

Keepin' It Movin'

Portraits from a New York City Transfer School

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It was on the first day of school when I saw my principal wearing a paper beard. The whole school was awaiting the beginning of the assembly, and I did a double-take as I stood awkwardly next to my new colleagues. I was fresh off a transfer from a school in the Bronx and couldn't believe what I was seeing. He was going to go up to the podium. . . . Wearing that? Another colleague, looking very earnest, was strumming his acoustic guitar and quietly singing a few lines to himself. A very distinguished woman in an expensive blazer and pencil skirt walked with purpose, carrying a large potted tree. I wasn't sure what was going to happen next, but I was sure that it was not going to go well. I sat back nervously and waited for the disaster to unfold.

But it didn't. The kids did not laugh while they sat down and listened to the parable of the old man and the tree. There was a whole staff narrative, as everyone took turns delivering lines (I had one, too, something about being a new branch of a tree with a strong trunk and fruits of the seven core values, which I read with as much enthusiasm and certainty as I could muster, as if I was in on the whole thing), contributing to the analogy of our school as the great tree, and our principal, the wise old man that tended to it. At the end of the show, the kids cheered in their teenage way, half serious and half trying to maintain their adolescent nonchalance in front of their friends. A few cheered for their favorite teacher ("Go ADAAAAAAM!!!"), and then they all shuffled off to meet with their advisory group (at our Expeditionary Learning school, we call it Crew). I was truly baffled, but I could tell that this was a very unique place. I gathered my things and made my way upstairs, giving myself my new teacher pep talk and wondering how the rest of the day would unfold.

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The Community

I work at a transfer school in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City. When describing that to people, my shorthand is usually, “Oh, it’s an alternative high school,” or “It’s a place where students come to get a second chance.” Sometimes I wonder what I’m actually conveying with these statements. I want people to understand that while I am working with high-risk youth from all over the city of New York, that does not mean what they probably think it means. I think a lot of people picture a scene like at the beginning of those teacher turn-around movies: *Dangerous Minds*, *Stand and Deliver*, or (my favorite) *Sister Act 2*. A school full of chaos, teachers reading newspapers and the like, and nothing really getting done.

What it really means is a group of 250 students from across New York City who arrive at my school because they change neighborhoods but can’t get a school transfer. Or they are chased out by a fellow student or an administrator. Or they can’t pass their Regents Exams, or they no longer want to deal with the high-pressure environment of the elite public school that they tested into. Or they don’t jive with the mission of their boutique high school in the city that wants them to focus on fashion design or science or theater or automotive technology. Or they are sick of getting pink slips or demerits at their charter school. Or they just don’t want to be one of 2,000 faces in the hallways.

Whatever their story, they end up here. We are one of seven schools in a building that had to fight hard to keep metal detectors out of the entrance-way. We strive to instill the guidance of our seven core values (diversity, democracy, truth, intellect, justice, humanity, and peace) through our close-knit structures and socially relevant curriculum. We are part of an organization in New York State that organized for the right to educate without standardized exams hanging over our heads. Because of this, our students write papers for every major subject area and orally defend them at the end of the semester instead of taking the regular three-hour exams.

Our students are organized into 16 different groups with a teacher/advisor at the helm, which we call Crew. Through the Crew structure and our curriculum we strive to balance freedom with personal responsibility and cooperation with independence. Sometimes we get it right and it’s awesome. Sometimes we get it wrong and it’s disastrous. Most of the time, we win some and we lose some, but students graduate and move on to their next step, having been changed for the better. We are on track to what I think education is supposed to be, and I am grateful to have the freedom in my classroom to educate in the way that I know will best serve my students.

John

I walk into my classroom, and there are four students. Four.

“Good morning, mathematicians. I’m really glad you’re here . . . but what did you do with the rest of my class?”

One of my students looks up from her Do Now and speaks slowly to me, as if explaining something very obvious: “It’s WEDNESDAY, Rachel. No one comes to school on WEDNESDAY.” That’s what they said about Tuesday. And Monday. And Friday.

“Right. How silly of me,” I reply drily. “Grab your binders, let’s get started.”

Attendance is a big problem at my school. This is true for many learning institutions in New York City, but here we serve a population where many of the students have not had positive experiences in the classroom. Some have trauma around this, some struggle academically, and some have just not made school a priority in their lives and old habits are hard to break. My colleagues are dedicated. Our class sizes: small. Our pedagogy: dynamic, creative, interesting, and socially situated within the worlds they inhabit. Frankly, we work our butts off. And still, I have four.

This is Math for Social Justice class. It’s an investigation of economics and statistics through a social justice lens. It’s designed for students who struggle with the basics without dumbing things down and making them repeat another. Remedial. Class. We learn about race, wealth, and education. We design budgets, discuss living wage, and become organizers of a union. We investigate credit cards, compound interest rates, and things to watch out for when the bank is trying to make a profit off of us. We ask the question, How can statistics be both accurate and misleading? to challenge the idea that numbers are absolute and can’t be argued. We read, write, discuss, present, and practice mathematics, building basic number sense and critical thinking skills.

One of my students, John, is a bright young man who has missed a lot of formal schooling. He’s been sleeping on subway trains for the last few months because he doesn’t have a place to stay and is struggling through the red tape of government assistance as an 18-year-old male with no dependents and no family. He is incredibly disruptive, rude, and disrespectful one day, and an insightful, discerning leader the next. On our midsemester course evaluation, he wrote: “This is the best class I’ve ever taken in school. At first I had no idea what we were gonna learn about, but now I get it. It’s the stuff that they’re supposed to teach you but don’t. I am already using it in my life and will continue to do so in the future.” He makes poignant statements during class discussions. His projects are often the most inno-

vative and interesting, and he takes pride in the work he does in class. He uses his camera phone to snap pictures of learning tasks and articles so he doesn't lose the information. In spite of this, his attendance rate is about 50%. Another 10% of the time he shows up but is so damaging to the learning environment that I have to send him to the counselor to process what happened in the classroom and how to avoid being a disruptive force in our community.

We get to the end of the semester, which feels like the very end of a very long, pot-hole-filled road. The class has been a challenging one for me, even though I've been working with a brilliant young student teacher who has helped the students complete their final papers and me keep my sanity. In spite of this, we reach our final presentations and I am proud of my students' work.

Today is John's panel. Despite his missing the majority of class the month before, he has completed a paper that I think has a chance of passing. He shows up 20 minutes early and is putting the final touches on his presentation, alone at the computer. I call out across the room and ask if he needs any help, but he waves me off politely. I am nervous; I always get nervous at their presentations. I am holding his paper in my hand, which is full of computations and vocabulary and sentences that are not quite right but show a glimpse of the intellect that could be developed into brilliance. He is the type of student I struggle with the most: bright, creative, and insightful but not able or willing to put in the work to develop it.

We talked a lot about race, wealth, and education in this class. John would give fiery, passion-filled speeches about racism in America and bias in education, demanding justice and education equity for all. But he can't seem to claim it for himself, in the classroom, right now. He takes only minimal help people offer because he is a self-proclaimed survivor and a con man, who has to "depend on his hustle, and no one else" to survive. "Give me a chance," he says in conversation one day, "and look the other way. I will always take what I can get. From anyone. And that's just how it is."

He gets through his presentation, demonstrating enough comprehension of the material to earn his credit. Before he leaves, he shakes my hand. "Thank you, Rachel, for your help this semester. It means a lot." As after many of our conversations, I wonder if this is an honest exchange between us. I shake the thought out of my head as he walks away, because it doesn't really matter at this point. "Good luck, sir!" I call down the hallway. He waves over his shoulder without looking back and leaves out the emergency exit. I sigh and walk back into the classroom. He doesn't come back in the fall.

Ernesto

Crew can make or break your day. For me it is both the most rewarding and most difficult part of my job. As a Crew advisor, my job is to monitor my students' academic as well as social/emotional progress. I have 15 students in my group this year. This structure ensures that all students and their families are known well by at least one adult in our community. We meet four times a week in the social worker's cozy office. It's our little home within the school.

Today is going to be a good day. "All right, y'all, did you collect any more donations?" I ask. I enter a full room with my big blue teacher box stuffed under my arm. Trayvon Martin has just been murdered. We discussed it in classes and school town meetings, and my kids asked me to help them organize a fundraiser to send money to the family for legal fees. They designed a button that they gave away for any size donation. Their goals were to raise money and awareness, and within a week, most of the faculty, students, and staff were wearing their "I am Trayvon Martin" buttons. Today we are finishing up our fundraiser goal poster and writing a thank-you card to a college friend of mine. She visited the school and was so inspired by the students that she donated all the money to get the buttons printed.

One of my boys, Ernesto, is leading the project. He's a young man who is in the midst of a total transformation. He entered the school the year before I got there, living in a group home and bursting at the seams with energy, intellect, and rage. Ernesto was taken in by a foster parent during his second semester here and slowly began the process of opening up and letting others take care of him. He had been fighting for his life (both literally and figuratively) for so long that trusting anyone was terrifying for him.

In a lot of ways, I feel like our school is made for students like Ernesto. Offered a safe environment, a place to practice healthy "family" dynamics in Crew, and a patient, skilled, and compassionate staff, he is able to relax into himself. Inquisitive, emotionally intelligent, and funny, he won me over quickly in spite of having to rein him in at least once a day. His foster mom and I developed a close relationship, anchored through frequent text message exchanges about how to address his behavior.

Fast forward to a few months before the fundraiser planning. His foster mom calls me on the phone and tells me he's not going to be in school because he was arrested and put in jail over night. He is home now but very spooked. The police roughed him up pretty badly, took all his stuff, threw him in a holding cell with grown men, and threatened to deport him.

The day Ernesto returns to Crew he is subdued. I give him a quick hug and welcome him back. He thanks me with a nod as he fights back tears. I

think about the year prior when a student wrote homophobic slurs about him on the wall. How shocked and saddened he was when he thought he and the other boy were just playing around, but the graffiti and the exchange of punches that followed proved him wrong. This was unusual at our school, and also unusual for him, because Ernesto is *tough*. I advocated for him then and worked with the principal to get a letter addressing the harassment read to the entire school. I at least felt some control over that situation and like I could do something to fix it. But this is different. I am tired of talking to my kids (my boys, mostly) about the proper way to interact with the cops so that they can stay as safe as possible. It feels so inadequate and deeply troubling that we have to have these conversations in the first place. For now, I can only give him a hug, a squeeze on the arm, and room to talk.

And he does talk. And we all listen. I am often blown away by my students' reactions to violence, tragedy, and pain. Their survival tactics involve enough empathy to let you know that they care without causing them to break; laughter to deal with the disbelief and their feelings of powerlessness; a "keep it movin'" attitude to get them through the terror and overwhelming sadness that comes with dealing with death, danger, and violence. On this day, though, they are quiet, encouraging, angry, and kind. They hold him with their silence, their eyes, and their quiet interjections of, "That's messed up, Ernesto!" He shares that he doesn't want to leave the house since it happened; they silently nod. "I'm angry and scared," he says, and after a pause, "Thanks for letting me talk." We thank Ernesto for being so open and go to lunch.

It doesn't surprise me, then, when six months later he is the one that asks me and his Crew to help organize a fundraiser for the Martin family. He is graduating this June, at age 20, after a long and unconventional road to what many people take for granted. I am excited to celebrate him and give a public acknowledgement to the intelligence and perseverance that some of us saw all along. I still watch him grow and change, and I am forever impressed with his resilience, courage, empathy, and passion. I feel grateful to work at a school where he has the room to respond to adversity in real and productive ways. That our messages of justice, peace, and respect for humanity are not just values posted on our walls but instilled in young people who are open to receiving them.

Muffin

My afternoon is filled with algebra class. Two sections—fewer than 15 kids in each. Some of my kids have passed their state exams but can't isolate

variables. This is the class that most kids have to pass to get to any other math topic in the school, so it's usually the newbies and the repeaters. My last period has about 13 kids. We've settled in after our opening student presentation, and I am starting class discussion with an open-ended question about systems of equations. Luis throws the eager hand raise, half-lifted out of his seat, eyes fixed on mine. This must be urgent.

"Yes, sir?"

"Rachel, have you looked around this room?" He pauses for what I can only assume is for dramatic effect. "This class is sooooooooooooo gay."

My usual response to these types of comments is to follow up with something like, "Explain to me how this relates to the math that we're exploring or we are disregarding your statement and going back to the task at hand." But today I pause and look around the room. There are four young gay men. Two transgendered students. There's me, their queer teacher. That's half of us. There is one gender nonconforming student, three sci-fi alternative skate boarders, and . . . Hector, a very proud young Dominican man who surprises me with insightful questions amidst a stream of comments like "I can't do this" and "Math is stupid." Oh man. This class *is* very queer. He catches my little smile before I redirect back to the lesson and giggles while picking up his pencil.

About halfway through class Muffin gets up and starts voguing in the corner.¹

S/he joined us the year before after being out of school for a few years. In her/his own words: "I hate math, and school's not really for me, but I guess I should have a diploma." We've been working together for a few months at this point. S/he has good instincts and understands the material better than most of her/his peers, but doesn't really retain much. I look up and see her/him strike a pose. At least s/he isn't blurting out and yelling about weed. AND s/he is carrying her class notebook while s/he dances it out. The other students are used to her/him by now and continue copying notes from the board. Class goes on. It's not the kind of order most folks are used to, but it works for us.

"RACHEL!" Muffin yells.

"Yes, dear, I'm right here, no need to yell. What do you need?"

"Sooooorry," s/he draws. "I think you messed up when you were isolating x . Weren't you supposed to ADD three?"

1. Voguing is a highly stylized dance that takes inspiration from runway modeling, breakdance, and gymnastics. Originating in the gay Harlem Black and Latino ballroom scene during the 1960s, it's usually a form of competition.

I look down at my work. Muffin is right. “Yep! Good catch. Thanks, dear. Glad you’re here to help out.”

“No problem, Rachel, I got you.” S/he goes back to dancing.

I am very happy to be working in a school where students can be themselves, but sometimes being themselves means vogueing in the corner. Working at this school was by no means an easy transition for me. Before teaching here, I was a ninth and tenth grade math/science teacher in the Bronx. While the students there had lots of struggles, it was a well-developed school where discipline, in a lot of ways, looked very traditional. There was a teacher-student accountability model that prioritized relationship building and whole community dynamics, but if someone was acting a fool, they were sent to the assistant principal who would lay the smack down and get them back in line. I’m used to structure and, honestly, not so good with adolescent chaos. My classroom has lots of routines and procedures to help my students learn but also to help me function. They feel safer, and I feel more competent when we know what to expect and have a system and order to things.

But things look different here. There is no heavy who is going to lay down the law if someone is out of line. The administration is definitely supportive of its teachers, but when a student needs an intervention, it is up to us as Crew advisors to dictate what that is. Chancellor’s Regulations from the Department of Education are a tool to be used if needed but are not the thing that regulates what actually happens day to day. So while at other schools Muffin would be hanging out in the dean’s office, here she is doing math to the beat. It’s that or send Muffin home. Every day.

Muffin would not be safe at many other high schools in the city. If you look at our students’ ID pictures out of context, they look like those of many New York City public schools. They are mostly students of color, with fitted ball caps and expensive sneakers, wearing tough snarls or open smiles. But when you walk down the halls and are present in classrooms, it’s different. For the most part, the kids accept you for who you are. They might not be in your immediate circle, and we still have fights from time to time, but on the whole they allow you to be who you are without a whole lot of trouble.

One of the other young transgendered students in the class has a very feminine appearance but identifies as male. His parents tepidly tolerate his identity in that they don’t demand he stop using male pronouns or kick him out of the house but will not allow him to change his physical appearance in any way—even cutting his hair shorter. When students address him using the wrong pronouns, I correct them. After initial confusion and some push back, they now correct each other. I am grateful for them and

their willingness to step outside of their comfort zones to make a space where all can feel welcome. It gives me hope for the world, it really does. My classroom looks a bit different to include the Muffins of the world, and she is not always able to stay with us. But we create an environment where the possibility of growth is real, if they choose to engage.

Tanya

The first day I meet Tanya is the same day as the old man and the tree assembly. She walks in and glances nervously around the room. I get up from the circle of chairs that the rest of us are sitting in and introduce myself. She nods hello and chooses a seat in the corner, away from everyone else.

“Hey, Tanya, come join us in the circle,” I say.

“No, I’m good, miss, thanks.” She goes into her bag and starts digging around, trying to signal to me that the conversation is over. I wait until she finishes digging out her lipstick to continue:

“I know it can be hard on a first day to put yourself out there.” She stares at me with a deadpan expression. I try again, “Today’s my first day, too. And for those four folks over there.” I motion to a small group of boys who look kind of uncomfortable while the other returning students laugh and joke and catch up about their summers. “C’mon over and help us with the poster assignment.”

Without any change in her expression or breaking eye contact, she drops the tube of lipstick back into the bag and loudly snaps the clasp shut. “I’m good. I’m going to stay here today.” She stares directly at me to see what my next move will be. I weigh my options. It is my first day; I’m not up for a fight, and besides I have no social capital—not even with my coteacher—at this point to engage in a power struggle and win.

“Ok, I can give you some room today,” I say, smiling slightly, “but tomorrow we’re gonna need you in the circle.”

“Whatever you say, miss.”

“My name is Rachel, dear. Please follow along from where you’re sitting.”

Things don’t get much better than that for the remainder of the time she is at our school. One of my strengths as a teacher is being able to connect with students and see the good in the hardest places. I am usually able to build trust rather quickly, as I demonstrate to them that I have strict rules and high expectations for a reason. That when I’m giving them a hard time it’s coming from an ethic of respect and care, not humiliation and punishment.

But for the next two years, Tanya and I battle it out, sometimes once a day. In a good week, we get by with only a couple conflicts. She often storms

out of our Crew room after I make a request for her to stop cursing or making a face at students while they are talking. While she lacks self-awareness (I began to understand through our mediations and calmer conversations that she sometimes doesn't realize how her actions are interpreted by others), she is emotionally intelligent. She uses this, however, to manipulate and bully other students. She is really *really* good at pushing buttons and identifies them in people quickly. When I am working with her, I need to recenter myself often and draw up from deep wells of empathy that I'm not sure go deep enough to influence our interactions.

We do have a few experiences, however, where I am able to find some common ground. One of our responsibilities as advisors is to be present at re-entry meetings if kids are suspended. Tanya often gets into altercations with other girls, and this time around it gets physical. I am in the main office with the principal, Tanya, and her mother, as well as the other girl's advisor and mother. We start talking about what happened and what the expectations are moving forward. I have not talked with her mother at length before; she never comes to conferences and only sometimes returns my calls. I am glad to see her here and hope that we can make some inroads.

I laid out my expectations for what we need to see moving forward and turn to Tanya's mom. "Ms. Johnson, are these expectations clear from your point of view? Anything you want to add, change, or take away?"

She turns to look at her daughter with such disdain that I think I stop breathing for a few seconds. She pauses before speaking, screwing her face into an expression that resembles experiencing a very foul smell: "It doesn't matter what you say to her. She's good for nothing. She won't do it. How dare you make me come here today, Tanya. I should be out working, putting food on the table, not here dealing with you and your nasty mouth."

In this moment, my frustrations with Tanya go away, and I feel so protective of her I want to hug her, physically shielding her from the awful words that continue to come out of her mother's mouth. It clicks for me in this moment why she is so brutal. Noah Levine, a Buddhist practitioner and teacher, says that hurt people hurt people. Never had I experienced such a stark example of this in the classroom as I do sitting across from Tanya. She cowers ever so slightly under her mother's words but soon hardens again. I don't think anyone else notices the break in her bored expression.

I wish I could say there was a real breakthrough after that or something, but there isn't. There is a short time period during her second year at school where she falls in love and she really seems to have changed. She is enthusiastic, helpful, open, and witty. It's unbelievable, really. But it only lasts

a couple months. They break up, and she goes back to waging her own private war against the rest of the world.

What is interesting about my student-teacher relationship with Tanya is that in my math class, she is a model student: engaged, hard-working, respectful, inquisitive, and committed. But in the Crew room, no matter how great things go the period before, she publicly states her hatred of the school, and of me in particular. It's a long year, and we get to experience different levels of success through contracts, social worker interventions, class excusals, and all-out blowups. I am relieved when we get to the end of the year, and I am able to place her into a different Crew, with a male teacher who is willing to work with her.

When we return to school in September, I receive word that Tanya is transferring to night school. This makes a lot of sense, since she hasn't earned more than one credit since last September and has burnt bridges with many of her peers. I can't say I am sad to see her go, either. When she comes back the last day to make the transfer, the social worker asks me if I want to come down and say goodbye to her. I quickly decline. I wish her well but do not have a desire to speak with her. She was the only student in my career that felt truly hard for me to love. I did everything I could think of to work with her and then some. I have absorbed her anger and abuses too many times to be able to reach out at this point. I appreciate her intelligence and strength, as I know intimately how hard it is to grow up with an angry mother, and I really hope that she finds happiness and peace. In a way, though, I feel defeated by her. She seems to disprove my theory that every student will bring positive energy to the community if you give them the space and support to express their goodness. I quietly bid her goodbye in my head and continue with my morning paperwork.

A couple hours later, I am in town meeting with my Crew when the social worker knocks quietly at the door. She pokes her head in and makes eye contact with me, waving me out into the hall.

"Hey, what's up?" I ask.

"Tanya's here. She's been begging me to say goodbye to you. Will you come down to my office?"

I sit there a moment, considering. I don't remember the last words Tanya spoke to me at the end of the previous school year, but I'm sure it was something on the negative side of neutral, which is the best she can do with me when she is trying her hardest. I sigh, confused but open. "Okay. Sure. I will walk down with you."

When we get close to the social worker's office, Tanya steps outside the door. "Good morning, Tanya. Good luck at your new—"

I don't get to finish my sentence because she slams into me with a big, hard hug. It lasts a couple seconds before she pulls away and looks up at me. "Thanks, Rachel. For everything. I will miss . . . being here." She shifts her eyes awkwardly down toward her feet.

I go from confused to absolutely stunned, but I don't show it to Tanya. The social worker and I meet eyes. She's been telling me for the last two years that in spite of all the struggle, I was making an impact. I didn't believe her until now. She gives me a gentle "I told you so" wink. I smile and look down at Tanya. "You're welcome. Good luck at your new school. I look forward to hearing from you when you get your diploma. You're too smart not to. Take good care of yourself, okay?" She nods. I wave to the social worker and return to the town meeting, still not really knowing what to feel.

Our Little Corner of New York

After work, I meet some of my coworkers at the bar down the street. We are friends. We respect each other. Work hard together. I wouldn't be able to do this job without them. Many people think they're an expert on education because they spent time in a classroom at some point in their life. But no one really gets the life of a teacher until they live the life of a teacher. And no one knows what it's like to teach in my school specifically other than the people I work with every day, or the ones who have worked here in the past and continue to keep in touch. The strong sense of community and belonging among our students would not exist without the same sense of community and belonging among the staff.

I am a proud member of the math department. Much like the pride of the members of my Crew can be, well, kind of irritating (when my kids went on their annual camping trip this year, one of the counselors told them that if they yelled out "Rachel's Crew!!!" one more time, they were going to leave them in the woods with just a compass and a canteen and make them fend for themselves), so too our department pride. Last month, we showed up a few minutes late to our faculty meeting and casually took off our coats to reveal our new matching T-shirts that read, "JBS Math Department: Can't Be Divided." The entire staff groaned as we high-fived and took our seats.

Though we approach it with humor and a touch of sarcasm, I really am a proud member of my department. Our combined expertise and ways of collaborating really stand out as a unique experience. At my first school, I was paired with a more experienced colleague to coteach geometry to some of our struggling students. When I asked if he wanted to plan together, he

firmly dismissed me. When I asked for lesson plans the night before so I could be ready for class, he refused because he didn't want me to steal his work. An ex-partner of mine was a brilliant science teacher who would help me out when I taught biology back in the Bronx. She would share her lessons with me but make me agree not to show them to anyone else since, according to her, it was her work and she didn't want anyone else to take credit for it.

Here it's the total opposite. We share tools, lessons, strategies, and ideas among our department and entire staff. When I need support or assistance, there are many people volunteering to help. When one of our kids needs redirection or support, we sit down together, have a meeting, and work it out. We meet as a whole group twice a week to discuss school policies, issues, and innovations. This time was intentionally built in to our schedules at the school's inception. While we sometimes complain about staff meetings, like teachers at any other school, there is something really powerful and affirming about sitting with your whole staff and working things out together. It reminds us that we are not alone in this work and helps develop a deep respect for each other that is necessary when working with such a tough student population. Mutual respect and aid are part of our practice as much as scaffolding and differentiation. Together, we model what we are asking the students to step up and do. It makes it apparent that we mean what we say and proving that it can be put into practice.

And so, together, we run a school and create a community. We perform miracles together and fail together. Of different politics, backgrounds, and ultimate ambitions, we are all united in this: we show up every day so our kids can earn their diplomas, learn about humanity, democracy, and community in the process, and become critical thinkers and actors in the world. Some kids drop out, but many of them pass and do just that. They come back and visit. Join the army. Go to college. Start college and drop out. Go back. Drop out. Some come back and work at the school. Some succeed by conventional measures and others succeed by their own, but I am sure of one thing: every student and staff member leaves here better for having been part of our community. It's not your usual school, but then again, the usual schools are not serving our students. That's how we all got to this little corner of New York in the first place.