

Father Teacher

Mike Rush

I left the house an hour earlier than usual and drove to the city's hospital. Sarah was no longer a student at our junior high where I had been teaching choir for three years, but had been one of my best singers, and I had gotten to know her family while she was my student. I spotted her parents in the ICU right away; they looked like they hadn't slept since they'd gotten the call.

It was a high school teacher's suggestion that I become a teacher, and I decided to teach choir primarily for relationships, desperately longing to re-create the family feeling of my own high school choir experiences. As a student, I'd felt loved and accepted there, and I longed to give that same experience to students of my own. But two years into the profession, I faced every bit of the stuff education majors are trained to handle; or not. My classroom management skills were so poor, caged monkeys could out-behave my students.

So, I quit.

However, after only one year of abject, poverty-induced depression, I screwed up my courage and returned to teaching. I didn't trust students, or my management skills, and with those first two years fresh in my mind, I certainly didn't want to make teaching my career. But teaching was all I knew how to do, and my wife and two young daughters needed more than my minimum-wage income.

The first year back, I wrestled with the same classroom issues from my past, and feared I would never learn how to make students behave. But the second year was

better, and by the third, I toyed with the idea of teaching as a career. But I was still struggling with the reality of managing a classroom the rest of my life.

Then came February and that walk into the ICU.

I hugged Sarah's mom impulsively, although I hadn't seen her since the final concert of Sarah's ninth grade year last May.

From what her mom told me, Sarah's body had probably been thrown into every corner of the car as it careened off one country-road culvert into another. Among other abdominal problems, Sarah's spleen had ruptured, and she had undergone emergency surgery. They didn't know how long she would stay in the intensive care ward. To my surprise, her dad took me into her private room and left me there alone. I was completely unprepared for the scene I witnessed; Sarah was all but dead.

"Thank you so much for coming, Mr. Rush," her mom offered when I returned to the waiting room. I quickly asked about her recovery and learned that the doctors had assured them it was probable, but not certain. The next few days would tell the tale of her return to wellness; all anyone could do was wait.

I don't know how many daily visits I made to the ICU until I skipped one. Eventually, the shock wore off of Sarah's parents and they were not so eager to let me see her. I could understand that. When a family suffers a life-threatening blow, they close ranks and hunker down to get themselves through it. When I joined them in the ICU waiting room, I would let them offer. Sometimes I went right into her room, at other times, not.

I made another routine visit one night during the third week of Sarah's intensive care. I hadn't been to see her in a couple of days and I could tell something was

not right the moment the elevator doors opened. The hallway stunk with hopelessness and I finally located a friend of Sarah's.

“Sarah has a fever around a hundred and seven,” she said through tightened lips. “She might not make it through the night.”

Just then, her dad stepped out of the ward. As our eyes met, I shuddered at his skin color. He was grey; wearing death like an overcoat.

I walked down the corridor to the elevator. The longer I walked, the greater the pressure. I was a kid again, sinking farther and farther in the pool's deep end, the water's weight threatening to make my head explode. As I crossed the parking lot, I realized why returning to the hospital while Sarah recovered had become so necessary.

I knew I had pursued teaching because I wanted to give something to students. Now, with one of mine in the hospital, barely clinging to life, I understood my feelings transcended concern for students' wellbeing. I loved Sarah. In varied ways, I loved them all.

For the second time in four weeks, I drove to the hospital before school to learn of Sarah's condition. In the ICU, I discovered that sometime in the night, Sarah's fever had broken and her body had begun the healing process.

During the next two weeks, my life returned to the rhythm of my routines before the accident with one exception – my regular presence in the hospital. Sarah finally left the ICU and took a room as a regular patient. Thirty nine days had passed since the accident. She had dropped almost twenty pounds from a frame that couldn't afford it. With each visit, I found Sarah's recovery progressing on schedule. Her surgical

incision was healing; the broken bones in her leg were mending, but she was still very weak.

One Saturday in May, while my family waited in the parking lot, I found Sarah in poor spirits. Her lungs were weak and the doctors had ordered respiratory therapy. The young therapist busied himself with preparations in her room. She seemed resigned to this, and took the hand-held device without question.

Sarah put the tube in her mouth and sucked. Therapy was grueling work, and her face wore the expression of deep sorrow. The therapist scolded her for lack of effort. She gave it another try and I fully expected her to burst into tears when the tube left her mouth. I had stayed longer than I'd planned and grasped her hand in mine.

“Sarah, I have to leave,” I said, thinking of my family, as I gave her hand a squeeze.

She took the tube from her mouth, caught her breath and looked up at me with pleading eyes. A cloud passed in front of the sun, and shadows filled the room. Her weakened lungs forced breath through a dry throat. The therapist froze. Time did too. Sarah had squeaked out the words, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I said, her hand still in mine, and then, I kissed her forehead.

And in that moment, I realized the teacher I was going to be.