

Eight Kids and a Rookie:

Speech, Theater, and Me in the Fields of Dreams

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It all began so innocently.

As I was finishing my student teaching in May of 1991, I was offered what seemed like a dream job for the next fall at a tiny high school with Kentucky's best test scores. I planned to spend the summer studying at Oxford University, so I snapped up the job and scurried off to England, dreaming of the five English classes I would return to.

While I was overseas, the principal at my new school decided that I would resurrect the defunct speech and theater program. He managed to tell ME about it a week after I arrived back in the country: two weeks before school started. He'd seen *Field of Dreams* too many times, for he seemed to think that if I rebuilt it, they would come.

I wasn't completely without a background in speech and theater. I'd been state speech champion in high school and the male lead in the senior musical. I'd served as an assistant to my former speech coach while in college, and I'd been in college plays. But I had no formal training -- I was an English major with specialties in writing, Shakespeare, and 20th Century African-American lit. It didn't matter. Because of Kentucky's expansive Language Arts secondary certificate, I was fully certified to teach speech and theater, even if I wasn't sure how. Innocently, naively, stupidly, I thought, "This will be fun. How hard can it be?"

I'll bet Custer said the same thing.

I was to teach a combined speech and drama course sixth period. The first day, I had four students. Ed walked in the classroom first. His mom, a school board member, signed him up and told her shy son about it the first

day of school. Jeanette, a senior, was a kid I'd met the week before school began. She showed me around the school like she owned the place, and she decided to give speech and drama a whirl. Joe was a likable kid in my fourth period English class, and I was pleased when he dumped word processing to join us. April was a girl you knew on sight was from the wrong side of the tracks. She was in English class with Joe, and since we were both nice to her the first day, she said she thought speech and drama would be the place for her.

By the end of the first week, I had eight students. Jeremy, Shane, and Tim were seniors who needed another class that period, and Ginger decided physics was too hard. Ed, Joe, Jeanette, and April rounded out the group. Eight was enough.

It was quite a beginning. We began by playing silly games -- what I would later learn were akin to Spolin's improvisational techniques. We then moved on to character creation. I'll never forget Crazy Ed's Used Cars and Bible School, as it was our first glimpse into the charismatic actor Ed would become. I'll also never forget Tim's Indian convenient store clerk who I thought was **so original** until the other kids clued me in that he was a regular on *The Simpsons* (I was a first-year teacher -- who knew what a TV even was?). Still, I kept them in front of the class as much as I possibly could, and I found myself looking forward to sixth period each day. Mysteries had always fascinated me--who knew how each day would turn out?

What impressed me most about the kids was their enthusiasm. Only Jeanette was tracked into honors English; the other kids were average students who were delighted to gain recognition, attention, teacher praise. It was like teaching was supposed to be. The students were motivated and worked hard. It was even fun!

I got braver. In October, I took my Incredible Eight to a state drama contest. Amazingly, Shane and Jeanette placed third in Improvisational Pairs. Ginger and Jeremy placed fourth in Duet Acting. I took them there for the experience and, seemingly, miracles occurred. We were all learning a great deal.

The year concluded busily with speechwriting, impromptu speaking (eight speeches about Elvis!), children's theater, debate, and a storytelling festival -- all memorable, all frantic and saddening and wonderful, hands-on learning experiences. No one learned more than I did; I even met the generation gap head-on as one of them innocently asked, "But who IS Carol Burnett?"

Maybe my greatest lesson that year was from one of the kids himself. Out of the blue, he tried to kill himself in April. As he underwent therapy, he told his doctors he felt more comfortable talking to me than anyone else. His parents told me about it, so I made myself available to him outside of school -- not to practice vigilante psychiatry, but just to be someone who listened and cared.

It worked. He came to extra practices, called me to chat about girls and grades, came to my house to eat my experimental bachelor cooking, and we became real friends. I was hesitant to let down the personal distance barriers we teachers erect, but the end result was that he came to trust me and eventually himself again, and he became a fairly normal college kid after graduation.

I learned from my Original Eight that students of drama and speech need their teachers to listen to what's being said. Our students put their most fragile, personal selves in front of us for evaluation. If we don't listen, or if we respond in the wrong way, we can do more damage than any math or science teacher ever dreamed of. The beauty is what can happen if we do listen. The kids learn that not only can they communicate, but they have something worth saying. It's this lesson that keeps me in education on the

days when I'd rather pour concrete than listen to one more spoken word.

My first principal was right. If you allow students the opportunity, they grow as communicators and as people. If you build it, they will come. My dream changed, and I moved to a different playing field that "just an English teacher." These days, half my teaching time is devoted to speech and theater courses, and I coach a strong forensics team and direct plays after school. In addition, I serve as the Kentucky chair of the National Forensic League, and I even act myself in community theater. Because of those eight kids, my entire course as a teacher shifted, and I'm a better teacher and person because of it; I can no longer imagine "just" teaching English. I'm not as innocent as I used to be -- eight years of high school students, two high schools, and a new Master's in speech and theater education have seen to that -- but I'm still here, building and rebuilding and rebuilding. My new dream is to keep doing what I'm doing, walking with my students through the speech and theater fields of dreams.

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