math problem or learning vocabulary words. I was a focused student, able to remember a lot, and as a kid I never sat back and wondered if the education I was getting was good enough.

But looking back, I see that I never grew mentally in that school. They didn't teach us to think broadly or be creative. Instead, I was always either doing what I was directed to do, or sitting back waiting for more directions. My classmates and I were taught what we needed to know to survive inside a classroom — things like dates and events in history — but not a lot that would help me survive in the world.

When I came to the United States I didn't know what to expect. On my first day of school in New York I met my new teacher, Mr. Jean Pierre, who was Haitian. He greeted me with "*Sa kap fèt la, Boss?*" which means, "How you doing, Boss?" in Creole.

That short sentence alone told me a lot. It meant that we were equals. Normally in Haiti, teachers only speak French to students, because those who speak French are looked upon as superior. But Mr. Jean Pierre spoke pure Creole with me, and that made me feel that the person I was going to spend my days with at this new school would be able to understand me.

I had Mr. Jean Pierre for every subject. On my first day in his class — which was full of other Haitian students also learning English — I couldn't even read the English title of the textbook he handed me. But I learned so quickly that by my third week, I understood most questions and was even raising my hand.

Mr. Jean Pierre brought in a couple of picture books, and he would have the two of us who were newest to English read out loud. He told us to sound out the words, and our first go was usually pretty good. That made me feel more confident. When we didn't get the word right, Mr. Jean Pierre would say it to us and have us repeat it back to him over and over again until we remembered it.

He also had us learn 10 to 20 vocabulary words each day. For each word we had to memorize how to spell it and pronounce it, and create a sentence with it. At first I hated this method because I wasn't used to





...and I'm truly  
 ...of great people who I  
 ...for their opinions, and I'm truly  
 ...and I'm truly  
 ...of great people who I  
 ...for their opinions, and I'm truly

**What's Next?**  
 ...and I'm truly  
 ...of great people who I  
 ...for their opinions, and I'm truly



...and I'm truly  
 ...of great people who I  
 ...for their opinions, and I'm truly



**Patrizia Wadda's Profile**

**Patrizia Wadda's Profile**  
 ...and I'm truly  
 ...of great people who I  
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...and I'm truly  
 ...of great people who I  
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...and I'm truly  
 ...of great people who I  
 ...for their opinions, and I'm truly

*"Our fear pushed us to learn whatever we were assigned."*

having to be creative in any way. But gradually, Mr. Jean Pierre helped me fall in love with creative writing. Every morning, we'd have 30 minutes to freewrite about anything that came to mind. I discovered that I was good at this, and Mr. Jean Pierre was the first teacher ever to put in time aside from his regular schedule for me, staying during lunch or after school to help me and another student who loved writing.

Through actions like this (he even helped us on weekends before big exams), Mr. Jean Pierre showed me that he truly cared about me as a person and wasn't just interested in doing his job and getting paid. Mr. Jean Pierre's methods were just as effective as the ones my scary teachers in Haiti used: In the seventh grade, the top 10 students in the school were all from our class, all Mr. Jean Pierre's students.

But he was also the kind of teacher who taught us how to survive in life. He took the time to tell us how to conduct ourselves in an office environment, how to shake someone's hand at a job interview, and how to stay focused even when everything might seem to be against us. The thing that he told us that stood out the most for me was this: "I see a lot of youngsters spending hundreds of dollars buying sneakers. I would never do such a thing. I would rather buy Timberlands that cost me about \$50 and spend \$200 on books instead." He made me realize that you can impress someone for a little while by dressing fancy, but a smart, educated mind can make a much longer-lasting impression.

I know he made a big impression on me. Since studying with Mr. Jean Pierre I always try to connect with my teachers, and I'm always looking for lessons I can take beyond the classroom.

# ne for Team Spirit



which I can use to the point until I'm a little bit. I figure the problem there is that I'm not really...

**Health Tip**  
After that, I realized that the whole of this was decided by the way of the...

...the whole of this was decided by the way of the... I realized that the whole of this was decided by the way of the... I realized that the whole of this was decided by the way of the...

**I'd rather pass the ball to a teammate, even if they were three other players apart.**

**An Exciting Game**  
After I finished the article I can...

5

19





# Global Classroom, Global Teacher

by Percy D. Lujan

Percy's young teacher, "Ms. Sara," has no time for passivity. In her classroom, students from countries around the world share stories of their religious traditions and transform themselves into peasants from 18th-century France. Looking back, Percy sees how Ms. Sara used a flair for the dramatic to teach an invaluable life lesson.

Teachers who use a variety of methods to illustrate a lesson earn high scores from students; teachers who stick to routine, less so. Ebony Coleman, 17, complains about the dull videos and repetitive handouts one teacher subjected her to. "You really had to push yourself, or take some five-hour energy drink, to stay awake in that class," she says. If a teacher hopes to keep students tuned in, "It can't just be the same thing every day."

If you say the name Sara Wolf inside my high school, the juniors and seniors will surely have a flashback to one of the best teachers they ever had.



*"She made us represent our personal beliefs in a painting. This taught us that though we were all from different cultures and religions, each of us is a unique person free from any label."*

I was lucky enough to have Ms. Sara for global studies in both ninth and 10th grade. She was not just a teacher — she was a performer. She didn't want to teach a bunch of students who couldn't relate to her lesson. She wanted her kids to be active learners, so her classes were full of interaction where students could learn about the subject matter by relating it to their lives.

For example, the first year I was in her class she taught us about religions. Ours was a school of immigrants, and it's easy to imagine why religion is a sensitive topic among such a diverse population. We never talked about it among ourselves.

Ms. Sara was brave enough to bring that topic to light. She put us into groups and had us learn about each other's religions. She gave us books and other research materials so we could also get a more objective view of these many beliefs. Then, she made each group give a presentation on one religion.

My group was studying Hinduism, and we were able to learn about the many details of this religion that non-Hindus might not understand fully. When I heard the other groups' presentations I was fascinated by what I heard, and as we learned, we were able to relate more to each other. I remember one day seeing the necklace of a Hindu friend; it was a golden figure of the Hindu god Shiva. "The Destroyer," I said, remembering my research. My friend was impressed with what I knew about his culture, and I feel he was glad to see that other people were learning about his beliefs.

Then Ms. Sara got more creative. She made us tell the class about our personal beliefs and then represent them in a painting. This exercise taught us that though we were all from different cultures and religions, each of us is a unique person free from any label.

Ms. Sara always used creative methods. When we studied the French Revolution, she helped us understand how history is still relevant by making us participate in the class as if we were history's protagonists. She first divided us into groups representing the three estates that existed in France at that time, and then she had the members of each group research their assigned estate. We had to write and give a speech in front of the class, expressing the point of view of our estate. Ms. Sara and her assistant acted as Marie Antoinette and King XVI, commenting on the ideas that they "liked" and acting offended about the ideas they didn't. That class discussion made me realize the beauty of democracy and why some people die to obtain it.

Her effectiveness as a teacher came from the love she showed for what she taught. Around the room she had many photographs of her travels to Cuba, Egypt, Peru, Ecuador and India. Her enthusiasm for global studies was contagious, and even though not all her students showed the same enthusiasm, all of us were willing to participate in her lessons.

When I finished 12th grade Ms. Sara left our school, but after the earthquake in Haiti I learned she had flown there to help with the relief efforts. I wasn't surprised: Going to Haiti was only an extension of what she taught all her students.

Now I realize that getting us so involved in her classes was only the outer layer of the seed that she was planting in our minds. You don't enter a class to hear a monologue by your teacher; you enter to participate in your education. In the same way, you don't enter the world to observe the events that happen around you; you enter the world to be an active global citizen. It is not enough to learn about what's wrong, what needs to be fixed or what can be improved. It is necessary to act, and to make this world better than the way you found it.

Just as Ms. Sara transformed the minds of her students, she wanted her students to go on to change the world.









# Hooked on Looping

## by Irving Torres

Irving is upset and apprehensive when he's assigned to special ed. When he gets to know his teacher, Ms. Ackert, his outlook changes — not least because he gets to know her so well. As special ed students, Irving and his classmates are “looped” into the same classroom each September for three years. This allows Ms. Ackert to develop not only a bond with her students but a deep understanding of their learning styles.

I was tired of waiting on the lunch line in the humid cafeteria of my elementary school. The smell of pizza roaming around made my stomach growl with hunger and desperation. As I was waiting, I saw some kids bullying the special ed students. Kids were smacking their heads and calling them retarded. I watched, feeling an eagerness to defend them, but I didn't have the courage. I never would have expected that I would soon go from being a bystander to being part of the targeted group.

"I learned more in those three years than I thought possible."

The following year, when I was 11, I was placed in special ed because my teacher claimed I had learning disabilities. I didn't agree with him and thought he'd unfairly labeled me. But the decision was final.

As the first day of sixth grade approached, I was really depressed. I was worried about joining a group that was treated so badly. However, the minute I stepped into my new classroom, I noticed a welcoming vibe. The teacher, Ms. Ackert, was a skinny 20-something with light skin, green eyes and wavy blonde hair. Neither race nor disability was a barrier for her, and she approached the students without disgust on her face. I respected her for that and quickly became as attached to her as the rest of the students were.

Ms. Ackert ended up being my teacher for three years, through sixth, seventh and eighth grades. I learned more in those three years than I thought possible. I attribute that to Ms. Ackert's skill as a teacher, but also to the fact that I was fortunate to have a continuing relationship with one teacher who really knew me. This process of a teacher working with students for multiple years is called "looping."

Looping is a great way to make students more interested in school, especially in our teenage years when we need someone we know and trust to guide us down the right path. I think that if we extend this "looping" idea to non-special ed classes in middle school and high school, there would be fewer kids dropping out. There are a few schools in New York that do this, but not enough. In my middle school, only the special ed kids got to stick with the same teacher, which was a benefit for us.







There were several things that Ms. Ackert did during our three years together that made her such an effective teacher. First, she was always an advocate for us. The other kids in the lunchroom were always making fun of us, calling us retarded and slow. My teacher made fun of the bullies, saying, “They act more retarded than us.”

She personally advocated for me, too. One year, I found a writing program I wanted to join, but because I was in special ed I didn’t meet the academic requirements. When Ms. Ackert found out, she was red with rage. She told me to make a poster board that displayed all my writing. She wanted me to present it to the principal, and to tell him I deserved to join the program. I did, and in the end he was impressed with my work and actually recommended me for an even better writing program.

My good work backfired on me, though. In seventh grade I noticed that, little by little, they were pulling me away from special ed classes. I didn’t pay it much mind until one day my mom received a letter saying it was time for me to leave special ed. Although I had gone into special ed with a heavy heart, now I didn’t want to go back to regular classes. I felt at home in special ed, mostly because of Ms. Ackert.

I felt like I was learning way more in special ed than I had in regular classes. Since Ms. Ackert and I had known each other for over a year already, every time she spoke to me during class or asked me a question, she geared the question or assignment specifically to me, which made the work more interesting.

In this way, I think looping benefits both the teacher and the students. Basically, the teacher learns what techniques work with specific students. And because the students already know the teacher, they feel comfortable speaking their minds when they have a question.

I spoke with the principal and I told him that I needed special ed. Thankfully, he let me stay for another year. It couldn’t last forever, though. By the end of eighth grade, I really was on my way back to regular classes. It was very hard, but I knew that at some point I had to move on.

I’d say leaving a teacher is the most negative part of looping. Students can feel lost, like they’ve been thrown out into the wilderness. Ms. Ackert tried to make the transition easier by giving me her phone number and telling me to call her when I needed advice or help with homework.





When we said goodbye, I felt like I was closing an important chapter of my life, kind of like when you move out of your parents' house.

An article in *Education World* also noted that students can have difficulty "adjusting to large school environments after being used to cloistered ones," and I agree. High school was very different, and confusing. I had to go to different teachers in different classrooms, and I was with different students each period. It took a while to find friendship with other students in such a place, but eventually I did. (Not so much with teachers, though.)

Now, even though I'm a senior in high school, my old classmates and I still go visit Ms. Ackert. She has pictures of all her former students taped on the wall, including me. That shows that she really cares for the students.

Through the years Ms. Ackert has watched me grow up, both on the outside and as a person. But I have watched her grow, as well. When she was my teacher six years ago, she was engaged, and I remember she told me once, "Irving, I will never have a child, you guys are my kids." Now, six years later, she has a 3-year-old kid and a husband. Both of us have come a long way, but one thing is the same: She is still the same great teacher I met on that unforgettable September morning.

"Now, even though I'm a senior in high school, my old classmates and I still go visit Ms. Ackert."



# One for Team Spirit



*I'd rather pass the ball to a teammate, even if there were three other players open.*

Stories  
America's Best



# Mama Casey

## by Annmarie Turton

In the classroom of “Mama Casey,” Annmarie learns about the economy of Haiti, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, global poverty — and the value of collaborative learning. Instead of sending students directly to the textbook, Mama Casey has them brainstorm together to share what they already know about a given subject.

She also pushes them to think critically about the way general principles connect to real-world situations — something that, as we found in our roundtable discussion, teens tend to appreciate.

The moment Ms. Casey arrived at our school, I knew she was something special. Her attire was reminiscent of high society English tea drinkers. She wore broad-rimmed hats, long flowing skirts, and a vast array of old-fashioned accessories. She never changed her style for anyone.

Her teaching style was the same; she said it hadn’t changed in the 30 years since her career began. She took a simple and direct approach to her



*"She took a simple and direct approach to her craft: Teach children what they need to know, using textbooks only as a reference."*

craft: Teach children what they need to know, using textbooks only as a reference. "The world is our textbook," she preached. "You can learn more from others than you can learn in a classroom."

But that didn't mean we had it easy in her class. I had her first for eighth-grade history and later for 12th-grade economics, and in both classes she challenged us every day to use what we already knew to chart our course of study. Before we read a particular chapter, she would make us identify and dissect our topic into three categories: political, social and economic. We would then throw out random things we knew about a particular subject and group them into these categories.

Once we started brainstorming as a class, the ideas flowed freely. In the 15 to 20 minutes we took to do this activity, we would generate enough ideas to fill two sheets of chart paper. After that, we would visit the chapter in our book pertaining to our topic and check to see how much we had covered without reading the chapter. Of course, we wouldn't get everything, so it was our job to peruse the chapter and make detailed notes on what we missed or didn't understand.

Ms. Casey also helped us understand how the subjects we study in school relate to one another and to the world. For example, in 12th-grade economics we examined the current value of the Haitian dollar and calculated what we already knew — that most Haitians are living below the poverty line. Ms. Casey explained Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" principle — which holds that people will only worry about higher order



concerns once their basic needs have been met — and we discussed how the inability to meet the first level in Maslow’s hierarchy could affect everything else in Haitian society, like literacy rates and civil and political unrest. From here we were able to tackle how these issues affect the health and overall growth of the Haitian people and other poor people around the world.

This lesson on interrelatedness was effective. It made our subject matter seem more relevant and important. Plus, it challenged us. We needed to stretch our minds to find these connections. Throughout, she taught us college-level terms and concepts and pushed us to practice higher level thinking.

Although she demanded a lot of us, Ms. Casey was also compassionate. Outside the classroom, she announced herself to every student as “Mama.” She told us she was our second mother, the one who gave us life not in the physical form, but in mental form.

She also taught us compassion and told us that learning can be achieved even in life’s lowest moments. When one of my classmates lost her mother to a terminal illness, Ms. Casey — Mama Casey — visited and consoled her family. She even escorted our senior class to the funeral so we could be there to support our grieving classmate. This moment made us see the true goodness of her heart and realize that she was teaching us empathy, a life lesson. To her, this was an opportunity for us to grow, grieve and learn together.





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