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“I Have The Same Name As The President!”

By Kevin La Plante

Teaching in the inner-city of Detroit can be compared to being a front-line medic stationed in a war zone. The medic works in direct opposition to his surroundings. In almost futile spurts of intense activity, he practices the act of healing while everyone else is hell-bent on destruction. The teacher and the medic have little or no control over the environment; the battles will rage on with or without them. Time spent complaining about the deplorable conditions, the status of the patient, or the total insanity of the entire system is counterproductive. Each time the medic surrenders to the frustration and allows himself to wallow in pity, one more person is lost.

Surgeons or medics quickly discover that they can't save them all. My principal has uttered those exact same words to me on more than one occasion when she sensed my disappointment over not being able to do more for a child. While I am grateful for my principal's support and understanding, I place a slightly different spin on that philosophy: While it may be true that we can't save them all, we must teach as if we can.

Teaching in a poverty-rich neighborhood crammed full of so much socio-economic injustice has hardened me a bit. Having front-line experience with nearly every social problem in existence has hardened my determination. I have not developed a vaccine that will cure America of

her ugliness, but I do my best to stop the bleeding, patch my students, and move them further ahead.

I despise statistics for the insensitive and ignorant manner in which they claim to prove anything at all, and I, especially, grow outraged when children are reduced to numbers. For each and every casualty in our society, there is a story—a story worth being told, and one that is far more powerful than a number. Statistics provide too much room for excuses and explanations for our inhumanity, but a story forces us to listen and get to know a person who deserves more than casually being ignored. What follows is William's story, with the hope that his story will not end in tragedy.

While it may be true that we can't save them all, we must teach as if we can.

Back to School: The Hard Realities

As always, I was excited to return to school this year. I suppose the day I am not will be the day I find another profession. I had recently returned from a solitary backpacking trip in Shenandoah National Park where I hiked mountains and stared out across valleys covered by so

many trees that the green hurt my eyes. From these vistas I felt so totally at peace that had you told me that there was nothing wrong with the world, I just might have believed you.

My peace was shattered the first day I drove through the neighborhood where my school stands defiantly against the hopelessness and depression that mark too many of her neighbors. It was as if I had just plunged into a cold, mountain lake—but there was nothing refreshing about my view. I turned the talk-radio babble off and just looked around. I was amazed, stupefied by how nothing had changed. The neighborhood looked exactly like it did when I left for my summer retreat to the wilderness and water. Conservatives tend to like when things stay the same, but in this neighborhood, change would help. Each generation is claimed by the ghosts of the previous one with little more than a whisper. Others don't make it to the next generation because of the real drama of a gun pop.

I was depressed as I made my way to the school, and just as I turned the corner, I saw them—beautiful children running to the building. They smiled and laughed, and they were excited that school was back in session. I know a lot of children in the suburbs and in rural communities cringe at the thought of returning to school after summer vacation, but our kids welcome the return, and some even aren't afraid to admit it. School is safe, dependable, and every once in a while the learning is even fun. I heard one of the students yell out my name and he waved as I carefully maneuvered to the rear parking lot. By the time I closed my car door their enthusiasm had rubbed off on me, and I couldn't wait to get started.

This year I was fortunate to have a seventh-eighth grade split for the integrated Language Arts and Social Studies block I teach. Most teachers in our building loathe this arrangement, but I volunteered for it. One of the positives was that I had a little more control over my class list than usual. I did not load up on all the brains. On the contrary, I sought out a nice balance, and I even agreed to take four Special Education Resource students. Other teachers felt I might be able to really help these students, and I took that recom-

mendation as a very high compliment from my colleagues.

Many of our students are very needy; they are classified "at risk" the moment they walk through the door. However, I have always maintained that the neediest children deserve the best teachers. From my experiences and work in other districts, I have concluded that inner-city schools have both the worst and best teachers I have known. Working with "at risk" children is a definite challenge. The rewards can be huge, but then again so can the costs.

...the neediest children deserve the best teachers

I often draw parallels to the sports world because the metaphors seem to stick and because sport is a microcosm of life. So it seems to me that a teacher who wants to help the neediest children is like the superstar who wants to take the last-second shot to win or lose the game. Many players shy away from that kind of pressure; others eat it up. From my limited time spent working with William, I knew the game had just moved beyond that last-second shot pressure into overtime.

Reaching the Hard-to-Reach: It Takes a Village

William came to our school when our new resource teacher, Ms. Dearden, transferred from another building. She brought William with her because she had grown very fond of the young man, and she suspected he would be lost without her. She probably was right.

When we talk about "reaching the hard to reach," we must never forget that many people reach out and try to help young people. If we hope to be successful, it must be a team effort. I see this cooperative compassion every day, and while this smacks in the face every perception of inner-city teachers and schools, I will testify that there are more caring, dedicated teachers trying their best to help than there are teachers who don't care. I don't think we stress this point enough. Yes, it

takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to abandon one. Our resource teacher, counselor, security guard, and many others like them have decided that that won't happen on their watch.

William has quite a file. His home life stinks. He hasn't spent much time with his father. He is quite intelligent, but he is a classic underachiever. He is small for his size, yet he wants to beat up the whole world. He is biracial, light-skinned, and he spends a lot of time proving that he's "black enough" for the other students' acceptance. William fits the description of almost any emotionally impaired youngster, but if we actually expect to help students like William, we cannot let those labels get in the way.

I am quite aware that teachers like practical advice from articles that can be applied to the classroom. And if that's what you're after, I'm sorry, you will be disappointed. I offer no sage wisdom, no best practice tips, or any learning systems that will miraculously rescue every hurting child. All I can say is that every hard-to-reach child must be dealt with using a case-by-case approach. Every student is an individual with a unique history, and if we seriously intend to do more than scratch the surface and do something that will serve as a meaningful benefit, then we must face the complexity of the problems.

...many people reach out and try to help young people

On the first day of school William appeared glad to see me. Last year, William couldn't count on much. He could count on the fact that he was constantly in trouble and that the resource teacher would do her best to pick up the pieces. But this year was his chance for a fresh start.

I had had William in a couple of my elective classes the year before, and he always worked well for me. I recognized that he needed quite a bit of structure, but I made sure he had ample opportunity for some creative expression and important moments of success.

From my limited exposure with William in the past and from the way he began the year with such a positive attitude, I had every reason to be optimistic. However, this case study breaks ranks in numerous ways, primarily in the outcome. William's story is not a skyrocketing success story. The outcome is still pending, and more struggles surface even as I write down and reflect on the ones that have delivered us to today.

It is often helpful to shift our sights back in time and fondly reminisce on what worked in the classroom, but maybe it's equally advantageous to scrutinize what didn't fall into place ever so neatly. Our stumbling blocks can be a great source of growth. We must get past blame and guilt; these emotions aren't very constructive. But we can attempt to develop a deeper understanding of a situation so that the past may serve us well in the future, even if it didn't at the time.

Every year I jot down in my journal all that went really well; I tally up the small victories and use them as fuel for the next year. It's from here that new ideas and theme studies often are conceived. In our profession it's important to pat ourselves on the back every once in a while because not many others will do it for us. Once my spirits are high, I turn to a clean page and write at the top, "The one student I could've done more for this year is ... " I have never drawn a blank. Usually, it's a hard-to-reach student, and in every case, I did try to help, but somehow I felt it wasn't enough.

Now, I don't beat myself up over those conditions beyond my control, but I take a stark look at all that was in my control. The exercise not only forces me to review my teaching practices and whether or not my intervention strategies worked but, more importantly, the exercise triggers a chain reaction of ideas. Little explosions light up in my mind, and I plot ways that I can become a better teacher next year. This act makes my teaching experience far more valuable than credited years towards retirement. Even still, before the first quarter was over I had a sinking feeling that William would be my candidate this year, hands down.

Working with William: Step Forward, Leap Backward

In his first week at school William got into three near-fights. Punches were not thrown, but a cacophony of insults was followed by a pushing match before I could get in the middle. In every case, William went after a bigger, tougher kid who could destroy him. I wondered if he had some kind of Napoleonic complex or just a death wish. The incidents never were with the same student, for it seemed like William detested all the children without the least bit of discrimination. He was fine in the classroom where I could fix a watchful eye on his every move, but once he was in the halls or lined up for lunch, his self-control disappeared.

At first I put on my counselor hat. I asked him why he was so angry. He didn't say. My psychological probe continued from a different angle, "Why did you want to fight him?" He either replied he didn't know, or he said the other student had said some "junk." I brought it to his attention that his pattern was to get into it with everybody. He just shrugged his shoulders.

Weeks went on like this. Every day William was involved in some sort of controversy. It was as if he was nothing more than a rambunctious kindergartner trapped in a seventh-grader's body. By this age, they usually outgrow some of that foolishness. William greeted his fellow students with either an insult or a hit, and while many did their best to ignore him, all of his "playing" was wearing on everyone's patience.

In time my counselor's hat was put away, and I wore the hat of a police officer. It became absolutely imperative to keep the peace. I jumped all over William for any little thing, his freedom was cut drastically, and if he was involved in a disagreement, I automatically assumed it was his fault. This hardline approach worked, but one day after I had disciplined William, he mumbled under his breath, "I hate this class."

I have had students mad at me before, but no one had ever said they hated me or the class. I didn't say anything when he said it, but I thought about it the rest of the day and through the night.

Of course, he hated this class. For one, I had made it a pretty miserable place for him to be. I justified my actions because I felt I was making

the class better for the rest of the community. But the more I watched William, and the more I thought about William, I concluded that it was only natural that he hated this class. He hated life.

The reasons were typical: Years of abuse and neglect had left their mark. It's not necessary to share all of the painful moments that I know he has had to deal with throughout his lifetime, but I will say that hating the world may have been his best survival skill.

I realized that while I didn't hate William, I was coming at him with the same anger that engulfed his entire personality. A change had to be made.

The most difficult part about William's situation is that he wasn't always bad. In fact, while in class he frequently worked with genuine excitement. He liked history, writing poetry, and contributing to class discussions. In October the class was studying the Presidential election. We were sizing up the candidates, as well as learning how the Electoral College unfolds. Among other activities, I required that the students watch one of the debates.

The next day William came into class all excited. He said,

"Mr. La Plante, do you know I have the same name as the President?"

"Actually, I never really thought about it, William, but that is pretty cool now that you mention it."

"Yes, it is," he said. "William Jefferson Clinton. The Jefferson part comes from Thomas Jefferson. You remember, the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence."

"I'm glad to see you were listening. I didn't know that about Clinton being named after him, though. Are you sure he wasn't named after Jefferson Davis since he was from the South?"

"Who?"

"Jefferson Davis. He was the President of the Confederate States of America during the Civil War."

"Oh, him. Maybe, but I think it was Thomas Jefferson. I think Thomas Jefferson was one of the first Democrats or something. Besides if he was named after Jefferson Davis, don't you think his name would be William Davis Clinton?"

"That makes sense, I guess."

"Hey, Mr. La Plante, do you think I could ever be President?"

"Well, when Bill Clinton was a young man he shook President Kennedy's hand, and the meeting inspired him to dream about becoming President someday."

"Yeah, but Kennedy got his head blown off. He's not around anymore. Do you think I can be President some day?"

"Anything's possible, William. If you work hard, apply yourself, and really use that intelligence you have been blessed with, then I can see you becoming President one day. Why, do you want to be President?"

"Not really, I was just wondering. I want to be a pro basketball player."

The difficult part is that one minute I felt like I was making some real progress with William, and the next he reverted back to some bone-headed delinquency. It never seemed to fail. The cycle was impenetrable: Near-greatness followed by some immature act where he would attack or incite another student.

Earlier in the year the class made a "Poetry Quilt." Each student had one square. They had to write a short poem, paste it on the felt, and then illustrate their section so that poetic images matched the quilt's artwork. The project was spectacular. William wrote a poem that seemed out of character. The words didn't seem to fit with his personality, but then I thought maybe I didn't know his true character. Better yet, maybe this was the type of peace he yearned to obtain. In any case, it's a beautiful poem.

PHILOSOPHICAL DAYDREAMS

My life
is like a steady
summer stream
uninterrupted by the outside world ...

as peaceful
as a fall pond
content to fall asleep and dream ...

as graceful
as snowflakes
falling
from the winter sky.

The paint wasn't even dry on the quilt before William got in trouble again—another suspension for fighting. It was around November when the resource teacher painfully suggested that we consider moving William back to a full-time emotionally impaired (E.I.) room. I didn't want to admit it, but maybe I wasn't the best person to help William. After he got into it with a student who wouldn't hurt anyone, I decided I would write the letter documenting all of his problems. William had become somewhat of a bully, and I can't stand bullies. It's not that William didn't want to fit in with his peers, he wanted friendship desperately. He simply was unaware of how to go about it. He felt casting insults and knocking heads would gain him respect.

After he got into another fight with one of the more gentle students, I was furious again. I felt betrayed and defeated. For every step forward, he took five, giant leaps backwards. This was a mess, and I decided I would write the final letter recommending that William be moved out of my room. I fired off the letter, gave it to the resource teacher, and asked if she could just sit on it for a while until I had some time to cool off.

William ended up getting suspended for punching that student, and while he was gone I pulled out his Treasury (similar to a Portfolio) and began to read through some of his work. It touched me because in his stories, poems, and artwork, I confronted the complexity of his situation. I knew if he was placed in an E.I. room it meant he would have to leave the school. Furthermore, I knew that most of the full-time Special Education classrooms in our district were a joke. It was not uncommon to find a room full of extremely needy children being managed by teachers with the least amount of training. Sending William away would be like sentencing him to prison—he might deserve it, but odds were, he would only get worse.

I read a piece William had written at the beginning of the year that described his summer and a little bit more about the complexity that could not be untangled:

I went to Adrian, Michigan for my summer vacation, and for the first time in three years I saw my father. I was very anxious. My father took me to the Jurassic Water Park. We had a great time.

My father and I exchanged memories and looked at old pictures. On August 10th my father and I went to North Carolina for my uncle's wedding. I was the ring bearer and my father was the best man. So I guess you can say that I had a summer well spent.

I had a lot to think about. The painful part of this piece was that William really needed his father, but the relationship was back to the way it was before the summer. His father was absent, and William was hurting. While William was gone the resource teacher and I talked about him every day. She even called him once to see how he was doing. She went over the brutal litany of experiences he has had to endure, and while I felt sorry for him, I still was leaning towards sending him to another room. I rationalized it by saying I had done my best. It was time to wash my hands of the matter since I can't save them all.

Threats were useless against William. How could you threaten a kid who already has had the worst done to him? He was hard. Even before his last fight Ms. Dearden and I warned him and his mother that he was on thin ice and it was cracking. We told them of our plans to ship him off to an E.I. room. William just said, "Whatever." The resource teacher even told him, "Listen, you have had every opportunity. You have the best teacher in the school, and if you can't make it with Mr. La Plante, you can't make it." Her praise made my decision all the more acceptable.

Sharing William's Story: "No one was ever there for me when I was growing up."

Near Thanksgiving I went away to the National Council of Teachers of English Fall Conference in Chicago. I was part of a group that presented at the conference, and I was asked to

bring samples of student writing. That request was never a problem. The real dilemma was narrowing down the selections. I couldn't do it before I left so I brought the whole class set of our "Growing Up" stories. The students had just finished workshopping and keyboarding their pieces that week, so the work was hot off the presses and packed full of intensity.

While in Chicago I read through the stack again. The work was powerful. Many were exceptional and worthy of being shared, but I was forced to publish only a few. I figured if I was lucky and kept my talking to a minimum, maybe I would have time to read one. All of the students and parents had completed written consent forms for publication, so the class's total participation made my job all the more difficult.

Somehow I managed to narrow the field to four. I struck up a balance of two boys, two girls, two eighth-graders, two seventh-graders, two strong writers, two emerging writers, and when I made copies at Kinko's I was overjoyed that William's piece was among the final four.

When I walked into the conference room, I still was unsure which story I would share given the opportunity. I don't know if it was because the story wasn't very long, or maybe it was because the imagery was so descriptive, or maybe it was just because as I read the words I saw his face the clearest in my mind; no matter, for whatever the reason, William's story, "My Neighborhood," was the one I shared with the group.

My neighborhood is like a rat infested hell hole. Trash is scattered all over the alley behind the house. People just throw their garbage wherever they want, and the funny part is that there are dumpsters back there that few people even bother to use. The rats and mice love it in the alley. They roam all over the alley like they own the place. Some of the rats are as big as small dogs, so I stay out of their way.

Probably the worst part about my neighborhood is it just looks real bad. It doesn't look like a place where anyone would want to live. A lot of people have left this part of the city, leaving behind their rundown, abandoned buildings. The wild dogs have moved in. They are real mean, junkyard dogs full of rabies, and when you're walking down the streets

you always have to be ready to out run the pack.

There is a crumbling shell of a house on the corner of Greyfriars and Deacon that I'm sure is a crackhouse. People stumble in and out of that house all day.

It's real tough growing up in my neighborhood. Acting hard in my neighborhood will just get you put in the hospital, but I had to put it to the test and find out the hard way.

A while back I walked around my neighborhood trying to be a tough guy. I would do whatever it took to be bad. One day I got into a scuffle with a boy that called me out. Well, in my hood there is no such thing as a fair fight. I beat him pretty good the first time, but before I knew it, he went and rounded up his cousins. I got jumped and they beat me down. I came out of the fight with a sprained ankle, a bunch of cuts, and a broken collar bone. No one was there for me when I was growing up. There was no one there to teach me that you can always be beaten, and that there is always someone tougher than you. I have missed my chance, but I want to make sure that my younger brother doesn't miss his. I will make sure that my little brother doesn't have to learn the hard way because a lot of times the hard way can kill you. I will be there for my brother, and in my neighborhood that means something.

The room was speechless after I read William's story. I saw tears in more than one set of eyes, and I had to choke them back myself while I read. William's writing shows exactly what's wrong with the world: Too many children can write these same heart-wrenching words without thinking twice. They don't have to dig for painful material, it's right there everyday. Pain has become normal. The worse part is that if this piece were fiction, I don't know if we would believe it.

When William wrote the sentence, "No one was there for me when I was growing up," I couldn't get the idea out of my head. It took the wind out of me like I had been socked in the stomach. I'm not sure which part is sadder: The fact that no one was there, or the fact that he considered himself already grown up. He is a seventh-grade boy, not yet a teenager, and already he felt he had missed his chance. I left the

conference ashamed that I had to travel to Chicago to learn what was there for me to discover every day in class: William needed someone, and right now, I was just about all he had.

Looking Toward the New Year: The Story Continues

I wanted to hug William when I returned to school that Monday, but I didn't. Instead I told him that I had read his story and how much everyone loved it. His eyes lit up with pride, and a smile stretched across his face. I found out he had misbehaved for the substitute a little bit, but I was in too good of a mood to let that bring me down. Besides, just about everyone misbehaves for a sub.

I held a private conference with William before the day was over. I told him we would reevaluate his case after the holidays. He would be on a form of probation. He seemed willing to accept those conditions, and he promised me he would pull his act together.

He did for a couple of weeks, but the saga of highs and lows continued. Later in the month he got into it with another mild-mannered boy. The battle of extremes was back in full effect.

I didn't even say a word to William this time. I filled out a referral explaining the whole scene as calmly as possible. I asked William to get his things, and I escorted him to the door. I handed him the referral and in the coldest, most robotic tone I could muster, I said, "William that was your last chance. I'm disappointed in you, and sorry it has come to this, but you have left me no choice. You're on your own."

William didn't want to reach out for the referral. I pushed at him again and told him to take it. Slowly his hand moved for the paper. I looked down at him and he looked up at me. His eyes were full of tears. I knew this was not an act. William never cried, and he had been in enough trouble before to use the ploy if he had wanted. He turned away quickly and left. I wondered if he would slam the door. He did the opposite; he closed the door carefully and respectfully. He looked back at me through the glass, and this time I saw that tears were streaming down his

cheeks. I didn't say a word and returned to teaching the class as if nothing had happened.

William wound up being excluded until the last day before the break. We were having our holiday party that day. He must have found out about the celebration from his classmates because he returned with a tray of homemade cupcakes that he and his Mom had baked. I told him to sit in his seat and not get out for any reason without my permission. He did. I managed to wish him a Merry Christmas as he left, but I don't think he thought that I meant it.

Over the holidays I found myself thinking about William more and more. What should I do with the young man? I am fortunate to have my students for three to four hours a day. We can get a lot done, but more importantly, we build some strong bonds. I have the time to get to know them, they get to know me, and we forge a real family-type relationship. I seriously doubted if William would have this closeness in another setting.

I shared a beautiful Christmas with my daughter. She was happy beyond belief. Her biggest childhood worries have been skinned-knees and whether or not the flowers will come back once they die in the fall. I wouldn't want it any other way, but it's not fair that other children can't have what she has. They are all deserving. I wondered how William's Christmas was after my daughter finished opening her presents. I think a lot about my students when I am away from them.

As far as William's situation was concerned, I resigned myself to the fact that I cared for the young man. I would go back to school and see what happened. Maybe a miracle had occurred over the dawn of the new year.

As a way of getting back into the mix, I asked my students to write their New Year's Resolutions in their journals. It was a pretty lame prompt to be sure, right up there with "what did you do over summer vacation?" but it was a start, nonetheless. Most of the responses were as uninspiring as my prompt, but not William's. He surprised me when he wrote how he knew he had screwed up in my class last semester, and how I had tried to help him. He went on to state that he had to accept the consequences, but he wished he had one more chance to do better. He said he was ready to do

better because over the break he thought about all that he had lost.

Without fail, William had piqued my curiosity. I cannot remember a time when he ever accepted responsibility for his own actions. In case that wasn't enough, this was a far cry from "hating" my class. I wondered if we can ever give children too many chances, especially if they are trying to improve. After all, isn't it our jobs to teach them? I can say unequivocally that on more than one occasion I have learned from my mistakes. Maybe William could do the same.

In my journal I wrote about how I want to tackle that in life which seems the most difficult right now. I recalled hearing Judson Hixson when I was a first-year teacher. Above any pep talk or educational jargon, I always have held his words close to my heart. He said that teachers gladly will take credit for those students who succeed, and most of those students probably would succeed without them. He went on to point out that very few ever take the blame for those who had failed. As far as "tackling that which seems most difficult," I already had William—why not finish the job?

I talked to William after class, and I asked him what he wanted out of the new year. He stared me in the eyes and said, "I want to stay in your class, Mr. La Plante." I felt embarrassed that I had somehow coaxed that response out of him, but once it was in the air I seized the moment.

"You do?" I asked. He shook his head yes. "Well, maybe that can be arranged. You know if we don't proceed with the paperwork in the next couple of weeks, you'll be stuck in here for the rest of the year."

He smiled. We were silent for some time, I heard the clock's second hand ticking on the wall, and I was about to say something stupid when William spoke up. "Mr. La Plante, do you think I can still be President?"

Now it was my turn to smile. I laughed and said, "William, if we make it through this year, I think you've got it made."

About the Author

Kevin LaPlante, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant and frequent conference presenter, teaches eighth grade at Dewey Center in Detroit.