

English 120: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay  
Professor Ryan Wepler

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Sophie Dillon

Note: Some names have been changed.

A Security Debriefing with R. Rosarbo on the Subject of Wilbur Cross High School

by Sophie Dillon

What I had heard about Ronnie, Wilbur Cross High School's most famous security guard, before entering the building my freshman year is as follows:

- Ronnie is a human megaphone. Truants quake from the power of his awesome throat.
- Ronnie is very orange. He is a gold member at Tommy's Tanning.
- Ronnie's silver hair is rock solid. He uses gel every morning to freeze it in glossy crenulation.
- Ronnie wears sunglasses at all times, to instill fear in those unaware of the path his eyes may take.
- Ronnie very much enjoys the company of Wilbur Cross's fine young women. Upon groping the interior of their backpacks in the morning (a mandatory security measure, along with a metal detector and ID scan), he often implores them: "Gimme a kiss."
- Ronnie teaches softball. He stretches the team out by hand. He insists circulation is best in a tight uniform.
- Ronnie used to help a Cross student smuggle cocaine into the second floor bathroom tampon dispensers. It was a lucrative business. No one knows what went wrong.
- Ronnie sings when he thinks he is alone. Miles Margulies once happened upon an off-key "Edelweiss."

- Ronnie won't check for a hall pass if you're white.
- Like every other fixture of Wilbur Cross, Ronnie will be funny in retrospect. I promise.  
Four more years.

He agreed to an interview before I explained what it was for. In the fifty or so feet from his post by the sheet glass doors and the teachers' lounge, he scores three high-fives from uninterested students and gives a loud, purposeless "Ok!" reminiscent of Lil Jon. His gait is the lovechild of a Spaghetti Western Sheriff and The Situation. In my three years of walking Wilbur Cross's dim hallways, Ronnie has remained a mythical creature to me, an impenetrable beast: the Guido gone to seed. When we sit down, I realize I don't even know his name.

"Ronald V. Rosarbo."

He removes identical walkie-talkies from their respective holsters and sets them on the table. They crackle and spit throughout the interview, random numbers in bass voices.

Ronald V. Rosarbo grew up in a classically large Italian family in New Haven. He graduated from Cross in 1963. Never, in a million years, he assures me, did he imagine he would be back here.

"What made me decide to go into security was, I sat down one night and I said, 'What do I want to do with the rest of my life?' I said 'I would really love to work with children.' I love my job, I love doin' this and helping kids. The thing I'm most proud of is all the girls and gentlemen I've helped get into college. That's the most important thing. I've developed a lot of personal relationships, especially with the graduates that have graduated."

This is the first time I have heard anyone call restraining children, "working with them," or assume the position of security guard has anything to do with encouraging college acceptance.

I realize, then, this is the most I have ever heard Ronnie speak. Though his sentences are filled with grammatical errors, he speaks with the measured pauses and assertiveness of a politician. An administrative veneer sometimes conceals his answers, disguising nonsensical content.

“The hardest part of my job,” Ronnie pontificates, “and what a lot of teachers and staff don’t realize is a lot of our children don’t eat. They face criseses that I never had to face. Their parents on drugs. Their siblings getting shot. Their friends getting shot, killed. No food on the table. Nowhere really to go, a lot of different things that are said about them, Facebook and Twitter and all this other stuff. When I was in school the only thing we had was the telephone.”

Ronnie blames most of the Cross student body’s problems on the immediacy of social networks. He says 95% of the fights he breaks up are “he said she said.” This is entirely different from the Wilbur Cross Ronnie started working at seventeen years ago. The New Haven Board of Education decided Cross needed security after a teacher was shot to death at the school store.

“When I first started, we used to have 8-10 fights a day. A day. We used to average 45 a week. Now those were all gang-related. Ok?”

Though Ronnie assures me fights are down to two a month (which my personal recollection contradicts), Wilbur Cross is still home to severely disenfranchised kids, the racial breakdown of which is about half black, half Hispanic, with a wedge of Caucasian jammed in awkwardly. Ronnie tells me Cross has not had any major incidents within the past seven years. The lunchroom fight that sent eleven students to juvie last year apparently didn’t count, or the catfight my sister witnessed four years ago involving a pregnant girl whose shirt was ripped off and unborn child beaten to death in the process.

I ask Ronnie for the craziest thing he has seen in his career, hoping he may give me something unimaginably absurd. Instead, he tells me about the day a French nanny was beaten in

the park across the street from Wilbur Cross, barely surviving to crawl up the embankment of the Mill River and search for her child, who had wandered safely to a Day Care a block away.

“That was the craziest, one of my craziest days at Wilbur Cross. One of the best days also, ‘cause a lot of the students came out and helped look for the baby.” This seems to be the only involvement of Wilbur Cross in the story, and the only part I find particularly “crazy”—that students were released from class to comb New Haven for a toddler. I can’t tell if Ronnie is holding back out of Wilbur Cross pride, or some confusion about being the school’s ambassador.

He defends teachers being caught on camera with brotherly vigor: ““Oh she’s having a moment, let me get her on, put her on Facebook.’ That’s an invasion of privacy.” I don’t interrupt him to argue that some Cross teachers deserve recording—namely Mrs. Brunetti, who told her students a few months ago she would not want to be in the same water as Muslims, because “they are dirty,” or the guidance counselor last year who was blackmailed into passing students because of her online pornography career: Ms. Stark, or “Nelly Rock.”

At least it explains why Ronnie’s hair is always gelled to perfection—“As security, we never know when we’re going to be filmed.”

Ronnie has a simple solution to school reform.

“The first three days of Wilbur Cross High School should be getting to know each other. You should know your classmates, how do you know what they eat next to you? Ok? Everyone should write an essay. Don’t have to put your name to it, the essay should be written in class and discussed. And I will tell you this, everyone will have a better understanding of everyone else.”

Ronnie's suggestions seem Student Council-y in nature: movie nights, more dances. He reminisces about the streamer-strung dances he attended as a student. "I mean, the school was a center of activity. We don't have that. We need to bring some of that back."

Ronnie's ideas seem to fall under the overused school reform term: "building smaller learning communities," a goal that has been attempted numerous times out of numerous wallets. Then Ronnie says something I have never heard out of an administrator's mouth:

"I think we're too focused on academics."

I restrain myself from laughing audibly.

Ronnie continues, spittle and gesticulations flying with equal force. He wants a return to that good old face-to-face contact, believes Cross's success lies in the friendship of its students. Ronnie talks about the difficulties teachers face when illiterate or nearly illiterate children are dumped on them, and the plain fact that "Some people aren't built for education."

Though finding sanctioned ways to spend as little time as possible in Wilbur Cross is a skill I've honed for years, most students skip class for the hallways, look at lunch as a sacred place for friendship instead of a prison wallpapered in stale celebrities jauntily sporting the "got milk?" mustache, see the street Spanish catcalls from the boys outside Guidance as a legitimate part of a mating ritual. Ronnie isn't suggesting we give up on education. He is seeing what administrators refuse to—that most Cross kids couldn't care less about a college degree. Constantly trying to sell them higher education alienates them from the classes at hand. It's community, a sense of belonging that they want and will listen to—not wrinkled hands shoving SAT fee waivers in their faces. Ronnie sees the necessary stair between Cross and college, the remedy to making high school relevant. Even if kids don't go on to a degree, at least they'll stick

around for a graduation cap—currently a feat only half the student body performs. Ronnie has a hell of a point.

What I gathered from an hour in the teacher’s lounge with Wilbur Cross High School’s most famous security guard, is as follows:

- Ronnie genuinely loves Wilbur Cross. He begged his daughter to come, and was heartbroken when she didn’t.
- Ronnie wears his sunglasses because he has a lazy eye. When he tells you what he really feels is the honest-ta-God trut, he lowers his chin and his right eye looks into you, while the left stares down the bridge of his nose.
- Ronnie’s daughter got him into softball. He’s coached the CT Raiders for 21 years.
- Ronnie’s biggest regret is that he didn’t become a history teacher.
- Ronnie loves singing his “boy,” Bruno Mars. His favorite song: Mars’ cover of Amy Winehouse’s “Valerie.”
- In seventeen years, Ronnie has only received one remark about the color of his skin—while working overtime at another high school.
- Many students talk to Ronnie about their problems on a regular basis. He counsels them, listens, lets them vent about all the “he said she said.” He holds their troubles so they may get back to class. Most of them have come back to thank him years later as college students. Ronnie has become the one-man Student Council, gluing a community out of students jaded by everything but the newest Apple product.

At the metal detectors the day after our interview, Ronnie passes my bag through the check table without even the smallest squeeze. He gives me a rough hug, pressing my ribcage in like I am six years old and he is my father, realizing that one day I will grow out of him.

“I’m sure you’ll get an A, honey.”

I thank him, pick up my bag, and hurry through the dim, fluorescent hallways. Hours afterward, his cologne lingers.