PERSONAL STORYTELLING:

A STUDY OF THE PURPOSE AND ART OF THE EDUCATIONAL MEMOIR

and

YOU READY, FELLOW? – A MEMOIR

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ABSTRACT

PERSONAL STORYTELLING:

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The purpose of this dissertation is to shine light on the pedagogical value of the educational memoir. In a time of great transformation within the teaching profession, many aspiring teachers enter the classroom unprepared for the realities they will face. This project explores how exposure to educational memoirs can help combat that troubling trend. Part one of the project highlights four memoirs written by educators who entered the profession at different points of their lives and for different reasons. The lessons extracted from them paint a clear picture of the challenges new teachers often face as they seek to establish themselves in their careers. Examples of those challenges include educating students with low literacy rates, establishing authority in the classroom, developing a unique teaching style, measuring student success, and dealing with the educational bureaucracy.

Part two of the dissertation is an original memoir that highlights the author's teaching experience at a small high school in the South Bronx. Readers of this memoir will gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges a new teacher faces as he tries to navigate the difficulties of finding pedagogical success in one of New York City's most challenging educational environments. From this memoir, future educators will learn the importance of developing a classroom routine, and will discover a variety of ways to connect with students both inside and

outside the classroom. In addition, they will learn about the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic altered the educational landscape, and the troubling effects of the ongoing gun violence epidemic. The significant contribution of this memoir is to enlighten novice educators regarding the personal and professional challenges they will face in the beginning stages of their career, and to show how, with time, success can be achieved.

This paper is dedicated to my parents,

my brother, my wife, and my children.

CONTENTS

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Part 1

Personal Storytelling:
A Study of the Purpose and Art of the Educational Memoir

Introduction

For some reason, as human beings, we are drawn to the experiences of others. We often dwell on other people's highs and lows, things we feel they are doing well or could be doing differently, and actions that either shock or inspire us. We celebrate their accomplishments, and try to learn from their mistakes. Sometimes, for better or for worse, we pay more attention to others than we do to ourselves. Perhaps it is this mindset that explains the increasing popularity of memoir writing – a genre that centers around personal storytelling.

The beauty of memoir is the diversity that exists within the genre. Every person who writes their memoir has a unique story to tell. They also have a different purpose for sharing it. For some, the need to leave their footprint on the world is their motivating factor. Others write with the goal of enlightening their readers on topics that are important to them. A third reason for memoir writing is to engage in a process of self-discovery. And lastly, there are people who write to inspire. No purpose is more important or more noble than any other. The important thing is the simple fact that these stories are available for us to learn from and enjoy.

An underrated aspect of the memoir genre is its educational value. Memoirs can teach us how to navigate certain situations in our own lives, and can motivate us even in the most difficult of times. Moreover, they can help us find clarity when faced with moral or ethical dilemmas.

Works of this genre can also be of great value professionally, with educational memoirs being a prime example. As a new generation of teachers comes of age, they do so in a time of great transformation within the profession. But even as technological change revolutionizes the

educational experience, on a deeper level there are fundamental values that are the backbone of what it means to be a teacher. Aspiring teachers need to learn how to relate to those values, and an important part of what it means to do this is to read the experiences of those who have come before them.

The insights and perspectives novice teachers can gain from educational memoirs are invaluable. But what are they? How do they help us understand the dynamics of the teaching profession? And in what ways can they aid the development of the next generation of teachers? The four educational memoirs I will highlight in the research portion of this dissertation will provide a detailed insight into the questions I have posed. They are written by authors from different backgrounds who entered the classroom at different times throughout their lives. Their experiences not only reveal the enormous diversity that exists across our nation's educational landscape, but also the timeless challenges that teachers are up against throughout their careers.

Confessions of a Bad Teacher: The Shocking Truth from the Front Lines of American Public Education
By: John Owens

John Owens never planned on becoming a teacher. But after a successful thirty-year career in the publishing field, he joined the profession for the same reason most people do: the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others. He believed that his professional experiences, facility with kids, and love of literature would make him a welcome addition to any school that valued passionate team members who cared deeply about the power of education. He had been warned about the challenges of the profession, but was determined to do his part to help some of New York City's most vulnerable students achieve both personal and academic growth. After securing a teaching position within the English department of a small high school in the Bronx, Owens was confident that he was on his way toward achieving his goals. His memoir, Confessions of A Bad Teacher: The Shocking Truth from the Front Lines of American Public Education, reveals what went wrong, and exposes the shortcomings of a system that he feels does not support its students and teachers.

One of John Owens' primary issues with his former school was the constant harassment he experienced from his administration. He believed that his principal's obsession with power created an environment where it was essentially impossible to ever be considered a good teacher. Despite his best efforts to adhere to his principal's strict guidelines, Owens was often criticized for actions deemed contrary to what was expected of him. A prime example of this was when, during a parent-teacher conference, Owens explained to a group of parents the importance of showing up to class on time, being prepared with the proper materials, and completing the assigned work. To his astonishment, one parent in the group felt offended by his message, and the next day Owens received a letter in his file for what the principal claimed was a lack of

cultural sensitivity. On another occasion, Owens was reprimanded for keeping his students for ten minutes after school as a punishment for their behavior that day in class. For that he was labeled dangerous, and guilty of creating an unsafe learning environment.

It is worthwhile to ask why a principal would ever treat a member of his or her staff in this manner. One explanation would be that it helps to create an environment of fear. Just as teachers have goals for the students in their classes, principals have their own higher-level goals for the school as a whole. Owens alludes to this when he reflects on the absurd amount of data he was forced to collect on each of his students. In addition to what are commonly perceived as normal data points such as attendance, homework, and class participation, Owens also had to measure, among other things, each student's "unity of being" and "self-determination." He claims that these alternative data points, which at his school contributed to a student's grade, helped administrators skew the numbers in the hope that it would eventually lead to better graduation rates.

In addition to highlighting the issues that could potentially arise from overbearing administrators, this memoir also questions the narrative that teachers are solely to blame for student underachievement. Owens would argue that in an era in which data and test scores are the main variables used to measure the success of public schools, it has become universally accepted to blame teachers if those numbers are not up to par. However, it is important to take into account the extreme academic diversity that exists in many public-school classrooms, especially in inner-city schools like the one where Owens taught. In his memoir he reflects on the difficulty of working with students who are brand-new to the English language, have had interruptions in their formal education, or who arrived to high school well below grade level in reading and writing. In order to be of true help to these students a teacher must meet them where

they are. Ignoring the different factors that contribute to student underachievement is unfair to both the students who find themselves in this position and the teachers who teach them.

Arguably the most important point Owens makes in this memoir is that better teacher training is greatly needed throughout the United States. Teaching, like anything else, is a skill that takes time to perfect. Too often, first-year teachers are thrown into the fire with very little direction or support. They lack the classroom management skills that are essential to creating a classroom environment where learning is possible. In addition, they become overwhelmed by the rules and protocols forced on them by their administration. The result is that many teachers, after only a few years, burn out, and decide to pursue other professions. These teachers are replaced by a new cohort who once again experience the difficulties of the first few years in the classroom. This cycle is extremely harmful to students because it makes it almost impossible for schools to build the type of culture that is needed in order to foster academic success. More effective teacher training would reduce the amount of burnout that many novice teachers experience, and would provide them with the skills they need in order to achieve success in the classroom.

Holler if You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students
By: Gregory Michie

A career in education often starts by chance. Perhaps a desire to travel the world leads a person to a classroom in some faraway place they had never thought about before. They arrive scared, confused, and more often than not, intimated by a language barrier that seems unbreakable. Time passes, a routine is developed. A connection is formed with people who, just a short time ago, shared nothing in common. A teacher is born.

Or maybe a person relocates to a new city or state. In between jobs they decide to pursue substitute teaching as a way to earn money. They strive to get involved in the community, and feel as though working with kids would grant them the perfect opportunity to try something new as they pursue their next step. But something happens while they are in the classroom. A bond is formed with students who, up to that point, had never made any sort of connection with a teacher. Other faculty members begin to notice the positive impact the substitute teacher is having on the students, and before long, the administration is searching for ways to keep this person on board. When an opening develops, the substitute teacher is approached to fill it. Their next step has just been taken.

This exact scenario was how Gregory Michie's tenure began in the Chicago public school system. In his captivating memoir Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students, Michie provides fascinating insight into the steps of his personal pedagogical development in an extremely challenging environment. His experiences address three essential topics that all teachers must consider: 1) the importance of classroom management 2) the need to create a dynamic, culturally relevant curriculum and 3) the notion that an educator is more than just a teacher.

As a brand-new teacher, Michie had preconceived notions about what a successful classroom environment looked like: The teacher spoke and the students listened, what was written on the board was copied in notebooks, and content taught in class was studied and discussed. Like most new teachers, he gave very little thought to the problem of how to handle the complete opposite scenario – one in which students took advantage of a lack of authority, constantly questioned the purpose of what they were doing, and eagerly searched for ways to take advantage of a new teacher who had yet to establish himself. But that type of environment would quickly become his new reality. To make matters worse, the more Michie tried to assert his control, the less of it he had. After struggling for much of his first year in the classroom, a turning point occurred when he shifted from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one. He found that activities where students took the lead, such as Socratic seminars and debates, could, ironically, be used as a tool to assert control. It was only when he had a solid foundation with regard to classroom management that he was able to begin forming his pedagogical identity.

Once Michie developed an understanding of how to teach, his next issue became what to teach. In his memoir he recalls his desire for his students to engage with content that would reflect who they were and the communities they came from. He wanted them to be proud of their cultures, and to be able to talk about their lives in a positive light. But in order to do this, he had to learn about them – who they were, where they came from, the values that were important to them. Only then could he find literature that could spark their interest and further their thinking. Michie's acknowledgement of the clear correlation between relationship-building and effective curriculum development is an important idea that teachers, at any level, must keep in mind.

During his time in the Chicago Public School system, Gregory Michie dedicated his life to his craft. But it was his efforts outside the classroom that earned his students' respect. Included in his memoir are examples of the different roles he played in his students' lives. On numerous occasions he acted as a counselor for kids who were struggling with personal matters. He also supported various community events he knew his students and their families would be attending. An example of this was the annual Mexican Independence Day parade. Additionally, Michie organized many school outings and field trips with the goal of broadening his students' interests and horizons. Lastly, he spearheaded ways to help his students speak up for change. These efforts show how a teacher's responsibilities extend far beyond the classroom. From Michie's experience we learn how, by embracing additional responsibilities, we can make life in the classroom more enjoyable and meaningful.

The Water is Wide
By: Pat Conroy

What makes Pat Conroy's The Water is Wide such a moving literary work is his ability to connect his personal experiences to the major cultural changes that were taking place during the time of his writing. In order to appreciate the significance of this memoir, it is imperative to understand Conroy's past. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, Conroy came of age in a time and place where segregation and racial discrimination were as normal as the sun rising in the east. When his family settled in Beaufort, South Carolina, Conroy attended an all-white high school. Upon graduating, he continued his education at The Citadel, a military college which, in Conroy's time, had yet to admit an African American cadet. In The Water is Wide Conroy admits that for much of his youth, not knowing anything different, he very much identified with the troubling cultural views of his day. With this in mind, it speaks volumes about Conroy's character that he eventually pursued a teaching position at the only elementary school on Daufuskie Island – an isolated island off the coast of South Carolina that was overwhelmingly populated by the descendants of African American slaves.

Conroy began his first school year on Daufuskie Island with big dreams. He believed that empowering through education the island's poor, underprivileged African American children was an important first step in combatting the legacy of racism that had haunted South Carolina for centuries. As the Civil Rights Movement was ushering in major cultural changes throughout the country, Conroy strongly believed that his initiative would be a key toward a brighter future. But reality quickly set in. As his first class got underway, Conroy quickly realized that the overwhelming majority of his students were illiterate, had major difficulty with simple arithmetic, and lacked even a basic knowledge of life off the island. Gone was any thought of rich discussion about the important novels Conroy had planned to introduce to his

class. The reality of this dire situation was the first roadblock Conroy would experience in his new position.

Part of what allowed Conroy to eventually thrive in the classroom during his year on Daufuskie Island was his willingness to alter his teaching style. Instead of primarily focusing on reading and writing, Conroy took an approach that relied heavily on conversation. He discovered that in this particular situation, a seminar style of learning would be more effective than the traditional routines that are often associated with K-12 education. His justification for this shift was that when students talk, they learn.

This philosophical shift provided Conroy's students the opportunity to express themselves in a way they had never done before in a school setting. The conversational mode of learning he adopted sparked debates that helped students form their own opinions about various topics. It also helped them make real-world connections to the content and concepts that were being discussed in class – a strategy that helped his students make sense of what they were learning. Lastly, it gave Conroy a way to measure student learning – something he desperately needed, especially during his first few months in the classroom.

One of Conroy's core beliefs highlighted in his memoir was the power of learning through experience. Realizing that basically all his students had never left Daufuskie Island, Conroy made a point of organizing trips that would expand their horizons and open their eyes to the outside world. His two biggest trips were to Charleston and Washington DC. It is hard to imagine the kind of impact these trips had on kids who, for their entire lives, had only known the ways of their little island. Through these adventures he was able to bring the outside world to life for students who, until then, had only been able to imagine what life was like in that other world.

Pat Conroy's The Water is Wide reinforces the idea that for some students, learning can be a slow and grueling process. He notes many times throughout his memoir how frustrating this can be for teachers who put so much time and effort into their craft. His experiences accentuate the important point that above all else, a teacher's job is to instill confidence in their students, and convince them that they can achieve more. His positivity and reinforcing nature inspired his students to think and relate to the world in a different way. This, he argues, should be a teacher's ultimate goal.

Teacher Man
By: Frank McCourt

It is often said that life is the greatest teacher. After all, it is our experiences that teach us new things, provide a new perspective, and inspire us to do more. But when viewed through a pedagogical lens, how can future educators use their own life experiences in their quest to teach others? That is a critically important question when considering the best ways to prepare new teachers for a career in the classroom. It is also a major theme of Frank McCourt's educational memoir Teacher Man.

In Teacher Man, McCourt paints a vivid picture of the hardships and achievements that are part of a twenty-seven-year career as a high school teacher. But what makes his story so inspirational is his belief that the hardships are what make the achievements possible. Like many, if not all, new teachers, McCourt began his career confused – unsure of himself and of what he was trying to accomplish. He was quiet, timid, and had no experience interacting with teenagers from a completely different background than his own. His struggles were compounded when he realized that his students did not share his love of language and literature. Desperate and defeated, McCourt searched for ways to connect with a tough audience that was in no hurry to do him any favors. Ironically, it was stories about himself – his tough upbringing in his native Ireland and his experience finding his way in America – that helped him find his "teacher voice" and identity.

To McCourt's amazement, his storytelling, and the improvisational approach to teaching he adopted as a result of it, became a key ingredient of his success. It became a tool he used to connect with a diverse student population that year after year became intrigued by his accent, his background, and his personal history. Although he originally had a difficult time understanding why, he found that his students welcomed his willingness to openly discuss his life experiences

with them. In his early years, he most likely overlooked the ways in which these stories expanded his students' horizons and gave them a new perspective. But later on, he became acutely aware of their impact.

But that is not to say he was without struggle. Throughout his memoir he often alludes to the self-doubt that accompanies a thankless profession that, he felt, too often handicaps a teacher's ability to think outside the box. He reflects on the long and lonely nights he spent grading, planning, and pondering his future.

An important idea McCourt highlights in this memoir is the struggle between traditional and innovative approaches to content and curriculum. In the beginning of his career, he was satisfied with the long-established approach of most English Language Arts teachers – a combination of strict grammar lessons and exposure to classic works of literature. However, as time passed, McCourt found this approach to be very limiting. It suppressed his creative nature, and did little to encourage any sort of analytical thinking. So, he pursued a different path, one that saw him bring everyday life into his classroom. A prime example of this was when he used "excuse notes" as a prompt for storytelling. Another example was when he encouraged his students to use recipes as a way of exploring their cultures. Perhaps the best example was when he used food as a tool to teach descriptive writing. By creating alternative ways for students to broaden their perspectives, McCourt established himself as an unconventional, forward-thinking educator – a rarity in a public education system that is too often reluctant to change.

In this timeless memoir, Frank McCourt emphasizes the importance of cultivating a classroom culture that reflects your personality. McCourt was a gifted story-teller who achieved great literary success after he retired from teaching, but it was his authenticity in the classroom that made his success possible. Educators who learn how to weave their personal strengths into

their everyday lessons will have a much easier time in the classroom than those who try to be someone they are not.

Conclusion

John Owens, Gregory Michie, Pat Conroy, and Frank McCourt were once brand-new teachers. They entered the profession in different places, for different reasons, and at different points of their lives. Each of them had unique classroom experiences that provide a meaningful insight into the teaching experience as a whole. For people who are starting their teaching careers, these memoirs offer timeless lessons that can make the transition to life in the classroom significantly easier.

John Owens' reflections on his experience as a middle school teacher in one of New York City's toughest neighborhoods remind us that teaching is a skill, and like any other skill, improvement comes only with practice. That fact is often overlooked by new teachers who enter the classroom expecting nothing but perfection. The reality is that perfection in a classroom setting is almost impossible to define. Students with diverse academic and linguistic backgrounds may have different needs than native English speakers. Similarly, students with interrupted formal education may not be able to complete the same work as their peers. These factors, and many others, make perfection in the classroom an unrealistic goal. A better goal would be to always be prepared with a detailed plan of action. That said, it is important to accept that things may not always go as expected – we learn by experience how to handle those situations when they arise.

In addition, Owens' rocky relationship with his school's administration highlights the important fact that outside factors can directly affect what happens inside the classroom. Every teacher is a member of a team, and administrators are in charge of leading the team. The policies and practices they implement will directly affect how a school is run. A teacher must take their administrators' opinions into account as they plan and execute their lessons.

Gregory Michie's memoir about his experience teaching in the Chicago public school system provides valuable wisdom that would benefit any aspiring teacher. Like John Owens, Michie's first year in the classroom was a tumultuous one. But unlike Owens, Michie was eventually able to find his groove. A big reason for his breakthrough was his pivot from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one. After failing to establish himself as the dominating figure in his classroom, Michie adopted a routine that centered around equity of voice. This gave his students a much larger leadership role, which, in his view, encouraged more participation and student-to-student interaction. While this may not work for everyone, new teachers should strive to mirror the type of environment Michie was able to create.

Another reason for Michie's eventual success was his focus on relationship building. Ironically, it was Michie's efforts outside the classroom that made him a more effective teacher. His eagerness to get to know his students – their values, customs, and traditions – and become a part of their world helped him earn their trust and respect. Moreover, it inspired him to build a curriculum that reflected their cultures. Michie understood the crucial role that confidence plays in education, and his efforts to help students learn through a process of self-discovery were an invaluable part of his pedagogical triumphs. It would behoove any new teacher to adopt these practices as they begin planning their lessons, units, and curriculums.

Pat Conroy's The Water Is Wide illustrates the importance of patience and determination. When Conroy accepted a teaching position on Daufuskie Island, he entered a world that was completely foreign to anything he had ever known. His students had little to no exposure to the outside world, and many could neither read nor write. One can only imagine how difficult it must have been for Conroy to plan and execute his lessons in a classroom filled with students with such diverse needs. But circumstances that would drive most people away only

emboldened his resolve. A major reason for his eventual success was his acceptance of the fact that learning can often be a slow and grueling process that must be accompanied by constant positive reinforcement. It was this realization, coupled with his strong determination, that allowed him to become such a central figure in his students' lives.

New teachers are very often put in the most difficult situations. In order to succeed, they must understand that the learning process is filled with many highs and lows, but through it all, it is their job to encourage, support, and never lose sight of what they are trying to achieve.

Frank McCourt spent much of his early life searching for a purpose. It was the classroom that finally gave him one. Given his long tenure in the New York City public school system and the eventual fame he experienced as a writer, it is easy to assume that McCourt never experienced struggle in his teaching career. But that is far from the case. For many years McCourt had a difficult time engaging his students who, particularly in the beginning of his career, did not show the same appetite for writing and literature that he did. However, to his great surprise, there was something that his students consistently did show interest in, and that was McCourt himself. His students were consistently intrigued by the sound of his strong Irish accent, and also by the story of his life – a life he so desperately wanted to forget. As time went on, McCourt's stories of his difficult upbringing in Limerick, Ireland, became a central part of his teaching routine. His recollections of poverty, desperation, and sacrifice engaged the imagination of his students whose life experiences differed so greatly from his own. Embracing this teaching style was, for him, the first step in becoming a more creative and effective educator. The biggest lesson we can take away from McCourt's memoir Teacher Man is the importance of finding your teaching identity. New teachers must realize that everybody will have their own teaching style, and that style will only come with experience.

The teaching profession currently finds itself at a crossroads. As new technologies continue to alter the way people interact with the world, it is more important than ever for teachers to feel prepared and confident in their craft. The unfortunate reality is that in many cases, the complete opposite is true. Those who enter the profession completely blind to the realities of the classroom will have a very difficult time establishing themselves and finding lasting success. A way to avoid this is by exposing new teachers to the experiences of those who have come before them. For that reason, educational memoirs should be at the heart of all teacher preparation programs. The four memoirs highlighted in this dissertation provide important takeaways, but it is beneficial to be aware of all the knowledge that can be gained from the plethora of other works that make up the genre.

Part II

You Ready, Fellow?

Prologue

I have always envied people whose memory allows them to see the past as clearly as the present. The totality of their memories gives them a holistic view of life that allows them to consciously link who they were to what they have become. My wife is like this. She very often comments on how a certain smell or taste reminds her of a specific moment of her past. She can tell you precise details of when and where she first smelled or ate something that left a strong impression on her. I am convinced that these vivid memories, above all else, are why she developed a passion for food, and decided to pursue a career as a chef.

I am very different. My memory is more vague than that. When I reflect on my childhood, I have a difficult time remembering specific details about events or activities I took part in. When I think about my high school years, various baseball and soccer games come to mind. What stands out most about middle school are the summers - specifically the long drives my father and I used to take to and from my summer camp in upstate New York. As a child, those two-and-a-half hour drives from Highland Park, New Jersey to the heart of the Catskills felt like journeys from one world to another. My most vivid memory from elementary school is of lying on the gymnasium floor screaming in agony as I felt squishy skin where my kneecap should have been. I don't remember anything about the hospital I was brought to that day or the doctor who popped my knee back into place after it had stayed dislocated for hours, but I can vaguely picture the rehab center I frequented three times per week after that unfortunate accident.

While most of my youth is foggy, one memory remains crystal clear. One night when I was six years old, my father, a Spanish teacher at a community college, was forced to bring me to work with him. After the ten-minute drive from our house to Middlesex College, I remember being in awe as I got out of the back seat of our two-door Nissan Sentra. Moments before, we had passed the most beautiful baseball field I had ever seen, and now I was looking around at a perfectly manicured college campus. Before we walked to the building where my father would be giving class, we stopped briefly at his office. I met some of his colleagues, watched him make copies, and rocked as far back as I could in his office chair. When it was time to go, we took a brief walk to Main Hall, where he would soon be giving class. I remember feeling excited as the students walked in.

My father began class that evening by greeting his students in Spanish, and then playing a traditional Mexican folklore melody on a portable C.D. player he had brought with him from home. The students listened and nodded their heads. Some scribbled in their notebooks while others rested their heads in their folded arms. When the song ended there was a brief discussion before my father started scribbling something on the chalkboard. About ten minutes into the class I remember that a restless feeling came over me, and I took the liberty of going on an adventure. Before the class began my father had given me some coins for the vending machine. As I left the room, I told him that's where I would be heading, but in reality, I didn't have an exact destination in mind. When I entered the hallway, I was stunned to find the same scene playing out in every classroom: Teachers talking while students sat and stared. I walked around the empty hallways wondering why anybody would want to be there.

My adventure that evening brought me to every corner of Main Hall. After awhile, my six-year-old self decided it was time to get back to class, but to which classroom I had no idea.

Everything around me looked exactly the same. A sense of panic took over. I tried my best to retrace my steps, but by that point there was no chance of doing so. With the hallways empty and most of the doors closed, there was nobody I could ask for help. I continued walking, but despite my best efforts my father was nowhere to be found. I eventually decided to stay in one place and wait to be rescued - an empty classroom would be the perfect spot.

What seemed like hours went by before I heard voices close to me. Soon after I found the courage to step out into the hallway, an unfamiliar voice asked if I was Professor Ramer's kid. I nodded in agreement. He told me to follow him if I wanted to go back to class. When we arrived, my father, unfazed by my disappearance, welcomed me back without even asking where I had been. He told me the class had just gone on break, and we had about an hour left before we would be going home.

For the second half of the class I sat in the back corner and didn't make a sound. As my father continued to scribble on the board, I stared at the clock and watched the seconds go by. It was dark outside - night had fallen, and the full moon gave life to the half-empty parking lot I looked at from my desk. I saw our car in the distance. If my father ever stopped scribbling and talking we could get in the car and go home. I was tired and bored, and I didn't want to be there any longer. In that helpless moment, I promised myself that I would never be a teacher.

Chapter 1

As my flight descended on Las Vegas, I couldn't help but think that at twenty-six years of age I had found what many people spend their entire lives searching for: a clear career path at a hot-shot start-up with unlimited potential. As I'm sure many people have done before me, I took this time to mentally prepare myself for the weekend on which I was about to embark. "I've made it" I thought to myself. Here I am, on a free Thursday-morning flight to Vegas, on a trip I had earned after coming out on top in a grueling three-month battle on the telephone front. My overall save percentage – the rate at which I was able to convince people to keep paying for the service my company was providing – was number one in the saves department over the course of that span. As a result, I was a half hour away from checking into a paid-for room at the Cosmopolitan Hotel. Despite multiple offers to trade rooms, I ended up standing firm and keeping the personal suite I had fought so hard to win. This was my first time in Vegas, and I was going to do it right.

My long weekend in Las Vegas turned out to be more than I could ever have imagined. Dinners at high-end, overpriced restaurants; free tables at clubs I would never frequent on my own. Unlimited food and drinks being relentlessly shoved in my face, and the constant exhilaration of rolling the dice at the craps table or casually giving the "hit" sign to the Black Jack dealer as my heart raced during a big hand. At night I walked up and down The Strip, marveling at the characters passing by and the fountains dancing to the music of Andrea Bocelli. The constant exhilaration left me asking myself: How the hell did I get here?

While I didn't realize it at the time, this trip to Las Vegas would represent a crossroads in my life, symbolizing on one hand grit and success, and on the other, like Vegas itself, falsehood and immediate satisfaction. The fact of the matter was that I was unhappy in my job. While the

perks were plentiful – numerous happy hours, an office on Wall Street, free lunch on Wednesdays, a young and vibrant workplace – my actual role in the company, and the day-to-day responsibilities that came with it, were extremely mundane, monotonous, unfulfilling, and downright boring. I came to work uninspired, and left every day questioning where my life was going, and how I was still functioning after being screamed at over the phone for eight hours straight by responsible business owners who, most of the time, were simply trying to cancel an expensive service that wasn't working for them.

To make myself clear, this is nothing against my former company. In fact, I will always have a special place in my heart for my incredibly talented and driven co-workers who thrived in that start-up environment. The things I and my colleagues – many of whom have since become extremely successful in other endeavors – were able to accomplish there were amazing. While the company was undoubtedly built on the sales floor, its backbone was the retention team that I was a key part of for over a year. Day after day, my team of four to six people were stuck in the trenches, answering call after call, having the same conversation over and over again. "I can definitely cancel your account…While I'm pulling up your information, any specific reason you are looking to cancel?" That line was more often than not met with a response of "I just don't want this crap!" or "I don't know what the hell I'm paying for!" My response to that, no matter how badly an account was performing, was along the lines of "okay, I can definitely take care of that for you…the only reason I was asking is because I see that your account (pause) is actually doing quite well…" More often than not, the customer would ask what I meant by that, and the conversation would continue. Boom. Once we got them talking, the bait had been taken, and all of us in the trenches knew that we had a chance to keep that customer and increase our numbers. We did and said whatever we had to in order to get that save. Reselling at its finest. We did it

often, and we did it well. It had gotten me to Vegas, but it had also led me to the brink of insanity.

People who can relate to this feeling dread going to work. They justify staying in a role they're unhappy with when they finally get a little taste of the carrot that's being dangled before them by a higher-up. And while that chunk tastes damn good while you're chewing, the second you swallow, it's back to reality. For me, that reality was a headset, a telephone, and a big-screen TV mounted on a bare wall that indicated the number of people on hold, and the amount of time they had spent holding in their frustrations, which I would begin to bear the brunt of the second I pushed the talk button. On the Monday I returned from Vegas, that reality never felt so real. As I sat in my chair and stared at that screen, I thought about something I had heard very often growing up: Reality sucks.

This was by no means the first time I had experienced the frustrations of what to me felt like a meaningless career. In the spring of 2011 I graduated from Indiana University with a bachelor's degree in International Studies and a minor in Spanish. After spending my entire freshman year of college overseas, I arrived at Indiana eager to do my part in helping the world become a better place. What that really meant, I had no idea. But as a young, naïve college student, I was convinced that my focus on political science and history, coupled with my extensive experience abroad, would make an exciting career filled with travel and adventure not only a possibility, but a given. Looking back, I now realize that those dreams could have come true had I taken advantage of some of the excellent extracurricular opportunities that an institution like Indiana University has to offer. But instead I joined a fraternity, made Assembly Hall (Indiana's legendary basketball arena) my second home, and focused more on finishing my degree as fast as possible than on making concrete plans about where it could take me. As a

result, a few weeks after graduating, I said goodbye to Bloomington, Indiana and moved back to my childhood home in Highland Park, New Jersey with no job, no plan, and only a couple of dollars to my name. Since I first left home, I had traveled the world, been exposed to new cultures, made new friends, and developed a completely new worldview. Now I was back in my childhood bedroom, staring at the same bare walls, watching baseball games on the same small television, and hearing the same creaks from the wooden floor that I had heard since I was a baby. Familiarity no longer felt comfortable. It was time for me to create my own path, but I had no idea where to begin.

Perhaps no experience is as humbling as searching for your first job. This is the moment when many people are introduced to the competitive nature of our society. It is a time when people are forced to sell themselves, and convince potential hiring managers why they, as opposed to thousands of other candidates, are the right fit for an open role. It is a lonely experience that is more often than not met with unapologetic rejection. When I began applying for jobs, I realized how unqualified I was for all the positions that were of any interest to me. I also realized how clueless I was about the type of career I wanted to pursue. Having grown up in a small middle-class town, I had never been exposed to, or thought about, the extreme diversity that exists in the job market. I had no grasp of any of the creative ways people make money. I had only been exposed to the careers of my parents, and the parents of my friends. I was determined to never be a teacher, so that was easily crossed off the list. I had zero interest in law, medicine, or entrepreneurship. I dreaded the thought of becoming a salesman or doing any type of physical labor. While crossing ideas off the list was easy, finding jobs I was interested in pursuing became more difficult than accepting the fact that I had graduated college completely unprepared for the "real world."

As the calendar turned from July to August, the pressure to find a job began to mount. The days began to feel like weeks. I began to question if anyone was even looking at the numerous job applications I was filling out every day. While others around me seamlessly settled into cushy roles in their family businesses or jobs they had landed long before graduating, I continued to struggle. Doubt began to overwhelm me in a way I had never experienced before. Just as my frustration reached its crescendo, I finally received a call from my first potential employer. In the months before that, a feeling of entitlement had dominated the direction of my future. Nothing ever seemed good enough to meet my ridiculous expectations. But everything changed upon receiving that call. After a short conversation with the hiring manager, I had locked up an interview. In the moments after the conclusion of the call, I became determined to not only land my first job, but to become the best Enterprise-Rent-A-Car employee that had ever lived.

To say I was ecstatic to receive my first job offer would be an understatement. At twenty-two years old, the $40,000 annual salary I was to receive was more money than I had ever made in my life. Although I was skeptical of what it really meant, I was proud to enroll in the management training program that Enterprise prides itself on. I was eager to learn more about cars – an area in which I knew very little – and gain real-world working experience with a successful, nationally-recognized company. I had seen the television commercials touting Enterprise's reputation as one of the country's top employers of college graduates, and I was eager to make my degree – although it had nothing to do with business – worthwhile. Neither the schedule (7:30am – 6:00pm) nor the dress code (clean shaven, suit pants, a white shirt and tie) bothered me. In fact, I looked forward to finally having a reason to get up early. And so, in the summer of 2011, life after college began. In the coming months, I would wish it hadn't.

My experience at Enterprise started off with a major surprise. On my first morning, after introducing me to my new colleagues, my branch manager led me to his desk, sat me down, and immediately inquired about my desire to sell. This was far from what I was expecting, but not wanting to disappoint, I guaranteed him that once I became accustomed to this new role, I would be the best salesman in the entire office. He liked that answer, shook my hand, and told me to wait for him at my desk. On the short walk from one side of the office to the other, I thought about what it was I would actually be selling. I had been under the impression that a management trainee would not have to bother with the hassle of sales. In fact, I figured that at a rental car company, selling anything at all would be completely out of the question. I could not have been more wrong. I would soon find out that in exchange for my small, biweekly paycheck I would be expected to sell…all day, every single day. The product: renter's insurance. The realization that I had gone to college to sell car rental insurance was a difficult pill to swallow, but as a desperate college graduate looking for any opportunity, I put my ego aside and got down to business.

After a rocky start, things began to click for me at Enterprise. It took about three months before I began to learn the tricks of the trade. My sales pitch became more refined – instead of begging people to take the insurance, I began convincing them of all the reasons of why it was needed. When customers would tell me their credit cards would cover any damages, I would counter with the simple question "but do you really want to go through the hassle of getting American Express involved? Twenty dollars for peace of mind sounds like a great deal to me." I would only sometimes mention that the damage waiver was twenty dollars extra per day. I learned it was always better to deal with any issues after the fact. Even if customers were upset,

in the end, they usually just paid, and my sales numbers reaped the benefits. Only the savvy ones would complain and get their way.

The roadside assistance option became my favorite product to sell. Although it was the cheapest out of the four possible options, it was the one that most customers did not need. Many people had AAA or another service they could call upon to help them in case of an emergency. But again, "do you really want to go through the hassle of using another company when four dollars per day guarantees you a ride home in even the worst situations?" If I had to, I made them feel cheap for not wanting to essentially gift Enterprise another four dollars per day on top of the cost of their rental. Given the situation, I stopped at nothing in order to make sure I returned from a transaction with at least one signature next to one of the listed insurance products – usually one that was not at all needed. If I failed to make a sale, the frustration lingered until the next opportunity passed through those spotless glass doors. It became a kind of game – one that I enjoyed throughout my honeymoon phase, but began to despise once the excitement wore off.

I'm not sure of the exact moment I lost my motivation at Enterprise. But as time went on, my eagerness to make the corporation money by pushing car rental insurance on people who most of the time did not need it, began to fade. After a brief obsession with improving my sales numbers, I slowly began to lose steam. Every day, after working from 7:30am until 6:00pm, I would come home, change clothes, eat a quick dinner, and let the humming of my television put me to sleep. My social life became nonexistent as my exhaustion continually triumphed over my desire for personal enjoyment. At twenty-three years old, I knew there had to be more to life than this. In the middle of the day, I began taking my time with tasks I used to complete without delay. On pickups (yes, Enterprise actually does pick you up), I began stopping for coffee and a

breakfast sandwich. On one trip in particular, I picked up a disgruntled customer from a local motel who seemed to be going through a lot in his personal life. In no rush to get back to the office, I stopped and got us both coffee and egg sandwiches from the local deli. This small gesture made a great impression on him, and when we finally did get back to the office, he did not hold back in voicing his pleasure. In fact, he went straight up to my manager, told him what I had done, and suggested that I deserved an immediate raise. What this customer did not realize was that my well-intentioned actions had broken branch rules. Instead of resulting in a raise, his endorsement of my customer service skills began the process of a transfer.

As a gift for surviving one year at Enterprise, the company transferred me to a different branch. Their rationale was that a change of environment would once again spark my interest and get me selling again. My area manager explained that a promotion would be more than possible if I were to replicate what I had achieved in my first eight months on the job. What that transfer really did was to convince me that I needed a change. But youth and inexperience imposed on me a sense of guilt for having bigger dreams. How would I say goodbye to the members of my team? How would the company survive without a seasoned veteran like myself at the front desk picking up the phone, providing excellent customer service, and nonchalantly selling the holy car rental insurance? This ridiculous sense of guilt kept me at Enterprise far longer than I should have stayed.

In my last four months working at Enterprise Rent-A-Car I read more books – during working hours – than I had in four years of college. This was possible because I had once again been transferred to a different branch – this time it was a satellite office located inside a hotel that dealt primarily with corporate accounts. These accounts already had the insurance products built into the prices. Therefore, it made sense to send someone like me – an employee who no

longer cared at all about their sales numbers – to take care of these customers. From 7:30 in the morning until 6:00 at night I sat unbothered in my desk chair waiting for either the phone to ring or for a customer to pick up their rental car. When neither of those things happened, I read novels like Crime and Punishment, The Source, Invisible Man, and East of Eden. I also devoured newspapers like The Wall Street Journal and The Economist. Reading not only made time pass quickly, but also made work not so bad. For a while, I was completely content with collecting a paycheck while flying under the radar. The only problem was that in reality, I was not flying under the radar at all. In fact, I was being watched every day by my colleague who was in charge of that satellite branch. When word got out that I was more focused on my books than on my job, I had a long discussion with a different colleague who convinced me that life would go on – for both myself and the company – if I decided to pursue other options. I finally convinced myself that that was true. In the spring of 2013 I quit my job at Enterprise, and never looked back.

My main goal for life after Enterprise was finding a way to move out of my childhood home. In the years since I had moved back from college, I had spent so much time at work that I had barely paid any attention to what was going on around me. Once I had my life back, I realized that I hadn't missed very much. Now in my mid-twenties, I noticed that my hometown lacked the excitement it used to exude in my teenage years. I had a difficult time reconnecting with the people and places that had defined my childhood. I yearned for more action, more excitement – a new world.

One of the positives of going to a university like Indiana was that it made it possible for me to create a network of people from all over the country. In my time between jobs, I took advantage of this network, and visited a group of friends who in the years after college had

settled down in Chicago. I had taken a couple of weekend trips there during my three years in Indiana, but they were all typical adventures of a broke college student – no plan of where to stay, where to go, or what to do. But when you are twenty years old, and have a free ride to a new place, you figure out those details later. Now I would be sleeping in a beautiful apartment, and with some money in my bank account, I would be enjoying all of what that great city has to offer. And the best part was that I had no return date from Chicago. Eager for a new adventure, I wasn't sure if I would ever leave.

But after just two weeks, my adventure in Chicago was cut short by the news of a potential job. Contrary to my prior experience, this time around, a career essentially fell into my lap. It was almost as if the universe wanted to acknowledge all the self-inflicted stress and suffering I had experienced with the job hunt almost three years earlier.

The potential job opportunity was with a digital advertising agency called Union Square Media. A good friend of mine from Los Angeles worked closely with this company, and advised me that they were looking to fill a role. Contrary to my worries, he claimed that my lack of experience in this field would actually be viewed as a positive. This struck me as odd, but I assumed they were looking for anyone who was willing to be trained from scratch, and accept their modest salary offer. What intrigued me most about this opportunity was that it could be my official ticket out of my home town. The office I would potentially be working at was located on the corner of Broadway and East 18th street – the heart of New York City. After a few emails back and forth I had set up an in-person interview. My impromptu trip to Chicago had come to an abrupt end, but a new life in the greatest city in the world was now at my fingertips.

On the morning of the interview I thought about what a life in New York City would be like. As a child I had often heard my parents reflect on their fondest memories of their time in

New York – the seven years they lived in Queens, their time in graduate school at NYU, and their adventures to and from the Bronx at all hours of the day and night to visit friends and family. My father had often told me that those years were the best of his life. On the hour-long train ride from New Brunswick, New Jersey to Penn Station I sat there yearning for my own New York adventure. I had no idea what that would look or feel like, but in my heart, I knew it was something I really wanted.

When I arrived at Penn Station I decided I would take the twenty-five-minute walk to the office as opposed to going there on the subway. That would give me some extra time to prepare myself for the impending interview. At that time, I knew absolutely nothing about digital advertising, but I did have significant interview experience, which I relied on to create my plan of action. Instead of trying to pretend that I had even a basic understanding of the tasks I would be asked to accomplish, I would change the conversation's narrative and focus more on my ability and eagerness to be trained in a field I was very much interested in. I was confident with that approach, and as it turned out, I had every reason to be. A day after the interview, I was offered the job. I accepted it immediately. A new era in my life had officially begun.

Similar to my experience at Enterprise, my tenure at Union Square Media began with a bang. Although there was no official training program, every morning I would sit with my boss and observe what he did. When there was some down-time – usually around 11:00am, before the work day started on the west coast – he would teach me the basics. We discussed the details of media buying and the various types of online advertising our company focused on. We talked about the different roles of publishers and advertisers. He introduced me to the difference between CMP (cost per thousand impressions) and CPC (cost per click). We spoke about banners, fonts, and the way colors are utilized in various types of campaigns. We also discussed

the campaigns themselves – their overall goals, and the age, sex, and geographical location of the targeted audience. Everything was new to me, and it was exciting to be exposed to the intricacies of an industry that was all around me, but of which I knew very little.

After my third month at Union Square Media I felt confident enough to pursue my dream of moving to New York City. Up to that point I had been commuting to my office every day from Highland Park. On occasion I would sleep on a friend's couch in Manhattan, but more often than not, after the work day was done, I would take the hour-long train ride from Penn Station back to New Brunswick, New Jersey, walk half an hour to my modest house on Graham Street, eat dinner, get some rest, and get ready to do the same thing all over again the next day. The commute was not ideal, but I put up with it knowing that one day it would end. And when that day finally came, I was proud that I had paid my dues in order to accomplish my goal.

My first apartment in New York City was in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. At the time, Williamsburg was in the midst of a major transformation. As the area's gritty image was replaced by sparkling new high-rises, apartment hunters looking for more bang for their buck began flocking there. By the time I arrived, the gentrification process was well underway, but remnants remained of the hipster environment that had preceded this new era. The result was one of the most unique neighborhoods in all of New York City – one that was racing toward the future, yet still very much stuck in the past. Two things in particular stood out about my new home: 1) The previous tenants were the late Michael K. Williams and Felicia Pearson – the actors who played Omar and Snoop in the hit HBO series "The Wire," and 2) My commute to work would now be twenty minutes door-to-door.

As the months went by, my lease and commute became the main reasons for staying at Union Square Media. After the initial bouts of excitement, things at USM changed rather

quickly. It seemed as though my boss no longer had the time or interest in training me the same way he had upon my arrival. Perhaps he thought that at that point I was ready to go off on my own and bring in the business that would make our company significant profits. Or maybe, as things at the office got busier, he did not care about what I was doing or working on. I became convinced that the latter was true.

Keeping in mind that I started this job with absolutely zero experience or knowledge of digital advertising, I was not sure how to handle this awkward situation. Day after day I showed up to work confused about my role and responsibilities. During our weekly team meetings, I sat quietly praying that I would not be asked any questions or be called upon to speak. I tried to voice my frustrations to the only other in-office employee (everybody else in the small company worked from home), but she was as clueless as I was. She had her busy-work to complete, and she was not going to let my issues get in her way. On various occasions, I asked my boss if there were any tasks he needed me to complete or specific things that I should be focusing on. He repeatedly told me to just keep doing what I was doing. This confused me even more considering that for the overwhelming majority of the day, I was not doing anything productive at all. In the morning I would spend hours staring at my laptop screen reading the newspaper, and in the afternoons, I would voice my frustration and confusion to any friends on G-Chat who cared to listen. Before long, I began reading PDF versions of free novels I found online. I began to not care one bit about the multiple cameras in the office that were watching my every move.

There were some highlights from my time at USM. On one occasion, I saw Kim Kardashian and her entourage entering ABC Kitchen – a trendy restaurant located right across the street from my office. At the company holiday party, I won a sought-after bottle of Dom Perignon in a raffle I didn't even know I had entered. As a birthday gift to my colleague, one

day my boss took us to BCD Tofu House – a restaurant in Korea Town that I have since gone back to many times. But overall, my time at Union Square Media was summed up by anxiety and confusion. Every day I entered the office expecting to be fired. And then, in June of 2016, it finally happened.

Although I had been anxiously awaiting this moment for months, when it happened I felt as though I had been blindsided. When my boss called me into his tiny office in the back corner of the converted one floor apartment our company had recently relocated to, I had zero indication that this would be a decisive moment in my life. But when he sat me down and began speaking, I knew immediately that my time at USM had come to an end. In a soft tone, one I had rarely ever heard him use, he asked me a question that took me by complete surprise: "Neil, what do you want to do with your life?" I remember taking a few moments to consider the question, but not being able to come up with a definitive answer. "I'm asking because I know it's not this" he continued. He would go on to explain that by letting me go he was doing me a favor, and giving me an opportunity to explore my interests and passions. I appreciated his kind words, but in the back of my mind I knew none of that mattered to him – he wanted someone to come in and make money, something I had failed to do. The conversation ended professionally. I left his office, gathered my belongings, and put Union Square Media in my rearview mirror forever.

The shock of getting fired lingered for days, but the reality was that it happened at the perfect time. The lease for my Williamsburg apartment would be expiring in one month, and at that point, with nothing forcing me to stay put, I would be free to pursue anything my heart desired. After failing in two different jobs, the last thing I wanted to do was rush into another random role in an industry I had no interest in. Very much aware that this was a unique moment in my life – a time with essentially zero responsibilities – I thought deeply about how to make it

both productive and meaningful. While my mind was urging me to build on my two previous jobs by pursuing a graduate degree in business or management, my heart was pushing me toward adventure, daring me to create my own path. I began to flirt with the idea of traveling. Where I would go and what I would do was still very much undecided, but the prospect of experiencing a different culture and way of life very quickly began to overwhelm my consciousness. I had often heard my father reflect on his own overseas adventures – the years he spent in France, his time in Puerto Rico, and his epic journey to Mexico – and I yearned for an experience I would be able to look back on with the same feeling that it had been a turning point in my life.

Two weeks after I was fired by Union Square Media, I decided to follow my heart and take a trip. After much consideration, my destination would be Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. My decision to visit Quetzaltenango came down to four factors: 1) It would give me an opportunity to seriously study Spanish in a way I had never done before 2) I would be fully immersed in a country and a culture I knew absolutely nothing about 3) I would be able to survive on a very low budget, and 4) It would be a good starting point if I ultimately decided to travel throughout Central and South America. Once I finalized where I would stay – I decided on a language school that also offered living accommodations – I purchased my one-way flight. I would be leaving five days after my lease on my apartment expired. I had yearned for a new adventure, and now I was turning that wish into reality.

The flight from Newark Liberty International Airport to Guatemala City was about five hours. I took this time to sleep, read, and imagine the life I was about to experience. When the plane finally landed, I took a cab to the central bus station in Guatemala City. From there I would take the three-hour bus ride to Quetzaltenango. Upon my arrival to the central bus station, the first thing I noticed was how much I stood out. I was a white American man in a sea of

Mayan Guatemaltecos. I had studied Spanish for a significant amount of time, but I had almost no confidence in my ability to speak it, and I had a very difficult time understanding it in the real world. For the first time in my life I was taller than everybody around me. I was very much aware of the confused looks I received as I desperately tried to navigate the confusion of the bus station during rush hour. In my broken Spanish I inquired as to which bus goes to Quetzaltenango. It seemed as though each person I asked pointed in a different direction. With busses coming and going all around me, I couldn't contain my rising anxiety. Alone in a country many would consider third-world, I hadn't even been away twenty-four hours and I was already terrified. Sensing my confusion, an old man in a cowboy hat approached me and asked where I was heading. I told him I needed the bus to Quetzaltenango. He proceeded to accompany me across the bus station, weaving in and out to avoid the crowds of people rushing from one bus to another. As we approached the bus I needed, he assured me that this one would lead me to Xela (pronounced Shela). I repeatedly tried to tell him that my destination was not Xela, but Quetzaltenango. But every time I said this he just shrugged, and pointed to the same bus. To me, it was as if what I was telling him was going in one ear and out the other. As the bus got ready to depart, the last few people were still putting their bags in the storage unit on the bottom. When the gentleman began helping me with my bags, I looked at him with a sense of despair. "Am I really trusting this guy?" I thought to myself as I pushed my second bag onto the bus. As the driver motioned for me to hurry up, I accepted the fact that I was on the verge of putting my destiny in the hands of a complete stranger I had known for all of three minutes, and I got on. About an hour into the ride, I found out that Xela is another name for Quetzaltenango. When this became clear I breathed a sigh of relief. I was thankful that my faith in the man with the cowboy hat had worked out. I was also very aware that my adventure had begun.

My travels in Guatemala lasted almost two months. On weekdays I started every morning with a three-hour one-on-one Spanish lesson given by a tutor who worked part-time at the language school. When our sessions concluded I would explore this beautiful city. I hiked the mountain the locals referred to as El Baúl. I tasted the fresh tacos and pupusas from the little stands that take over the city's central plaza throughout the day. I picked my own fruit and ate it straight from the tree. I watched women of all ages make home-made tortillas in their traditional way. I visited all types of bars and restaurants, drank the rich coffee and hot chocolate, and took in the breathtaking views of the mountains and volcanos that can be seen in the distance. My long walks around the city and my many conversations with its locals allowed me to develop an understanding of Guatemala's tumultuous past and troubled present.

The weekends were saved for more intense adventures. After meeting a travel guide at a bar one night, I accepted his invitation to join his group when they visited the Fuentes Georginas hot springs. While we were there, he told me he had one more open spot on his trip to hike Volcán Tajumulco, the highest peak in central America, and I jumped at the opportunity. Although heavy rain made this hike much more intense than I had expected, watching the sun rise through the clouds from the volcano's peak was a sight that will stay with me forever. In addition to intense excursions (mostly hikes), I also ventured to more laid-back settings. I spent a long weekend in Panajachel – a lakeside town located on the edge of the stunning Lago Atitlan. I toured Antigua – the former capital of the region before it was ravaged by an earthquake in the late 1700's. I even went to Chichicastenango to experience its famous outdoor crafts market – often considered the largest in the entire region. After each adventure, I returned to my home base eagerly awaiting what the next day had in store. While I had traveled before, this was the first time I had done so completely on my own, and I was loving every minute.

But all good things must come to an end. After seven weeks in Guatemala, it was once again time to come home. But this time I would be doing so with much more clarity regarding the type of life I wanted to live. This adventure made me realize how passionate I was about seeing and experiencing new places and cultures. I now understood that this was a big part of who I am and what makes me happy. My travels also made me realize that I am not the type of person who can work day in and day out, year after year, with nothing to look forward to. After starting strong in both of my previous jobs, I had clearly burned out and stopped caring. I now realized that I needed a career that would allow me to both pursue my passions, and give me the time I need every year to regroup, reset, and recharge my battery.

My third job as a retention specialist was the complete opposite of this, and soon after my memorable weekend in Las Vegas, I decided to walk away. The thought of one more day talking to numerous unhappy customers through a big bulky headset was too much to bear. On my last day, my manager gave me permission to take a three-hour lunch, and made it possible for each member of my close-knit team to join me for celebratory drinks at our favorite happy hour spot on Stone Street in lower Manhattan. I spent that time reminiscing about the good times, and laughing off the bad ones. I had envisioned myself returning from that three-hour hiatus with a Nurf gun, ready to cause a big stir in the office, just as Ari Gold had done in one of the most famous scenes of the HBO hit series Entourage. But instead, I calmly took my seat and prepared to take the last few calls I would ever have to take in this role. After one quick conversation, it was clear that I had no further intention of doing my job to the best of my ability. Understanding that the end had come, I said my goodbyes, and casually walked out.

A few months earlier I had applied and been accepted to the NYC Teaching Fellows Program – a teaching fellowship geared toward career-changers like myself. After spending my

entire life determined to never be a teacher, it became almost impossible for me to ignore the signs that were pushing me in that direction. Something that was very much on my mind was the idea of having the summers off to enjoy life in any way I pleased. I routinely found myself fantasizing about all the exotic places I could potentially travel to and enjoy. And it was nice to know that if I didn't want to travel, and instead do nothing at all, that was okay too. I relished the opportunity to use this time however I wanted – a perk that very few people are able to enjoy. Something else I began to take more seriously was my desire to work in what I viewed as a meaningful profession. Now, with a few different professional experiences under my belt, I no longer saw any purpose in selling, re-selling, and providing customer service. It finally dawned on me that what I was really doing in those dead-end jobs was just making other people money, and I grew tired of working so hard and not reaping the benefits. Could I have experienced more financial success in these roles? Absolutely. But for better or for worse, I was unwilling to devote enough time and to be deferential enough toward superiors to move up the ranks. As opposed to what I had done before, teaching would give me the opportunity to make a meaningful impact on the world. It would allow me to play a part in molding the minds of the next generation, and it would put me in a position to become a role model and mentor to kids who desperately needed that. Despite these enticing reasons to pivot to the world of education, with the acceptance date for the program rapidly approaching, I was still unsure that this was really what I wanted to do. I was well aware from my parents' experiences that teaching, like anything else, has its drawbacks. There were reasons for the well-documented teacher shortage, and I had seen first-hand the dedication that a person needs in order to survive in the profession year after year. While the angel and devil on my shoulders continued to duke it out, my heart made itself very clear about what it wanted me to do – one day before the deadline, I accepted

the offer to join the NYC Teaching Fellows program. I had never worked with kids, had zero leadership experience, and was far from an expert in any subject, but in the next two months, I would become a teacher. When I called my mom to tell her the news, she responded with a simple yet memorable question: "You ready, Fellow?"

Chapter 2

In late June of 2016, I attended the New York City Teaching Fellows Orientation at the newly-renovated Kings Theater in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. After waiting on line in extreme heat for almost an hour, I entered the building and was greeted by a rush of freezing cold air that helped shift my focus back to my purpose for being there, as opposed to the sweat that had drenched my thin white button-down dress shirt. Despite the number of future "Fellows" present, the venue did an excellent job of keeping everything organized. Tables were set up around the lobby where volunteers were handing out important information and responding to any inquiries. In addition, each guest received a bag that consisted of a binder, a folder, and a few pens commemorating the moment. After securing my bag, I followed the crowd into the auditorium and took an open seat toward the back. I took a moment to survey the large room, and was struck by the number of people who would be joining me in my new educational crusade. I wondered how on earth there was a teacher shortage given the number of people who were on the verge of entering the profession. I did not think at all about the percentage of those in the room who would quit the program at some point that summer or throughout their first year.

We were not waiting very long before the first speaker, an administrator for the NYC Teaching Fellows Program, took the stage. Her positive energy and upbeat demeanor immediately set the tone. She welcomed us to this exciting event, thanked us for being there, and offered her admiration for our collective dedication to the youth of New York City. She explained to the newest cohort of NYC Teaching Fellows that in the coming years, we would be responsible for closing the city's achievement gap, and giving hundreds of thousands of kids a shot at a better future. Her energy was electric, and her message inspiring. "This is why I have

chosen this path" I thought to myself as I leaned forward and listened intently to her powerful message.

The second speaker, the former Chancellor of the New York City Public School system, Carmin Fariña, echoed those statements. In her short speech, she recounted her experiences over three decades, as both teacher and administrator, within the New York City Department of Education. She recalled how far New York City had come throughout her career with regard to meeting the diverse needs of all students regardless of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. She emphasized that these achievements did not come by accident, but were made possible by the hard work and dedication of New York City's army of teachers. She challenged the next generation to continue that legacy.

After a few more speeches given by various members of the New York City Teaching Fellows program, it was impossible to not feel inspired and proud of what I was on the verge of dedicating my life to. I would finally be doing something that would give me an opportunity to make a positive impact on the world – a prospect I had yearned for after my previous professional experiences. It seemed as though everyone in the audience shared those sentiments. The energy that filled the room was palpable, and it was clear that my fellow soon-to-be first-year teachers were as focused and excited as I was.

A key part of the NYC Teaching Fellows Program is the training each "fellow" receives before they begin their new lives in the classroom. In the summer of 2016, this training was a six-week boot camp that focused on the "essential skills" teachers would need in order to assert and maintain control over their classes. The mornings would be devoted to learning these skills, and in the afternoons every "fellow-in-training" would be given an opportunity to put them into practice in front of real-life students who were enrolled in summer school programs at various

sites around New York City. "Fellows-in-training" would be closely monitored by experienced coaches who would record their "glows and grows" (strengths and weaknesses) in each formal teaching session. The idea was that by the end of the six-week training period, each fellow would possess the skills, knowledge, and confidence that are essential to effective instruction.

A second pillar of the program was the educational piece – enrollment in a two-year Master's Degree program at one of the participating CUNY schools. Given the fact that Fellows were expected to be teaching during the day, their required graduate courses would be held at night. Fellows were unable to choose which CUNY school they were to attend – this was predetermined based on the subject they would be assigned to teach. The purpose of the coursework was to help Fellows gain the core knowledge they needed to teach their respective classes.

When I accepted the offer to join the NYC Teaching Fellows, I knew that I was committing to a rigorous program that would occupy most of my time. But it was at the orientation where I found out what that commitment would entail. Included in my binder was information about the subject I would be teaching, where I would be completing my summer training, and at which CUNY school I would be attending classes four nights per week during the summer session, and two nights per week during the fall and spring semesters for the next two years.

I was not surprised to find out that my new area of focus would be ENL (English as a New Language) – having zero qualifications in math or science, I had listed ENL, along with English Language Arts, as one of my preferred options on the application. But I was completely caught off guard by the other information I received. I had assumed that, since I lived in Brooklyn, my summer assignment would be at a school not too far from home. I also assumed

that the graduate school I would be attending would be in either Brooklyn or Manhattan. But that would make too much sense. A letter in my binder revealed that my training site would be P.S. 206, a Middle School located at 120th Street and Pleasant Avenue, directly across from the Wagner housing project in the East Harlem section of Manhattan. Unfamiliar with the area, I immediately looked up the location to see how far my new morning commute would be – I refused to believe Google Maps when it showed fifty-five minutes. To make matters worse, moments later I learned that for the next two years I would be pursuing a Master's Degree from Lehman College – a tiny school located in the north Bronx, an hour and fifteen minutes away from my home. In just a few seconds, my life had been completely upended. For the foreseeable future, every morning I would be traveling from Brooklyn to East Harlem for the "Fellows' boot camp," then up to Lehman College to attend graduate school, and then back home to Brooklyn. I would leave my apartment at 6:30 am and not get home until 9:00 pm. Surviving the summer would be the first test of my new life and career.

On the first day of "Fellows' boot camp" I boarded the subway train at Atlantic Avenue ready to tackle the challenge that lay ahead. I had never been on the train this early in the morning, and I was pleased to learn that one positive of commuting at this hour was the assurance of a seat – an all-too-important factor given the distance I would be traveling. After eleven stops without a delay, I exited the number four train at the corner of 125th Street and Lexington Avenue. The atmosphere was lively – hip-hop blasting, cars honking, and people power-walking with a purpose in every direction. On the fifteen-minute walk from the train to P.S. 206 I surveyed my surroundings, and as reggaeton blasted from my headphones, I pondered what type of impact I would be able to make as a teacher in this community. I arrived to P.S.

206 drenched in sweat, but eager to learn and master the skills that would immediately make me one of those great teachers students never forget.

At 8:00 am sharp, the lead trainer addressed the thirty-five "Fellows-in-training" in front of him. His demeanor resembled a drill sergeant addressing his troops before battle. His message was clear: The next six weeks would be a difficult challenge filled with many emotional highs and lows. Failure to exhibit pedagogical progress throughout the training period would put your place in the program in jeopardy. Lastly, failure to arrive to training on time would result in severe disciplinary action. He made it clear that the trainers were there for support, but it would be up to us to complete the assigned tasks, demonstrate pedagogical growth, and maintain a level of professionalism that demonstrated our readiness to become public school educators in New York City. His opening statements set the tone, and from that point on, I made sure to adhere to the strict guidelines that had been put into place by the team of veteran teachers.

The playbook for the training we were to receive was included in the big binder that would soon become each "Fellow-in-training's" holy grail. In it, among other things, were best practices on how to present information to students, key classroom management strategies that could be utilized in a variety of situations, and helpful documents that would assist in lesson planning. The plan was that each day we would collectively review a portion of this information, thoroughly discuss it, and then put it into practice in our classes with real-life pupils. In theory the plan made complete sense, and for a moment I believed that this six-week training would be all that was needed to prepare me for life in the classroom.

The first day of training was filled with numerous icebreakers and "get-to-know-you" activities. To start off, each "Fellow-in-training" was given an opportunity to introduce themselves, share snippets of their life story, and talk about the forces that led them to pursue a

career in education. When it was my turn to speak, I briefly noted my displeasure with my previous careers, and my desire to do something that could make a real difference in my city. I also discussed how attracted I was at the prospect of having two whole months off every summer – my honesty was met with a round of applause and multiple nods of approval. I was pleased to see that I was not the only one who held that perk in high regard. After a few rounds of human bingo, two truths and a lie, and the creation of a name poem, it was time for lunch. I walked by myself to the nearest bodega for a turkey sandwich, a seltzer, and a large coffee – my second in only a few hours.

The second half of the day was filled with lectures from the three trainers who would be in charge of preparing us for life in the classroom. Each trainer was a veteran public-school teacher who placed great importance on preparing the next cohort of educators for the realities they would soon face. The main trainer had just concluded his fifteenth year in the classroom. He had begun his career teaching English Language Arts at a charter school in the Bronx, but had made the decision after three years to switch to a public middle school within the Department of Education. The second trainer was a nine-year veteran of the New York City Public Schools, and had just been promoted to "lead teacher" at her elementary school. Rounding out the staff was a young, vibrant middle school math teacher who had started his career five years earlier after graduating with honors from the University of Pennsylvania. All three gave a thorough review of their expectations, and discussed the incremental pedagogical growth they expected to see as each week passed. It was inspiring to hear the confidence they had in us, and I was eager to not disappoint them. The lectures eventually gave way to a lengthy Q and A session that only ended when the clock struck 2:30 pm and it was time for us to depart.

The first session of "Fellows' boot camp" had come and gone – it was now on to the educational portion of the day.

The trip by subway train from P.S. 206 to Lehman College took about 45 minutes. As I descended the stairs of the Kingsbridge Road station, it dawned on me that this was the furthest I had ever ventured into the Bronx. I took a few moments to adjust to my new environment. The above-ground subway and the wide roads were different than anything I had ever seen in Brooklyn or Manhattan. On the walk from the subway station to campus I noticed several children playing kickball and stickball on the fenced-in blacktop outside Walton High School. Across the street there was a Dominican restaurant that had the look and feel of an old-school diner. Right next door was a pizza shop, owned by a Chinese couple, with a line out the door full of young kids. Further down the block was a café and a bodega. In the coming years these places would become my refuge – spots where I could take a break, catch my breath, and enjoy a quick slice of pizza, a cup of hot coffee, or a plate of rice and beans. But on that first day, these places were just as unknown to me as the buildings and hallways of Lehman College.

The campus of Lehman College is surprisingly beautiful. On that first day of class I entered campus through the southern gate as opposed to the main entrance located five blocks north. I was struck by the perfectly manicured great lawn, the gothic architecture of some of the institution's most prominent buildings, and the aura of positivity exuded by the groups of students passing by. For a moment I caught myself unfairly comparing the campus to that of Indiana University, but I reminded myself of the importance of living in the moment. "That was then and this is now" I thought as I followed the campus map to Carman Hall – the location of both my classes that first summer.

My first-ever graduate course was scheduled to begin at 4:00 pm. The name of the course was "Foundations of Education," and its goal was to teach future educators the keys to creating a successful learning environment for all students. The six-week course was split up into three sections: Classroom Management, Assessment, and Instructional Design. Each two-week section was taught by a different professor. We were told that the purpose of this was that learning from a diverse set of voices would enhance our understanding of the realities that were waiting for us in classrooms all over New York City.

My first two weeks would be devoted to "Classroom Management." Upon entering the classroom, I took a seat toward the back. In my mind I heard the voice of my father urging me to sit up front, but on that first day, I was content with my decision. As I waited for class to begin, I took a moment to survey my surroundings. The classroom was filled with people who, like myself, had decided to take a new direction in life, and pursue a career as a teacher. I wondered what these people had done previously, and their reasons for choosing to go down a different path. I assumed that many of them had had similar experiences to my own, and hoped that becoming a teacher would give them both a new purpose and a better quality of life.

At 4:00 pm sharp, my professor started class by taking attendance. Moments later, after introducing himself, he began lecturing about his experiences as an elementary school teacher in Florida. He was honest about the hardships, and spoke about various strategies he had used to overcome the difficulties he faced in the beginning stages of his career. I appreciated his eagerness to share those strategies with me and my classmates. His calm but confident demeanor made it seem as though he was some sort of guru who had all the secrets for a successful transition to the classroom. Or maybe the anxiety I felt about my new reality convinced me that this was the case.

The first secret he shared was the importance of a seating chart. A detailed seating chart, he said, would ensure that the teacher knows both who his students are, and where they belong. He then stressed the importance of having both a classroom management plan, and a carefully designed discipline plan to hold students accountable for their actions. Over the course of the two-hour lecture, he mentioned tips on how to restore order in a classroom where the students have gained the upper hand, and the importance of creating an open line of communication with the parents of students who had become behavioral problems. I sat at my desk vigorously taking notes, terrified that I would miss important information that would hinder my ability to become an effective classroom teacher. By the end of class, my mind raced with tasks I needed to complete in order to survive my summer assignment at P.S. 206. I had no plan whatsoever as to when these tasks would be completed, but I was adamant that they needed to get done.

The hallways of Carman Hall were tidy but bare. As I shuffled from one corner of the building to the other, fatigue began to creep its way into my psyche. The day had already been unbearably long, but I still had one more class to complete before I could return home to Brooklyn. My second class of the evening was a course that focused on the ideals of Special Education – a topic that, at the time, was completely new to me. In her introduction to the class, the professor stated that in her opinion, this would be one of the most important courses we would take in graduate school. Completely naïve to the diverse needs of our student population, I doubted that this was true, but appreciated her passion and interest in the topic.

The class began with an introduction to the IEP, short for Individualized Education Program. My professor explained that every student classified with a learning disability was entitled to an IEP, and that over time, the information included in this document would guide teachers in their quest to help all students achieve their academic potential. This document, she

claimed, was the biggest variable for a special education student's success or failure. Intrigued by its power, I wanted to learn how it was created, and more importantly, ways it could be used to help students grow and develop both inside and outside the classroom. But I would soon find out that that would have to wait. My professor explained that the greatest part of the course would be devoted to becoming experts on the multitude of learning disabilities, and how they shape a student's identity. Only then would we be able to wrap our head around the intricacies of how to complete an IEP. The first disability we were introduced to was ADHD. Our homework that first night was to read and summarize the first chapter of our book, which focused solely on what ADHD was, and interventions that could be used to help students with ADHD succeed academically.

Before leaving class that night I caught a glimpse of the burnt orange sunset that blessed this pocket of the north Bronx – the first of many sunsets I would witness over the course of my two years at Lehman. When class finally broke I took my time exiting Carman Hall. The day had worn me down; I was intimidated by the thought of six more weeks just like it. As I strolled to the subway that would transport me downtown – first through the Bronx, then through Manhattan and then to Brooklyn – I did my best to motivate myself to complete the work that needed to be done in order to be prepared for the next day's grind. Within minutes the number 4 train arrived, and I hopped on. I took out my binder from my backpack, and started skimming my assignment that needed to be completed before the second day of "Fellows' boot camp." Moments later, I calmly shut both my binder and my eyes. In what seemed like minutes, but was really well over an hour, I was back home.

I left my apartment the next morning feeling drained yet inspired. On the short stroll to the subway I reminded myself why I had made the decision to join the army of teachers who had

devoted their lives to "fighting the good fight." It wasn't only that I wanted to live a life of purpose. I was also genuinely worried about the future of our society. A group of children I shared the uptown number 4 train with reinforced that worry. As the train shoved off I sat in awe of their focus and determination. Each child glared at their iPhones as their fingers moved with the delicateness of a tap dancer in their prime. None of them uttered a word. They seemed at peace as the minutes went by, their games providing moments of tranquility that I assumed eluded them throughout most of their days. I wondered if they showed the same grit and persistence in their classrooms. I assumed that they did not. One of my goals in my new life as a teacher was to reverse that troubling trend.

On the second day of "Fellows' boot camp" I arrived to P.S. 206 a few minutes before 8:00 am. As fresh sweat petals poured down my forehead, one of the trainers half-jokingly commented that I was lucky to have arrived before the late bell – a lateness this early on in the summer would have put my chances of completing the program in jeopardy.

The training began a few moments after I got settled in. The focus of day two was the art of the "do now" – a fancy term for a five-minute warm-up activity with which every teacher in the New York City public school system was expected to begin every lesson. The "do now," our trainer noted, set the tone for the entire class. Its purpose was to activate prior knowledge and to provide insight into topics that needed to be reviewed or retaught. As a group we looked at various examples of strong "do now" questions, and discussed the elements that made them effective. We also studied weak "do now" questions, and discussed in detail how they could be improved. Much of what we spoke about was common sense, but given the importance that was placed on this short activity, I did my best to absorb all the information that was being taught to us.

After lunch, it was our turn to come up with our own "Do Now" activities. We were given a handful of topics to choose from, and the task was to create a warm-up activity that could be beneficial in a real-life lesson about that topic. The topic I chose was grammar, specifically subject-verb agreement. The task seemed so simple, but in reality, it was quite difficult. I thought about what would excite a teenager and spark their interest in learning. Perhaps some sort of game or matching activity would do the trick. For a moment I thought about the fifteen-year-old version of myself, and the way I would have preferred a lesson to begin. But that was no help. In the end, I created a standard fill-in-the-blank activity that students had probably seen hundreds of times before. When it was finally my turn to present it, I was praised for coming up with a task that forced students to think critically and activate their prior knowledge. I was relieved, but I wondered why I was being praised.

From 125th Street and Lexington Avenue the subway train rumbled north. A brief delay at 161st Street offered a glimpse of Yankee Stadium. The Yankees would soon be taking on the Toronto Blue Jays, and fans were already showing up for their pregame activities. In a former time, a couple of drinks on a warm summer night, followed by a Major League baseball game, would have made for the perfect evening. But in my new life there was no time for old pleasures.

The second day of class at Lehman College started just as the first one had. After taking attendance, my teacher once again went down memory lane and spent a considerable amount of time reminiscing about his previous classroom experiences. From those experiences we learned about how to handle class bullies, students who were new to the country, and teachers who communicated a negative attitude. In what would become a pattern, the lecture continued until the break.

It was only after the break that we began to discuss the details of a well-thought-out seating chart. Expanding the discussion he had introduced a day earlier, our instructor presented the various options a teacher has with regard to the placement of desks around a classroom. Having the desks lined up in rows was his preferred option, but having them in groups had its benefits as well. He made a point of stressing the importance of "purposeful grouping" if we chose the latter. The third option he presented was putting the desks in a large circle. This setup, we were warned, should be used only for a Socratic seminar – an activity where student participation occurs through group discussion. We discussed at length the situations in which each setup would be appropriate, and the consequences of a wrong move. In all my years as a student, I had never noticed the ways in which this small detail could affect student learning. I appreciated the opportunity to ponder details I had always viewed as insignificant, but in the back of my mind I wondered if the topic was appropriate for a graduate-level course. There had to be more pressing topics to explore. That thought lingered as the conversation continued.

My chapter summary on ADHD ended up being four pages long. It was detailed and dry, but seemed to be exactly what my professor was looking for. "Completion of a detailed summary is the best way to study important topics" she would often remark. Her rationale was that summarizing a text forced one to read and write about a topic before talking about it in a class discussion. Her goal was to force students to make use of all four language domains – reading, writing, listening, and speaking – when learning new material. I noted this unique element of her teaching style.

Our discussion about ADHD consisted of each class member reading their summaries directly from their papers. Given the fact that everyone had read the same chapter, the information each person presented was unsurprisingly similar. Everyone, of course,

acknowledged what ADHD is, and the ways those who have it are affected. Most people also included potential strategies teachers could use in order to differentiate instruction through multiple means of engagement. After hearing what we had read repeated in a variety of ways, the activity became painfully boring. Was the professor aware of this? Was it her plan to use boredom as a tactic to assert control? Did she even care about how we felt? Thoughts like these flooded my mind. Minutes before class broke on that second evening, my professor announced the homework that was to be completed for the following day: A detailed summary of our book's chapter on dyslexia. Part of me questioned the purpose of these assignments, but on the other hand, I was too exhausted to care. As soon as I could, I exited Carman Hall, and headed straight to the Kingsbridge Road subway station. After a full day of training and classes, all I could think about was getting home, catching my breath, and getting some rest. But that would have to wait, because the moment I entered the station, a sign flashed the two words any New York City commuter fears most: Train Delay.

It took only two days for doubt to seep its way into my mind. While I had been warned that the training program would be a serious commitment, the reality was that I had been caught off guard by its intensity. Although I had never enjoyed sustained satisfaction in my previous careers, I had always very much enjoyed my social life outside of work. I was in my mid-twenties, and since I had moved, New York City had become my playground. I enjoyed trying new restaurants, finding new bars, and having time to hang out with old friends while simultaneously trying to make new ones. But after two days of "Fellows' boot camp" it was clear that if I was to see this through and actually become a teacher, my priorities would have to change. It wasn't that the training or the coursework was so difficult. In fact, two days in, I was shocked at how basic "boot camp" seemed, and how boring the coursework was. The time

commitment was what really made me nervous. At that point, I was not sure if I wanted to sacrifice my own life in order to attempt to make an impact on the lives of others. Over the next few years, that dilemma would become a heavy burden to carry.

The next three days of "Fellows' boot camp" were devoted to the creation of a strong lesson plan. The framework that we were to follow was presented to us as the "workshop model" – an instructional method that includes a mini-lesson, a guided practice, and an independent practice. The rationale for learning how to make use of this pedagogical approach was that each lesson should include time for direct instruction, a group activity, and independent work. With this in mind, each morning we specifically focused on one aspect of the workshop model, and in the afternoons, our task was to come up with ideas and activities based on what we had gone over before our lunch break. Our goal, we were told, was to create a lesson plan that we would be able to use in an actual classroom the following week. In order to do this, we conferenced with our trainers, bounced ideas off our peers, and made use of the sample plans included in our binders. Before the bell dismissed us for the weekend, our lead trainer addressed our cohort from the front of the room. In a serious tone, he advised us to tweak and review the plans we had created in preparation for what would be our first experience teaching in front of real students. We were not told what grade we would be teaching, or how many students would be in our class, but after a mere five days of training, my tryout as a New York City public school teacher was officially set to begin.

On that first Friday as an NYC Teaching Fellow, the seriousness of "boot camp" was replaced with a much more jovial vibe at Lehman College. After harping on just about everything that could possibly be said about a seating chart, my professor had spent the last two days lecturing about the importance and essential details of a strong classroom management plan.

In what I now understood to be a key part of his teaching style, he spent a significant portion of class time reflecting on the type of plan he preferred to utilize, and the different experiences that had led to its creation. Now, at the end of the week, we were finally given a chance to do most of the talking.

The first portion of class was devoted to group work. Each group was tasked with creating its own classroom management plan that could be utilized in a middle or high school setting. Once the plans had been completed, it was time to role play. The skits were improvised; each group member was given an opportunity to put the plan into practice. The skits were messy, comical, and at times clearly unrealistic. But they forced us to adopt the mindset of young kids, full of energy and eager to challenge authority. In the moment, amused by each other's improvisation skills, we laughed and joked around. Little did I know that in just a few short months, the content of these skits would become my reality, and in that reality, laughing and joking would be replaced by anger and frustration.

My last class of the week was also different from what I had come to expect. The previous four days had been spent learning about various learning disabilities, and the ways in which those who have them are affected. Our summaries and discussions provided us an opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge of the realities of the students we would soon have in our classrooms, but they did little to provide us with the knowledge needed to meet these students' unique needs. On the last day of the week we were finally given an opportunity to reflect on those needs, and create scaffolds that could help us in a real classroom environment. Our task that evening was to build on the lesson plans we had created at "Fellows' boot camp" by explicitly showing the purpose of each scaffold, and how they would meet each student's needs. This would be a simple task for a veteran teacher with significant classroom experience, but for a

teacher-in-training whose sole experience in the classroom was a five-minute tryout in front of three administrators, it was immensely challenging. It forced us to think about the way we wanted to deliver a lesson, how that lesson would be perceived by a classroom full of students, the possible misconceptions, and the various modifications needed to ensure that all students were given the support they needed to complete the activities. Toward the end of class, each of us was given a chance to verbally present what we had come up with. My presentation left much to be desired, but I made it through. As I walked out of that final class of the week I was thinking about what I could have done differently, potential areas of confusion for certain students, and how I could improve my overall approach. Although up to that point I had never taught a real class, as I boarded the downtown number 4 train that would finally bring me home, it dawned on me that I was starting to think like a teacher.

After a grueling week, I envisioned a weekend full of rest and relaxation. Instead, I caught up on work, and prepared for my first few days as a real classroom teacher. Contrary to my old routine, I was up early, and prioritized getting work done as opposed to making evening plans. My main focus was creating a lesson plan for the class I would be teaching the coming Monday. I wanted everything to be perfect: The delivery, the timing, the transitions, the scaffolds, etc. Anything less than perfection would be a disappointment. I wanted my kids to be engaged, have fun, and learn. I didn't care that they were in summer school. My class was going to be different. I had no idea who my students were, how many there were, or their academic capabilities, but I did know that the next day's class was going to be the best summer school class ever given. I was determined, focused, and prepared, and then very quickly, humbled by reality.

The class I ended up teaching on that Monday morning was completely different from what I had envisioned. After I calmly wrote my name on the white board, I turned around to see four seventh-graders – three boys and a girl – staring at me. I was immediately struck by how young they were. Their innocent faces told me that there was so much they didn't know, but the glare in their eyes told me that there was already so much they had experienced. A short ice-breaker activity was all I needed to figure out that these four students were not English Language Learners, but native English speakers who had failed their coursework throughout the school year, and were now in summer school in order to meet their academic requirements. Thinking that my impending lesson on subject-verb agreement, a basic grammar lesson geared toward beginning English Language Learners, would be a complete bore, I panicked. But in that moment, I had no choice; I was acutely aware of my trainer sitting in the corner of the classroom relentlessly taking notes on my every move. At this point there was no turning back.

When I was planning this lesson, one thing I tried to focus on was the timing of each component. As I was instructed, I had allotted five minutes for the do now, ten minutes for the mini lesson, ten minutes for group work, and the last fifteen minutes for independent practice. But in my first crack at teaching, all that was thrown out the window. After the kids raced through the do now, they completed the other grammar sheets I had prepared for them in what seemed like record time. Not knowing what to do, I decided to go over each example one by one. By the end, the looks on their faces, and their body language, sent me a clear message: "Stop!" They were eventually bailed out by my trainer who, realizing I had used up all my materials, ended the lesson early, and gave the floor back to their regular teacher.

Walking out of the room I felt defeated. I had wasted these innocent students' time, and had taught them nothing. I had barely conversed with them, had forgotten all four of their

names, and did absolutely nothing to motivate them. After spending so much time learning and preparing, when my moment came, I fell flat on my face.

I shared these frustrating sentiments with my trainer in our follow-up meeting directly after my first tryout. He agreed that the lesson was dry and the timing was off, but instead of harping on the negatives, he noted some of the positives. There were no behavioral issues, students were participating when called on, and they felt confident when they got an answer correct. In addition, he noted that two students, on separate occasions, had asked clarifying questions when they had gotten something wrong. He said that these were important takeaways that should be acknowledged, and encouraged me to not be my toughest critic.

After our initial meeting, I ended up teaching that same seventh-grade class at P.S. 206 fourteen more times. At the conclusion of each session, my trainer and I would discuss what went well, what was lacking, and what should be changed. These meetings made me aware of the fact that although there was major room for improvement, there were in fact many things I was doing well. Hearing that from a respected source always made me feel good, and gave me the confidence I needed to move forward. Perhaps the most important piece of advice I ever got from my trainer is that good teaching is a skill, and like any other skill, it takes time to perfect. A new teacher must embrace and learn from the growing pains they will undoubtedly experience in the beginning stages of their career.

According to the New York City Teaching Fellows program and the New York City Department of Education, six weeks of training and coursework was all I needed to become a classroom teacher in one of New York City's high-need public schools. In the moment, those six weeks felt like years. But after completing Fellows' boot camp, I couldn't believe how fast time had passed by. It was now the middle of August, and the 2016-2017 school year was set to begin

in just two weeks. I was excited and anxious to get underway, but one major hurdle remained: I still did not have a job.

The rapid job hunt brought me to places in New York City where I wouldn't have dared to go two months earlier. Neighborhoods like Washington Heights in northern Manhattan and Castle Hill in the Bronx were so foreign to me – unlike anything I had ever seen or experienced. After two unsuccessful interviews I began to panic. I had already sacrificed so much that summer, but now I was on the verge of starting the school year jobless – a prospect that would have forced me to rethink the direction I had chosen. With time running out, and my future in doubt, I finally received the email that would change my life forever.

Mott Haven Village Prep High School, a small learning community of 360 students, has a full-time vacancy for an English as a Second Language Teacher. If you are interested in filling this position, kindly respond to this email.

Our school is located on St. Ann's Ave. in the Bronx. We have a positive atmosphere centered on student support and academic achievement. The staff has a very collaborative spirit and welcomes all new members.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

James Ramos
Assistant Principal
Mott Haven Village Prep High School
Bronx, New York

A quick response to that email led to an interview with both the Principal and the Assistant Principal of Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School. Before our conversation ended, I all but pleaded with them to offer me the position. I told them this was where I wanted to be, and listed the qualities that would make me a great addition to their staff. Whether it was out of pity, desperation, or intrigue I still do not know, but at the conclusion of the interview, the principal looked me in the eye and offered me the job. With my heart racing, I accepted

immediately. She extended her arm, and as we shook hands, she said five words that I will never forget: Welcome to the South Bronx.

Chapter 3

The first official day of my teaching career was a beautiful fall day that still had the remnants of summer. My excitement woke me well before sunrise, and helped to push me out the door by 6:15 am. I took the short walk from my new apartment to the B train at Newkirk Plaza, and was relieved when I saw on the board that it would be arriving in just two minutes. After four quick stops, I transferred to the number 5 train at Atlantic Avenue, and from there, it was up to the Bronx. Doing my best to harness my excitement, I spent the next hour on my feet, gripping the cool metal pole in the middle of the subway car, subconsciously believing that that familiar sensation would provide some sort of moral support to help me survive the day. "The next stop is Jackson Avenue, transfer is available to the 2 train," I eventually heard over the loudspeaker, finally indicating that it was my time to exit.

During my brief power-walk from the subway station to my school, I was acutely aware of the stark contrast between my old and new lives. A few short months earlier I had been working in a new office building in Manhattan's financial district, passing by the strongest symbols of American might on a daily basis. But on the first day of my new life, I found myself walking to a small high school in one of the poorest districts in the nation. The chic coffee shops and bakeries I used to pass by every day were now replaced with dollar stores and bodegas; instead of rubbing shoulders with bankers and businessmen, I now shared the sidewalks with mothers rushing their kids to school, and groups of adults who seemed in no rush to go anywhere at all. The contrast was jarring.

In the days leading up to that first day, I had often thought about how I would introduce myself to my new students, and the type of message I would want to send to them. Among other things, I wanted them to know that I believed in them, and that I was ready to do whatever it took

to help them achieve their academic goals. But when my moment came, the poise and confidence I had always relied on eluded me. Part of the reason for this was that my first class was a co-taught class, meaning that another teacher, the content teacher, would be running the show. A few moments after the bell rang to signal the start of class, the ninth grade English teacher began her opening statements. She started off by introducing herself, and providing some information on her previous teaching experiences, both in New York City and abroad. She spoke about her rigorous expectations, and the beautiful things that could happen if everyone in the room committed to working hard and giving their all. And then, just when I thought she was done, she played a video she had created of her former students sharing what her future students should expect in her class. I was just as intimated as everyone else in the room.

When I finally did get a chance to speak, the epic motivational speech I had previously envisioned was replaced with something much more subtle. Looking out into a class of thirty teenagers, I introduced myself for the first time as Mr. Ramer, and shared with them bits and pieces of my past. I ended my introduction by telling them how honored I was to be their teacher, and that I would always be there for them for whatever they might need. The blank stares I got in return told me that my words were most likely going in one ear and out the other, but I had broken the ice with my students – a huge first step. For the rest of the period I stood silently at the front of the room as my co-teacher gave an overview of the class and went over the syllabus.

It was only after my lunch period that I had my first opportunity to teach my own class. My plan for the day was simple: a quick introduction, a review of the syllabus a colleague had shared with me the day before, and then some fun icebreakers to finish off the forty-five-minute period. But before anything else, my first order of business was to take attendance. Bubble

sheet in hand, I began to make my way down the list. After saying each name, I would look up and scan the room to match the name with a face. Each time I looked up I was shocked to see how many faces there were. "How am I ever going to learn all these names?" I thought to myself. The overwhelming majority of the names were easy to pronounce. And then came a difficult one. "Kadijaa..Kadijato…Sanoa…" I tried my best to sound it out, but I was struggling. A young girl in the back said her name clearly in a stern tone. "Got it" I responded, wanting to move on as fast as possible. Approaching the end, I was interrupted by the grand entrance of, I would later learn, one of the most notorious students at Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School. Joel, at nineteen years old – only eight years younger than myself – had been on track to graduate the previous June, but the disciplinary action that followed after he slammed another student's head into a locker prevented him from doing so. As soon as the door slung open, I knew trouble loomed. "Yooooooo What up mi gente!!!" Joel emphatically yelled, not caring at all about what had been taking place in the room moments earlier. "Good morning, can you please take the do-rag off?" I said. "Na" he replied "I can't." "Excuse me?" I answered back trying to assert control (which, I had learned in my summer training, was important to do, especially early on in the school year). "I ain't taking it off. What you going to do about it?" The heckling screams echoed all throughout the room. The entire class was cracking up as if they were in a comedy club. As Joel zig-zagged through the classroom, making sure to give everyone he knew a high five, I went back to my task at hand. I was only able to get through three more names before the girl who moments earlier had corrected my pronunciation of her name, raised her hand. "Kadijaaa…Kadiiija" I was butchering her name just moments after she had corrected me. "Can I go to the bathroom?" she asked. "I'm sorry, but it's school policy that students can only use the bathroom during even periods" I told her. I continued taking

attendance. Just about done, the same girl raised her hand again, and I butchered her name for a third time. She interrupted me with a threat that set the tone for the rest of the school year: "Mess up my name one more time, and I'll stab you in the eye with a pencil!" The laughter was louder this time; within just a few moments, my confidence had been shattered. I handed out the syllabus I wanted the students to read and sign. By the end of the period most of them were crumpled up on the floor. Two out of thirty were returned. The bell rang to mark the end of the period. Within three minutes I was staring at the faces of thirty different teenagers.

My next class went just about as well as the first one had, and by the end of the day I seriously questioned my ability to survive as a high school teacher in New York City. To say that I had been humbled would be an understatement. The teenagers I had "taught" that day had shaken me to the core. As I started my journey home I was completely overwhelmed with emotion. I only made it three blocks before tears started rolling down my cheeks. There I was, a twenty-seven-year-old man crying on the corner of 152nd Street and Jackson Avenue in the South Bronx. My old life, the one I had grown tired and frustrated with, never looked so good.

In a conversation leading up to the first day of school, my mom had offered her advice on how to tackle the challenge that lay ahead. Pride, persistence, and preparation, she said, would be the key to making it through the year. The three P's, as she would often refer to them, had helped her endure over forty years of teaching at the community college level in spite of major challenges that had, on a variety of occasions, threatened to derail her career.

When I called her to voice my frustrations with what had happened on day one, she immediately brought up what we had spoken about a few days earlier. "You have to take yourself seriously, show them that you will never be broken, and keep them busy at all times. If they're not busy," she went on, "then you're going to have problems."

Learning how to keep students busy is arguably the most difficult task for a first-year teacher. The key is having a curriculum that guides the creation of detailed lesson plans that keep students motivated and engaged. But on the second day of school, I found out from my principal that no curriculum existed for the classes I would be teaching. The English as a New Language teacher who had proceeded me at the school had followed her own system with very little administrative oversight. I did not have access to the materials she had used, which meant that I, a two-day veteran of the NYC Department of Education, would be in charge of creating both the curriculum and the materials – worksheets, outlines, graphic organizers – that I would need throughout the year. That thought was unnerving.

Not knowing how to teach was one thing, but being clueless on what to teach was a completely different issue. I was in desperate need of both content and materials, and with no guidance from anyone, my only option was to scour the internet with the hope of finding anything that I could realistically use. Grammar worksheets – usually made up of simple fill-in-the-blank exercises – quickly became my preferred option, and I used them to guide my instruction, providing a base I was able to work from.

In the weeks that followed, it seemed as if every moment I spent outside the classroom was dedicated to looking for materials for the next day's grammar lesson. On some occasions, frustrated with what I found online, I would create my own worksheets that could be tailored to what I was hoping to cover during class. Once I had the material, I then had to create a lesson plan; a hard copy of each day's lesson plan was a must in case an administrator decided to show up for an observation. More often than not, this extensive planning would last deep into the night. On some evenings, I would wake up in the middle of the night, laptop still on my chest, work still needing to get done.

Despite my meticulous preparation, I was acutely aware that little or no learning was actually taking place in my class. The primary reason for this was that for some students – those who spoke fluent English, but were still, according to the New York City Department of Education, labeled as English Language Learners – the work was simply too easy. For others – those who were brand-new to both the United States and the English language – the work was far too difficult. Trying to meet the needs of such a diverse group of students seemed like an impossible task. Despite my best efforts, boredom was rampant, and just as my mother had warned, behavior problems arose.

If during this time teaching had been my sole focus, perhaps I could have had an easier time adjusting. But that was far from the case. Every Wednesday and Thursday, after school, I would travel by subway from Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School in the South Bronx to Lehman College in the North Bronx for my graduate courses. My first class began at 4:00 pm, which gave me an hour-and-a-half window to get from work to school. If by some miracle there was no train traffic, I would have just enough time to scarf down a quick snack before the start of class. The tight schedule offered no time for any leisure activity – an unfortunate reality given the beauty of Lehman's campus, and the energy that pulsated throughout its grounds. After two two-hour classes, I would finally be done for the day; an hour-and-a-half train ride was the final hurdle. Occasionally I would have the energy to transform the subway train into a makeshift office in a desperate attempt to cross something off my to-do list, but more often than not, I would sink into a seat, close my eyes, and let the train carry me home.

On November 9, 2016 the world awoke to news that the United States had elected a new president. After one of the most divisive campaigns in recent history, President Trump's promise to "make America great again" rallied him to victory, and ushered in a new era of global

politics. Those who had grown frustrated with the state of the union after eight years of President Obama welcomed President Trump's outspoken demeanor, his willingness to question policies – both domestic and international – that he believed harmed the United States, and the fact that he was far removed from the political establishment. On the other hand, there was strong opposition to his threatening rhetoric, his tendency for rash decision-making, and his bold conservative agenda. The result of the election exacerbated deep divisions in American society. On November 9th, some people were elated while others were furious, and in a little classroom at a small high school in the South Bronx, there were others who were terrified.

It was clear from the beginning of class on that autumn day that something was off. My students, normally loud, jovial, and innocently disruptive, were unusually quiet, timid, and nervous. My loudest and most outgoing student, a fifteen-year-old named Juan, who usually screamed "Buenos Dias Mister!" and gave me a fist pump upon entering the room, sat at his desk with his head down. I attempted to give class, but it was clear that everybody's attention was elsewhere. Nobody responded when I first inquired about what was going on. But eventually a freshman named Felix spoke up. In broken English he said "Mister, Trump wins…he builds the wall." My heart sank. It was the first moment in which I realized that I was more than just a teacher.

That afternoon I took a break from grammar to talk about life. Now understanding the source of their anguish, I tried my best to explain to my students – most of them immigrants from Latin America and West Africa – that during an election, it is normal for a candidate to say whatever they think will help them win; whether it was true or not did not matter. Looking into their faces full of youth and fear, I assured them that President Trump was not going to build a wall or deport any of them back to their home countries – I had no idea if that was true or not,

but in the moment, I tried my best to comfort them. I could tell that my message was falling on deaf ears, so I decided to give them the floor. In an impromptu move, everybody rearranged their chairs into a circle, and was given an opportunity to share their feelings about what was happening. They spoke in broken English, Spanish, and French. Some stayed quiet, while others opened up more than they had all year. Whatever language they spoke, their message was clear: They were very much aware of the events unfolding around them, and the possibility that they could be directly affected by them. I couldn't understand exactly what they were experiencing, but I empathized with them, and tried my best to show them that I cared.

By late November I was tired and distressed. I was having a hard time constantly planning for the next day, keeping students motivated and engaged during class, mentally preparing for the inevitable hurdles that would come up throughout the school day, and keeping up with the work from my graduate courses at Lehman College. In addition, my daily commute from Brooklyn to the Bronx was starting to take its toll. Thanksgiving break was approaching, and I envisioned a four-day weekend of rest and relaxation with friends and family who in the last few months I had barely seen.

On the Wednesday before the break there was excitement in the air. In the morning, an announcement came over the loudspeaker that all after-school activities were cancelled – an implicit message from the principal that teachers were both encouraged and expected to exit the premises as fast as possible after the bell that marked the end of the day. The night before, for the first time all year, I was too exhausted to write up a formal lesson plan. I did, however, search the internet for a usable lesson about Thanksgiving. In the end, I decided that a video explaining the origins of Thanksgiving, and a simple worksheet based on the information presented, would be sufficient.

With forty-five minutes left before a four-day vacation, I assumed that I was home free. When I couldn't get the video to work, I accepted defeat, and gave my students permission to relax – most sat there and relentlessly scrolled on their smartphones. About ten minutes into the "free period" a visitor showed up – the assistant principal. Notebook in hand, and a stern look on her face, she strolled around the perimeter of the room, eventually finding a seat in the back-left corner. My heart sank.

Before I scrambled for something to talk about, I yelled for everybody to put their phones away and to concentrate on what was going on at the front of the room. Most consciously refused. A waterfall of sweat began pouring down my forehead. As they continued to scroll, I scrambled for something to talk about. I began my Thanksgiving lesson by talking about the Pilgrims – who they were, why they came to America, where they landed, and the challenges they faced upon their arrival. I then gave a short history lesson on Native Americans. I concluded the lesson by explaining that our Thanksgiving tradition was born when these two groups came together for an epic feast that, as legend has it, lasted for three days. I handed out a worksheet for students to complete individually. I circled around the room to monitor student progress just as I had been taught in "Fellows' boot camp," but not surprisingly, very few students were putting pen to paper. Before she left, the vice principal asked for a hard copy of the lesson plan. When I told her I did not have one she looked me up and down, and without saying another word, left the room. My first-ever observation was officially complete. When the bell rang, the excitement I had felt less than an hour before had turned into embarrassment and humiliation. During the previous three months I had poured everything I had into trying to be the best educator I could possibly be, but at that moment, all of that was moot. I had made a fool of myself in front of my students and my boss; the shame was overwhelming.

Ironically, my epic Thanksgiving failure became a turning point in my young career. As a result of my lackadaisical preparation, I was advised by my principal to seek out a mentor, and then meet with that person weekly. The choice was simple. Aware of my struggles, but appreciative of my drive, Ms. Rodriguez, the school's speech pathologist, had been helping me with various tasks throughout the first few months of the school year. Among other things, she helped me contact the parents of students who were consistently absent or cutting – a tedious job considering the number of calls that had to be made. She was positive and upbeat, and she took her leadership role in the school seriously. I was glad to be working with her.

In our first after-school meeting Ms. Rodriguez inquired about what I had been teaching, and my overall goals for my English as a New Language classes. I explained that I had been focusing solely on grammar, and had been using worksheets I had either created on my own or found online to guide my instruction. Her reaction still sticks with me years later: "You teach grammar every day? How have you made it to December?" When she recovered from her initial shock, she inquired about the anchor text I had been using. When I explained that nobody had given me a book, she encouraged me to go out and find "something on the shorter side that is relatable for students who are new to the United States." That night I ordered *Javier Arrives In the United States: A Text For Developing Readers* by Nina Rosen. I had no way of knowing whether or not the students would appreciate the fictional experiences of Javier, but I finally had something that could be used to guide me as I began to develop my routine.

"You need to get them on your side, and the way to do that is to show them you care." Ms. Rodriguez constantly reminded me of this any time I voiced my frustrations to her. On the surface, I knew what she meant. But in reality, how does one actually get rowdy teenagers "on your side?" Her answer was simple: "The more time you spend with them, the more they will

respect you." Extra time was something I barely had during my first year in the classroom, but I trusted Ms. Rodriguez's advice – I was willing to make the necessary sacrifices in order to build relationships and a classroom community.

The week before winter break, I gave my students a short survey to fill out. I specifically wanted to know what they were enjoying about our class, how I could improve as their teacher, and what they were doing on their own in an effort to improve their English. The last question, a simple yes or no, asked them if they would be willing to join an after-school program. To my amazement, the overwhelming majority checked yes.

Ms. Rodriguez helped me fill out the paperwork for my new club. I named it the ENL Academic Support Group. Because I had to go to Lehman College on Wednesday and Thursday nights for graduate school, the plan was for the club to meet on Mondays and Tuesdays from 2:30 pm to 4:00 pm. During this time, students would be assigned to work on a computer program Ms. Rodriguez had recommended called ESL Read Smart. The beauty of this program was that it would individualize instruction based on the score each student received on a baseline reading assessment. Another perk was that I wouldn't have to plan any additional activities; all I had to do was show up. The club was approved the last day of school before winter break. Twenty-one students had signed up. I looked forward to getting started.

Winter break came and went. Although I was not physically in the building, mentally I spent my nine-day vacation at the board, teaching in room 412B. Instead of traveling or enjoying New York City as I had planned, I graded old assignments, created a final exam for the fall semester, completed my unit plans for the spring semester, and tried my best to get ahead with lesson-planning. When we returned to school, everybody happily shared their vacation

adventures. Not wanting to admit that I did nothing, I told my colleagues I caught up on some much-needed rest and relaxation.

The return to school signaled the return of my 5:30 am wakeup and my daily hour-and-a-half commute to and from the Bronx. It also meant that final exams for the first semester were right around the corner. At Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School, the final exam was 25% of a student's grade for the semester. For many students, this test would determine if they would pass or fail my class. Given the importance of this one exam, I decided to spend the next two weeks reviewing the material we had learned throughout the first half of the school year. Much to the dismay of Ms. Rodriguez, grammar was once again our main focus.

I assumed that my students would take their final preparation seriously – but I was wrong. For the next two weeks they were as hyper, distracted, and disengaged as they had been all year. After what I thought had been significant progress in the area of classroom management, it felt as though I was back at square one. Spit balls, paper airplanes, and paper basketballs flew around the room. Phones were out, headphones were in, and barely anybody cared to listen to what I had to say. It was frustrating to see the students this way, and I didn't hold back in letting them know. "Don't you realize how important this time is? Are you trying to fail the final exam?!" I would repeatedly yell when things really got out of hand. The truth was, they did not appreciate the importance of this preparation time because most of them had no idea what a final exam was, and the fact that it held such weight on their semester grade simply did not matter to them. The importance I was putting on this test made no sense to them, and their actions in the weeks leading up to the test made no sense to me. This lack of understanding highlighted the major disconnection I felt from my students throughout my first year in the classroom.

The final exam was a combination of reading comprehension questions and grammar exercises. At the very least, students were expected to know the basic components of a complete sentence, and how to conjugate verbs in the simple present tense. The most difficult part of the test asked students to identify and correct errors in various sentences and paragraphs. After four months of practice, it seemed fair to assume that my students had a solid understanding of what was going on. The results showed otherwise. Considering the work I had put in throughout the semester, the long nights and early mornings, it was disheartening to see the confusion and doubt that my students felt. Even more difficult to accept was a general lack of effort.

On the first day of the second semester I received a call on the classroom telephone from my assistant principal. She said a new student had arrived, and as the head of the ENL department, it was part of my job to conduct the "new student interview." This interview consisted of four parts: A home-language survey, the viewing of a short video that outlined the different programs that exist for English Language Learners in the New York City Department of Education, a questionnaire that parents or guardians had to fill out after seeing the video, and an informal English-language proficiency test.

When I got to the main office on the fifth floor it was immediately clear who the new student was. Sitting quietly in the corner next to a gentleman who couldn't have been much older than myself was a young boy with a terrified look on his face. I greeted him with a smile and extended my hand. The quick, weak handshake showed his fear and anxiety. "Hi, my name is Mr. Ramer, welcome to our school." He gave a slight nod of acknowledgement.

The older gentleman seemed more eager to engage in conversation. Pen in hand, it seemed as though he was anxious to conclude this meeting and get on with his day. When I started outlining what it was that needed to be done, it became immediately clear that neither of

them had any idea what I was saying. Six months earlier I was a new recruit in "Fellows' boot camp" learning the absolute basics of pedagogy, and now I was completing a new-student orientation with an immigrant family who, due to a language barrier, had major difficultly understanding the information that was being presented to them. In my broken Spanish I reviewed the paperwork and gestured to the older gentleman where to sign. He signed in a hurry next to each "x." After the three of us viewed the thirteen-minute video, the gentleman made it clear that he wanted to leave the child at our school. Before he signed the document to make that choice official, I tried to explain that given the limited programs that were available at our school for English Language Learners, a better choice would be to send his nephew (I found out the relationship a few days later) to a school with either a bilingual or a dual-language program, which would make it possible for him to take classes in Spanish as he progressed in English. Clearly in a hurry, he declined the offer. The paperwork was signed, and just like that, Miguel, who had arrived to the Bronx just a few weeks earlier, not knowing a single word of English, was the newest admit to Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School. Part of me was frustrated – "where would I even start with this kid" I asked myself. But looking at him, a terrified young boy, who had probably experienced things I could never have imagined during his journey to the Bronx, it dawned on me that my job was to create a comfortable environment where he could finally be at ease. That was something I could do.

In the weeks to come, many students, just like Miguel, would show up at our school. They came from all over the world: Guatemala, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Guinea, Gambia, Yemen. Some came with their parents, while others came with guardians. Some spoke broken English, while others spoke none at all. I greeted each one of them in the exact same way: "Hi, my name is Mr. Ramer, welcome to our school." Each one would look at

me with a face full of fear and worry, and I would do my best to calm them down and make them feel welcome. Each orientation would remind me of the crucial role that I could play in other people's lives.

The beginning of the second semester had a very different feel than the beginning of the first. The realities of the classroom, and the need to expect the unexpected, were no longer a surprise to me. There were minor tweaks to my schedule, but the classes I was teaching were exactly the same: Three English as a New Language classes and two tenth-grade co-taught English Language Arts classes. I had developed relationships with some of my colleagues, and now felt more comfortable bouncing ideas off them or asking for advice. But the biggest change was the level of comfort I now felt with my students, and the sense of community that began to exist among them.

A major factor in the creation of that community was the ENL Academic Support Group. For anybody not involved, it would have been fair to question how much academic development was actually taking place there. Students would often enter the classroom loud and rambunctious, listening to music, and only when they were done flinging snacks around the room would they sit down, open a laptop (provided by the school), and log on to ESL Read Smart. Once everybody had logged on, there were usually a few moments of silence before someone would emphatically celebrate or complain about getting a question right or wrong. It was impossible to bring the silence back once it had been broken.

The group became a refuge to students who needed it most. It was a place where any language could be spoken without fear of embarrassment, where extra help could be gotten without fear, and where students could joke around without fear of punishment. New students often joined the group upon their arrival to the school, making their difficult adjustment to their

new home somewhat easier. Some students never even opened their laptops, choosing instead to relax and catch their breath. On a personal level, the three extra hours I spent with them per week created a special bond and a sense of trust that had not existed at the start of the school year.

Although the club helped me foster a new rapport with my students, by the spring I was still struggling to develop a teaching routine. The book I had found after my discussion with Ms. Rodriguez provided me with an anchor text from which to work, but deciding what content to teach, and how to teach it, was a major challenge. When I posed this question in one of my graduate courses the responses were more confusing than helpful. One classmate advised me to develop an order-of-events chart, another recommended a dilemma map, and a third showed me the feelings charts she had created for her middle-school students. All those activities seemed great, but what I needed was an actual routine. What exercises could I create for each chapter that could help my students simultaneously learn both content and language? I did not find an answer to that question during my first year, but solving that problem would become an obsession in the months to come.

Before we celebrated the end of the spring semester at Lehman College, my professor asked us to complete a ten-minute "free-write" activity. Her instructions were to think about the past nine months, and to record all the thoughts, reflections, and takeaways that came to mind about our first year as New York City Public school teachers. As I began to write, it dawned on me that this was the first time I had taken a moment to think back on the most difficult year of my life.

I began by writing about the commute. I had spent over five hundred hours on various subway trains throughout the year during my daily journeys from Brooklyn to the Bronx and

back. On numerous occasions the subway became a makeshift office in a scrambled effort to complete an assignment for work or school. Sometimes, in a desperate effort to catch my breath, the train became my resting spot – a place to close my eyes before my next task. I wrote about how, throughout the year, I had seen Mariachi bands play, subway dancers perform, religious speakers preach, and everything from shouting matches to fist fights. I mentioned how much I had dreaded the commute, but how, in a strange way, these journeys underground had taught me more about my city than I had ever known.

I continued by writing about the personal sacrifices I had made throughout the year. At times, I wrote, I was so focused on my students and my coursework, it felt as if I was drowning. Between the constant planning, grading, and graduate work, I had very little time to do or enjoy anything else. I had made it to the end of the year, but it felt as though life was on hold, which was a very real frustration. I ended the "free-write" with a question I often pondered: "I work really hard, but am I making any difference?" When the class discussion began, that was the reflection I shared.

On June 27th, 2017 I listened intently as the valedictorian of the Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School senior class addressed her audience. Born and raised in the Dominican Republic, Yismairy had moved to the Bronx with her father and younger brother when she was thirteen years old. Unaware of the possibility of any other option, she enrolled at Mott Haven Village, learned English quickly, and realized early on the potential benefits of being, as she put it, "a big fish in a small pond." She recalled the challenges she faced as a young teen in an unfamiliar place, forced to carry the burden of going to school, taking care of her home, and helping to raise her younger brother. She explained that with nowhere else to go, her high school became her safe haven – a place where she felt supported, challenged, and encouraged to

achieve. She took a moment to thank her teachers for this, and reminded us that we could never truly understand the powerful role that we play in our students' lives. And then Yismairy addressed her classmates. She told them that they were the exception to the norm, that in this area of New York City people who looked like them were not supposed to walk across this stage and celebrate academic achievement. She reminded them to be proud of who they were and where they came from. And she encouraged them to acknowledge the people in their lives who helped them get to this point. Before concluding her speech, she said a prayer in Spanish for all of her classmates. She walked off the stage to rousing applause, and as she embraced her father and brother, it was impossible not to feel proud about what I was doing at Mott Haven Village. That moment finally convinced me that what I was doing mattered, and that I was in fact making a difference in the lives of others.

Chapter 4

In the months before I quit my job at Enterprise Rent-A-Car I attended two functions that for some reason have stuck in my mind over time. The first was a regional awards dinner that every member of my office was encouraged to attend. Two members of my team were being recognized for their extraordinary sales numbers, and my boss felt it was important for our entire team to be there as they received their honors. The second was a retirement party for a colleague who had been with the company for over thirty years. He had held numerous positions over the course of his career, and was finally being recognized for his sacrifice and loyalty.

The retirement party was held at a local bar and grill. Food and drinks were provided, as were hand-rolled cigars – Frank's favorite. There were lawn games for people to enjoy, and cabanas to relax in as we all reminisced about our experiences working with the man of the hour. After a few speeches Frank finally took the microphone to say a few words. He thanked everyone for coming, acknowledged various people who had played an important role in his career, and shared a few formative memories that, as he put it, would stay with him forever. When he was done, someone in the garden asked him the question that most people ponder before making the choice to retire: Now that you won't be in the office, what are you going to do with all your free time? Frank chuckled, "a whole lot of nothing" he said "and I'm going to enjoy every second of it."

With my first year in the classroom finally in the books, it was now time to enjoy the fruit of all teachers' labor: summer vacation. The past year had been one of major transition – I had made a career change, had gone back to school, had accepted a teaching position an hour from my home, and had devoted all my time and energy to improving my craft. Now, as the calendar

turned from spring to summer, it was finally time to do a whole lot of nothing, and enjoy every second of it. And that is exactly what I did.

Part of the reason I had pursued a career in education was because of the time off. After burning out in other endeavors, I learned that I am not the type of person who can do the same thing day after day, year after year, with nothing to look forward to. In order to remain in a positive frame of mind, I needed time for rest and relaxation, and in July of 2017 I finally had it. I got up late, passed the time in cafés, enjoyed the peace and tranquility of Prospect Park, Coney Island, and the Brooklyn Bridge Promenade. My girlfriend and I went out to dinner, went to the movies, and occasionally enjoyed an evening at a local bar. All that I had sacrificed during the year, I was now able to enjoy. The free time was everything, and I tried my best to take advantage of every second. But very quickly, all of that came to an end.

In the last days of summer, I began to think about my goals for the 2017-2018 school year. In graduate school, when discussing unit planning, I had been taught to work backwards – What was it that you wanted students to be able to do by the end of a unit, and what were the incremental steps that could help them reach that goal? I used that mindset to help me begin planning for year number two. What was it that I wanted my students to be able to achieve, and what type of instruction was needed in order to help them get there? When pondering these questions, I recalled the assessments my students were given toward the end of the spring semester, specifically the NYSESLAT (the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test). While administering this test, I saw the difficulty my students had remembering vocabulary words, writing basic sentences, and using those sentences to write basic paragraphs. I decided that that would be my main focus moving forward, but I was still unsure of what it would actually look like.

The night before the first day of school the jitters were back. I was excited to see my colleagues and begin again the one hundred-eighty-day grind, and I was also anxious to experience the inevitable challenges that lay ahead. What students would I cross paths with? How would I convince them to trust me? And how would I inspire them to do their very best? These questions were at the forefront of my mind as I prepared for year number two as a high school English teacher in the South Bronx.

After a summer of sleeping in, on the first day of school I was up and ready to go just as the sun was rising. For the first time in two months I would be en route to Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School. I boarded the B train at Newkirk Plaza and switched to the 5 train at Atlantic Avenue; No delays made the commute feel shorter than normal. After a little over an hour I exited at Jackson Avenue, and started down the steps. As the train rumbled north into the distance, the soundtrack of the South Bronx began to make its presence felt: Rap music blasting from the stoops of the projects on Westchester Avenue, prayers in Spanish blaring from a loudspeaker outside La Pastora bakery, mothers yelling at their kids to hurry up on their way to school, the boss at Cibao Meats giving orders to his workers, a group of middle-aged men shouting as they rolled dice, bachata music playing from the speakers of each and every bodega, and then, every couple of minutes, the rumble of the elevated subway. As I walked through the littered streets I tasted the thick South Bronx air –The smoke of cigarettes, marijuana, and black-and-milds combined to create a distinct stench I did not particularly enjoy. The sights, smells, and noises welcomed me back to the Bronx, and became my first memory of the new year.

Before entering the building, I was greeted with hugs and smiles – It was an emotional moment seeing my colleagues for the first time after the summer break. We spoke to each other about our summer adventures. Some people had recently gotten back from travels. Others, like

myself, had enjoyed a two-month "staycation" in New York. And then there were others who opted to teach summer school classes in order to earn extra money. Those who chose the summer school route made it clear that the two-week vacation they received at the end of August was simply not enough. But now, at the beginning of September, we were all back at Mott Haven Village, ready to mold the minds of the next generation.

One year before, the first day of school was like diving into the unknown – the confusion about everything had been scary and overwhelming. But now, despite being nervous about how the day would play out, it felt as if I had never left. I walked up the five flights of stairs to the main office, moved my time card, grabbed the stack of papers waiting for me in my mailbox, and headed to room 412B. In just a few moments a wave of students would be entering the building, and the year would officially begin. The students would first be directed to the gymnasium to receive their programs, and then they would head to their first class. I barely thought about what my opening address to them would be – this year I would rely more on instinct than planning.

When they arrived it was madness. The energy they brought with them on that early September day was contagious. Juan was back power-walking through the hallways giving high fives and hugs to almost everyone he saw, Fernando was back flirting with the group of girls he always tried to impress, Omar was back with his radiant smile, Joel was back bouncing his shiny Spalding basketball, Jason was back with his spotless Air Jordans, and Mariely, Rosa, and Feliciana were back doing each other's makeup and braiding each other's hair. These familiar sights comforted me as the bell rang to mark the beginning of first period.

The day went by without incident. My classes were full, but for the most part I was able to control them. This time around I made a conscious effort to start the year with the students doing most of the talking as opposed to myself. Each person said a little something about what

they had done during the summer, and a goal they had for the upcoming school year. Many students described travels back to their home countries. They reflected on the things they saw, the people they visited, the food they ate. Others proudly recalled a fun experience they had enjoyed at home in the Bronx – family cookouts, basketball games at St. Mary's Park, and videogames with friends were popular talking points. With regard to their goal for the next ten months, most had the same response: They wanted to improve their English.

Something I had overlooked in the beginning of my first year in the classroom was the importance of a benchmark assessment that measured my students' English-language capabilities. Not giving this type of assessment early on in the year significantly delayed my understanding of what my students were able to accomplish with regard to reading, writing, listening, and speaking. As a result, I went through the first semester with unrealistic expectations – a source of great frustration for both the students and myself.

With that in mind, on the second day of class, I gave a test. The students, about half of whom I had in my class the previous year, groaned as if the task I was asking them to complete was some sort of impossible challenge. In the back row, Argenis threw his hands up in the air asking God why, at this moment in his life, he had to complete Mr. Ramer's inaugural thirty-question reading and writing assessment. On the other side of the room, Christina raised her hand, and in a confusing tone blurted out "but Mr. Ramer, you never give tests, why do we have to take one now?" I'd like to believe that my response set the tone for not only the rest of the school year, but for the rest of my career. With confidence I responded "because this year we are actually going to learn something."

The students took the entire period to complete the exam. I appreciated their focus, and the effort that most of them exhibited throughout. While they worked, I quickly took attendance,

taking a moment to appreciate the control I had on just the second day of school. I had come a long way since Kadijatu had threatened to stab me in the eye with a pencil.

The scores of the benchmark assessment were not surprising. A handful of students did extremely well, but most had a difficult time answering simple reading comprehension questions in complete sentences, conjugating verbs in the simple present tense, and writing a clear paragraph that included a topic sentence, three supporting details, and a concluding sentence. One year earlier I had been shocked by how low my students' English-language levels had been, but now I understood the reality. It was not their fault that they were not fluent in English – they were simply immigrants from other countries who were at different points in their English-language journeys. That realization gave me a special appreciation for the ups and downs of the language acquisition process, and inspired me to take both myself and my class even more seriously.

By the beginning of year two I had a better understanding of my plan of action with regard to the curriculum I was trying to create and implement, but I still lacked the proper materials. Javier Arrives in the U.S.: A text For Developing Readers, the workbook I had found online based on Ms. Rodriguez's recommendation, had helped me navigate an extremely difficult situation, but the reality was that it did not provide enough material. It did not offer extensive vocabulary exercises, and the few reading comprehension questions that were included after each chapter were not enough to get me through an entire period. I desperately needed a workbook that could be used consistently for an extended period of time. I scoured the internet, searched through the school's closets, and even visited my mom's office at Middlesex College with the hope of finding something I could rely on to get me through the year. A few texts had possibilities, but each one had the same problem: Too much explanation, and not enough room

for student work. In addition, none of the readings I found could be aligned to any sort of theme. In order to avoid a daily search for materials, I had to figure something out quickly.

In a department meeting the following week I decided to voice my frustration about the lack of useful materials. How was I expected to teach both language and content without a workbook that included a variety of activities that actually helped students become better readers and writers? My colleagues, for the most part, sympathized with my situation, but did not have any solutions. But Mr. Lamb, the longest-tenured teacher at Mott Haven Village, made an interesting point that convinced me that something could be done. "If you don't see it on the shelf" he said "put it up there yourself."

As ludicrous as his advice seemed, it made complete sense. If I could not find what I was looking for, my only other option was to create it. That night, I phoned my mom to tell her about an idea I had for a book. True to her character, she encouraged me to think about the book's potential structure, what themes it would address, and what exercises would be included. Her only suggestion was to include exercises that addressed all four language modalities. Sensing the seriousness with which I was taking this potential endeavor, she proposed that we meet at her office at Middlesex College in Edison, New Jersey to plan out a manuscript.

We sat next to each other at a long conference table, each of us sipping a small hot coffee. We decided that similar to Javier Arrives in the U.S., our book should reflect the experience of a teenage immigrant arriving to the United States. On the white board in front of the table we brainstormed themes, eventually settling on four: 1) Families, Schools and Communities 2) Challenges and Solutions 3) Human Migration, and 4) New Beginnings. We named the protagonist Manny Garcia, and decided that he and his family would be from Cartagena, Colombia. Each story would chronicle their experiences in Queens, New York –

their new home. The goal was to write twenty stories, with at least four exercises after each one. The exercises would focus on vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, grammar, listening, and paragraph writing. As we stared at the board, our notes scribbled in various colors and in no particular order, we thought about the project's potential. "What if this hits?" my mom asked. We both laughed, but in the back of our minds we knew this brainstorming session had been the start of something, and the product could have exciting possibilities.

I went back to Brooklyn that night excited and inspired. At no point did it ever cross my mind that writing an English workbook was something a second-year teacher had no business doing. In fact, the opposite was true. I kept thinking about how I was filling a major need for myself, and that maybe one day this project could help thousands of other teachers who faced similar hurdles. I also reflected on how special it was to be doing a project like this with my mom. We had never done anything like this in the past, and it was exciting to work with her on something that we both felt could make a major contribution to the teaching of English all over the world.

Six weeks later, zero progress had been made. Not one story had been written, no exercises had been created, and worst of all, our enthusiasm for the plan had begun to wane. In my classes, my curriculum for the first marking period was a mixture of the workbook I already had, and worksheets I was able to find online. A large gap remained between what I hoped to do and what was actually getting done.

While I was still in the process of developing my pedagogical identity, by the middle of my second year at Mott Haven Village I had become a trusted member of the staff – somebody who both my colleagues and my students could rely on. In a small high school like Mott Haven, all staff members are expected to contribute to the school's well-being in a variety of ways, but

not everybody earns the trust of the students. My youth, energy, and general interest in relationship building helped me gain that trust, and I was proud of the leadership role it allowed me to take on. However, on many occasions, that role put me in situations I had never expected to be in.

Juan was a student I always enjoyed having in my class. Full of confidence, loud and boisterous, he commanded everyone's attention upon entering a room. He was a prankster who took every opportunity to play a joke on everybody, including himself. He was the type of person people gravitate toward; he loved to have fun. I could always count on Juan to participate in class. He never shied away from reading out loud or taking a stab at a question that most wouldn't dare to answer. Although he had been in the United States for two years, he was full of Dominican pride, and never wasted an opportunity to reminisce about life in his native country. When one day I found the phrase "Platano Power" drawn all over a desk, I knew immediately it had been Juan. But I also knew that maybe with a little pushback, he would eventually listen when I told him to erase his artwork.

When one day Juan knocked on my door during my lunch period, I knew something was wrong. He seemed worried and distraught. When I opened the door he quietly asked if he could come in. He sat down at a desk in the middle of the room, and looked around as if to ensure that we were alone and nobody would hear what he was on the verge of telling me. This was the first time I had ever seen this reserved side of him. "Everything ok?" I asked. Without even acknowledging the question, he began explaining his dilemma. "Ramer, I can't stop thinking about her. I know she likes me too, but we can't be together. She said her mom would not allow it. Her friend said it is because I am Dominican and she is from India, but that doesn't work for

me. Yesterday I got her flowers, but she did not want to keep them. She said she could never bring them home. How do I get her to like me? I don't know what to do."

I sat there in shock as a sixteen-year-old boy professed his love. Part of me wanted to burst out laughing, but at the same time, who was I was to judge what was real or fake? No matter how I felt about the situation, Juan's feelings were genuine. I never thought I would be asked to provide love advice to a student, but Juan had asked, and he deserved a true and honest answer. "I'm sorry you're hurt, Juan. I'm going to be real with you. If you can't be with her, that's her loss. As much as it hurts, time will make you feel better, and life will go on. There will be other fish in the sea." I'm not sure if he understood the last part, but I was confident that my message got across. For the rest of the period, Juan and I sat and talked. He opened up to me about his ex-girlfriend in the Dominican Republic, and how she compared to his new crush. He asked me about my girlfriend, and if I thought I was going to marry her. I told him that I thought so, but I was not quite ready to make that commitment yet. The conversation had caught me completely off guard, but it showed me where I stood in my students' eyes.

Diana arrived to our school toward the end of my first year. The unfortunate timing of her transfer from the Dominican Republic resulted in her having to repeat her junior year of high school. It was clear from the first day we met that Diana had real academic potential. During her new-student orientation I had found out that since second grade she had attended a highly regarded private school in the Dominican Republic. She never experienced a gap in her schooling, and it was clear that her mother took her education seriously. In addition, her score on the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners was very impressive. In a setting where devotion to academics is not the norm, Diana had been a welcome addition to our school community, and specifically to my English class.

When we returned to school in September I lobbied to get Diana out of my English as a New Language class and into a second required English Language Arts class. I knew she would be able to do the work, and this would help her gain more credits toward graduation faster. But my protest fell on deaf ears. Throughout the first marking period, she routinely flew through the work I gave her, and used the rest of class time to scroll on her phone, listen to music, or put her head down for a nap. After speaking with her other teachers, I confirmed that this was routinely happening in her other classes as well.

I worried about Diana. She was the first student I saw change right before my eyes. I knew that in the right setting she would be motivated and focused, but this was not the case for her at Mott Haven Village. She fell in with the wrong crowd, and it seemed as though nothing anybody said could convince her to take a different path. I often thought about calling her mother to discuss the situation, but there was always an excuse for not doing so.

One morning she walked into my class crying. When I approached her about what was wrong, she downplayed the situation as if there were no issue, and walked to her seat in the back of the room. She sat quietly scrolling on her phone, and when she grew tired of that, she stared out the window. When the bell rang to mark the end of class, I asked her if she had a moment to talk. Without even looking me in the eye she simply said no, and went on her way.

Given the way she had dismissed me earlier in the day, I was completely surprised when after school, she knocked on my door and asked to come in. I of course said yes, and moved a desk over in order to sit right in front of her. She started off by apologizing for the way she had spoken to me earlier in the day. Then she begged me for advice. “Ramer, my mom wants to send me back to the Dominican Republic. She tells me I don’t deserve to be here, and that she is going to send me back to live with my grandmother. I never thought I would say this but I don’t want

to go back. I want to stay here. I don't know what to do." With tears flowing down her cheeks, she kept repeating that she wanted to stay in her new home.

I got her a tissue and helped her calm down. I told Diana that she needed to think about where she was in life – where she had come from and where she wanted to go. I explained that in order to achieve her goals, she needed to focus on school, and work with the people who were willing to help her. I made her aware of the fact that if she really wanted to, she could graduate from high school in a year and a half and begin a new life in college, far away from the South Bronx. We spoke a little more about her mom, how she didn't want to disappoint her, but how she didn't understand that her strict rules had prevented Diana from living her own life. Before she left, she apologized for interrupting my afternoon, and thanked me for listening to her.

I wish I could say my advice changed the course of Diana's life for the better. But in reality, it didn't do very much at all. Over the next few months, Diana continued to be disengaged at school, and experience problems at home. She ignored warnings from her teachers and her guidance counselor, and ended up failing two classes during the first semester. Fed up with the situation, her mom followed through on her threat, and before the spring semester began, Diana was discharged from our school. Her experience in the United States had come to an end.

Sona arrived to Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School unable to speak a word of English. Less than a month before she started school, she had moved to the South Bronx, along with her father and two brothers, from Gambia in West Africa. Her native language was Soninke – an oral language that I was told is very rarely written. As expected, she could not complete any questions on the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners. Unable

to communicate with anybody in class, Sona kept to herself, and passed the time by doodling in the notebook I gave her on her first day.

About a week after enrolling at Mott Haven Village, Sona received her computer – a Google Chromebook that each student in the school was given by the New York City Department of Education. But unlike other students, Sona was in no rush to use it. For days, she never took it out of her backpack, preferring to copy what was on the board using pencil and paper. When one day I asked my students to complete a current-event assignment online, all of them, without any protest, took out their Chromebooks and wasted little time getting started…except Sona. I remember the confused look on her face as she slowly took out the smooth black rectangular device from her bag. She glanced around taking note on how to open the screen, and when she finally figured it out, she sat there staring at the foreign gadget. Puzzled as to what she was doing, I asked if she needed any help, but with a face full of uncertainty, she just looked at me. After a few minutes I walked over to Sona, gently took her computer, and helped her log on to the assignment the rest of her classmates were working on. For the rest of the period I circled the room, keeping an eye on Sona, who gently tapped various buttons on the keyboard in front of her.

When the bell rang to mark the end of the period, my students closed their laptops, returned them to their backpacks, and rushed out of the room. But Sona stayed. I sat at my desk waiting for her to leave, but instead she approached me. In a quiet whisper she said my name, pointed to her laptop, and then extended her hands sideways in a way that told me she had no idea what a computer was or how to use it. I sat there astonished. I couldn't believe that in 2017 there were people in the world who had yet to see or use a computer. I could tell that she wanted to learn how to use it, but I had absolutely no idea where to begin. I thought about it for a

moment. I decided to open up a Word document, and start with the alphabet. I typed out the entire alphabet with a space between each letter, and then asked her to copy it. Every time she pushed down on a letter I sensed that she was getting more comfortable. For the rest of the semester, whether her classmates were using their computers or not, Sona sat there, screen open, copying whatever text I gave her that day.

Edgar was already seventeen years old when he arrived in my class in the middle of December. A scrawny, fair-eyed young man, upon his arrival from Mexico he had originally been enrolled in a different Bronx high school before his foster mother complained about his hour-long commute. From the moment I met him it was clear to me that he was much more mature than my other students. During his new-student orientation, in broken English, he told me he had a job at a corner store, and hoped to find a second job at a bike shop. He also mentioned his desire to one day go to college.

From the very beginning I appreciated Edgar's outgoing nature and his eagerness to participate in class discussions. Although his English was far from perfect, he never shied away from speaking. More often than not he needed help finding the correct way to express himself, but that never stopped him from trying. It was almost as if he knew that the only way to learn was to do – something that most students have a difficult time accepting.

But Edgar was not without his struggles. His biggest weakness was reading. Like the overwhelming majority of his classmates, Edgar made no attempt to hide his dislike for reading; he strongly preferred listening to music. In class, when I would call on him to read he would often look at me with sympathy-seeking eyes that begged me to put the spotlight on somebody else. I tried my best not to give in to this pressure. But I admit that I sympathized with Edgar. The confused manner in which he would look at a page was always difficult for me to see. Often

he would pick up the text and bring it close to his face as he tried his best to sound out the letters and words. When that didn't work, he would put it back down on the table, and take turns moving his head closer or further back when he saw fit. In the end, more often than not, I would say the words and he would end up repeating them – this would at least give him pronunciation practice.

Edgar first approached me about his difficulty reading one week before winter break. The timing of the discussion, just as class was starting, did not surprise me at all – when Edgar had something to say, he did not delay in saying it. In front of the entire class, Edgar asked why teachers always make their students read. He said that in all of his classes beside gym, all they did was read and write, and he hated it. He claimed that all students hated reading, and they would learn more if they did different types of activities, specifically ones that required building things with their hands. On one hand, I thought Edgar had a point. For a lot of students at Mott Haven Village, reading and writing presented a major challenge, and the reality was that for many of them, their education would end after high school or even before. That being the case, it would make sense for them to take the type of classes mostly offered in trade schools – perhaps then they would learn something that would really help them in life. But on the other hand, their struggles with reading and writing were precisely the reason why such a major emphasis was placed on literacy skills. After all, the correlation between literacy and success is no secret.

Edgar's complaining continued. Having already proclaimed that reading was a waste of time, he now questioned why anybody would enjoy it. He spoke about how hard it was to see the words on the page because everything was, as he put it, borroso, Spanish for blurry. He then

half-jokingly picked up the paper, brought it close to his eyes, and loudly proclaimed "borroso!" He put the paper down, put his head closer to the page, and again proclaimed loudly "borroso!"

As his classmates chuckled, it finally dawned on me: Edgar needed glasses. Not wanting to cause a stir or make him feel bad, I gently told him that if the words on the page were blurry, there was a strong possibility that he needed glasses in order to see better. When he approached me after class he inquired about how he could get them. He proposed picking up a pair at the bodega on the corner, but I explained that he wouldn't be able to find them there. Before he left my room, we sat together and sent a quick email to his guidance counselor explaining the situation. After school that day I touched base with his counselor, who assured me that she had already reached out to the NYC vision service program that assisted K-12 students. Edgar eventually got his glasses. On the first day he had them, he came to my room and jokingly said "Ramer, I still hate to read, but at least now I can see." I never said it, but I was proud to be the person who assisted in making that happen.

These four experiences all took place during the fall semester of my second year at Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School. In each case, I was completely unprepared to assist with the difficulties my students were experiencing. At that point, I had never offered anybody advice about love, I had never consoled anybody who found themselves in a difficult family situation, I had never taught anybody the first steps to using a computer, and I had never helped anybody get glasses. The fact that these students came to me for guidance as they faced these difficult situations showed me that I had earned their respect – an important step in the process of establishing myself as a key member of the school's staff.

In the days before the spring semester began my focus completely shifted to curriculum development. After struggling with what to teach for a year and a half, I was determined to

finally create engaging units that I could consistently use with English Language Learners across all levels. I brainstormed different ideas, and for the most part, was pleased with what I came up with. The next step would be to work backwards – deciding what skills I wanted my students to know, creating the assessments they would be required to complete, choosing which texts to use, and then designing the worksheets and activities that I would use during each lesson. My already hectic schedule – a full-time job during the day and graduate school at night – made this a daunting task, but with the future in mind, I was willing to take it on.

Ready or not, the spring semester was set to begin the first Monday of February. After a few weeks of testing – first final exams and then the New York State Regents Exams – I was looking forward to getting back into the normal routine. I was also very ready to begin the countdown to summer vacation. One day before the semester began I got a phone call from my mom who said that she and my father were coming to New York City for the day and would love to take my girlfriend and me out to lunch. The timing was not ideal, but I agreed to go anyway. At that moment, there was no way of knowing that my professional life was about to change forever.

Lunch was at John's Pizzeria – a famous pizza place on Bleeker Street in the West Village. We chose the location more for the nostalgia than the quality of the food. Growing up, my parents used to take my brother and me to this restaurant every time we visited New York City. After sharing a pie, we would always walk over to Rocco's for dessert. This routine reminded my parents of the special years they spent as graduate students at NYU.

By the time my girlfriend and I arrived to John's my parents had already secured a booth. When we walked in, we all greeted each other, and I hung up our jackets on the hooks to the right of our table. Before we had the chance for any small talk, my mom handed me a manila

folder. "It took me a while" she said "but they're finally done. All twenty stories just like we discussed." I was shocked. When I opened the folder, stapled together were twenty stories about Manny Garcia, the fictional character we had created at our meeting months earlier at Middlesex College. Each story highlighted an experience in Manny's life after his family relocated from Cartagena, Colombia to Queens, New York. There were stories about his family, his school, his teacher, his daily activities, his first crush, his experience volunteering, his experience creating a resume, his experience at a baseball game, his experience with a health scare, his experience learning English, and many more. Not only was each story perfect in length, but they were all relatable to students who had relocated from their native countries to the United States. This was exactly what I had been looking for, and now I finally had it. Before I could flip through all the pages, I put the packet down, got up and gave my mom a huge hug.

I went home that afternoon in a completely different mindset from when I had left earlier in the day. Armed with a strong anchor text, my next task was to create the exercises that students would be required to complete after reading each story. Based on my goals going into the school year, I decided that for each story I would create one vocabulary activity, one annotation activity, ten reading comprehension questions, a grammar activity, and a paragraph-writing exercise. That structure would help me develop a routine that I could follow each and every week. Once the activities were created for each unit, the days of scrambling for tomorrow's activity would officially be over, and it would mark the beginning of a new era in my teaching career.

It is impossible to overstate how much difference a routine makes for a classroom teacher. After I created the exercises for the book we would later title Manny's Journey, my thought process shifted from how to teach as opposed to what to teach. I decided that Mondays

would be devoted to learning vocabulary, Tuesdays to reading comprehension, Wednesdays to grammar, Thursdays to paragraph writing, and Fridays to assessment. This psychological shift was my first step toward effective teaching.

The 2018 spring semester was also my final semester at Lehman College. After two years of working during the day and going to school at night, I was finally at the finish line. I'd like to think that my time at Lehman played a crucial role in molding me into the type of teacher I wanted to be, but that was not the case. The knowledge I gained there made very little difference in my professional development. But the experience was not without benefit. It was during this time that I learned the true meaning of grit and determination. The long nights on the train taught me about sacrifice, the pressure to complete assignments on time while also working taught me the importance of time management, and the exposure it gave me to the Bronx helped me become even more familiar with the community I was slowly becoming a part of. My graduation from Lehman meant that I could finally focus all my attention on teaching – a prospect I very much welcomed.

Before I knew it, two years had passed. And then, very quickly, a third.

Chapter 5

Growing up I often thought about what life would be like at age thirty. As a young boy I had little doubt that at that far-away point I would be in the midst of a Hall of Fame career as a catcher for the New York Mets. As time went by, and reality set it, I settled for a life as a self-made millionaire – free to do whatever I wanted whenever I wanted. At no point did I ever think that at thirty years of age I would be starting my fourth year as a high school English teacher in the South Bronx. But as John Lennon famously observed, life is what happens while you're busy making other plans.

I started year four at Mott Haven Village with a completely different mindset. Three years of teaching experience had put me at ease, but now it was my personal life that I began to worry about. The previous December I had married my long-time girlfriend, and by the time the autumn came around we were beginning to discuss serious life-changing decisions. The first one was about her future career. After working for years as a line cook in multiple Manhattan restaurants, she was tired and frustrated. The long hours, little pay, and difficult schedule weren't as attractive as they had previously been to a twenty-two-year-old fresh out of college. But food was her passion, and she very much wanted to devote her life to it. She dreamed of having a business of her own, but what that might be we had no idea. The second decision was about my own career. When I committed to the NYC Teaching Fellows Program I looked at it as a two-year try-out. I would give teaching a chance – if it worked out I would stick with it, but if it didn't I would move on to something else. By year four some sort of commitment had to be made. Part of me was still not sure if this was what I wanted to dedicate my life to, but the other part of me accepted the fact that a career in the classroom was looking inevitable.

Chief among the reasons to continue teaching was the ease with which I was able to do my job. No longer having to worry about graduate school, I spent the previous year focused on editing and tweaking the exercises I had created for Manny's Journey. Toward the end of the 2018-2019 school year, my mom found a printer who printed our project in book form. This meant that in year four, I would no longer have to look for materials to use or waste precious time printing endless worksheets. For the first time, all my students would have a real book to call their own.

In addition, it had taken three years, but I had finally found success with a weekly routine. I had developed multiple vocabulary-acquisition exercises – my favorite one being a "dictionary entry" worksheet where students were asked to identify target vocabulary words in a text, and use them in their own sentences and questions. I had created a variety of annotation exercises geared toward all types of learners – a visual annotation chart and inference questions were just a few examples. Adapting the grammar exercises I had previously created to the content of the book was a fairly simple task. And finally, I created multiple scaffolds that could be used for paragraph writing. I was no longer stressed about how I would survive the forty-five-minute class periods. In fact, it got to the point where, with so many different activities to choose from, those forty-five minutes would fly by.

Improvement in other areas, specifically classroom management, was evident as well. Over the years I had found my voice. I had learned when to be stern and when to give leeway, when to challenge and when to assist, and when to get creative or stick to the script. Now, whenever administrators would to come visit, they would routinely comment on my ability to create a warm and welcoming environment while simultaneously challenging my students in an effort to improve their English-language skills. Moreover, the school's guidance counselors,

with whom I had developed a close relationship, appreciated my willingness to directly contact the parents or guardians of students who either misbehaved or were chronically absent – something I had shied away from during my first three years. There was always some area that needed improvement, but overall, I was finally having success in the classroom. And the best part was that I wasn't trying very hard – everything was happening naturally.

By year four even the commute had gotten better. These days, the hour-and-fifteen-minute ride from Brooklyn to the Bronx seemed much shorter than it had ever been. Not using the train as a makeshift office helped, as did the peace of mind that went along with not having to worry about what to teach. When I wasn't lost in a James Michener novel I was listening to a podcast – How I Built This or The Dave Ramsey Show never seemed to get old. Sometimes, when I dozed off I would wake up just as the subway doors were opening at Jackson Avenue – my body subconsciously familiar with my surroundings.

But more important than anything else, what made my job so painless by year four was my relationship with my students. By this time, many of the freshmen I had started out with three years earlier were now seniors. I had seen them develop from young kids to young adults eager to make their mark on the world. I had played a major role in their high school experience, and I had gained their respect. Building a strong bond with that group helped me connect with those who came after them. Each year, "breaking the ice" with my new students became progressively easier.

But experience in the classroom was not without burden. As time went on, and my focus shifted from survival in the classroom to survival in the system, I began to be weighed down by various harsh realities that existed at Mott Haven Village. Chief among these was a lack of academic standards. Once I was able to focus solely on student development, I began to realize

that there was an enormous gap between what was expected and what could actually be done with regard to student academic achievement. While the literacy struggles of students who were brand-new to the United States were completely understandable and to be expected, by year four I became aware of the number of students who were still well below grade level in reading and writing. A group I particularly worried about were students who had been in the United States for years, but continued to be classified as English Language Learners. In order to adhere to guidelines imposed on them by the education system of the state of New York, many of these students were placed in my English as a New Language classes as opposed to other English Language Arts courses that were required for graduation. This limited their exposure to more challenging work that I thought could help them advance academically. These students were not getting the academic attention they needed, and their reading and writing development suffered as a result. Their scores on state examinations proved that a different course of action was required, but the rules imposed by the state would not allow that to happen. When I brought this to the attention of my administration, I was told that nothing could be done. Consequently, a large group of students were not given the tools they needed in order to produce the level of work that was expected of them. Accepting this reality was frustrating, but I had to come to terms with the fact that I was not in a position to change it. I could only control what happened in my classroom, and try the best I could to meet everybody's needs.

By the middle of year four I found myself spending more time at school than ever before. The ENL Academic Support Group was still going strong, although it functioned more as a homework help center than an English-language support program. By this time, I was also volunteering for other initiatives that I had never been part of before – the Thanksgiving Cultural

Feast team and the PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support) committee being two examples. But it was the athletics that meant the most to me.

In the fall of 2019 Nick Martinez was a sophomore at Mott Haven Village. He was the perfect example of a student who would not have been placed in my class had he shown even the slightest effort on the NYSELAT (New York State English Language Achievement Test) – a mandated test that all English Language Learners across the state of New York are required to take every April. Born in the Dominican Republic, Nick had moved to the Bronx as a young boy, and by the time I met him, he was completely fluent in English. He was a polite young man – laid back and always easy to talk to – but he had an intense dislike for school. He was below grade-level in reading and writing, and it was almost impossible to get him to produce any written work on his own. But there was one thing Nick did excel at: Basketball.

Nick never made his love for basketball a secret. He carried a ball around with him everywhere he went. He never wasted an opportunity to prove why Kobe Bryant was the best basketball player of all time. And his go-to excuse for not completing an assignment was that he had to go to the park for practice. I always appreciated his dedication to the game– it reminded me of my own relationship with baseball as a young boy. But one thing that bothered me was Nick's tendency to disappear, sometimes for days at a time. Despite our best efforts, I and other teachers had a difficult time getting Nick to class, and by the time basketball season rolled around, he was in serious danger of being ineligible to play for the varsity team.

When the school's basketball coach approached me about that possibility, I agreed to be part of the intervention. When I first spoke to Nick, I got the impression that he did not understand the concept that as a student athlete, academics come before athletics; the idea that one could be punished because they failed to meet certain academic criteria seemed completely

foreign to him. But after awhile he caught on. During our conversation my message to Nick was simple: If you show up, you will pass. And if you pass, you will play. It was toward the end of that conversation that our friendly bet was made. We agreed that if Nick came to school every day for three months straight – about the duration of the basketball season – I would go to every home game. In the end, we both broke our promise. But Nick only ended up missing a few school days, and I only ended up missing a few games.

Attending those basketball games gave me an opportunity to see my students – Nick and others – in a different light. It was the first time I saw them in their own element, giving their all for something they really cared about. And it was the first time they saw me outside the classroom, supporting them, on my own time, in their own endeavors. Moreover, those games gave us something to bond over. When we spoke about them at school the next day we did so in a way that made us equal. For a few moments, we could ignore the student-teacher hierarchy, and simply talk as peers. And in that way, a relationship blossomed.

In early February, when the Mott Haven Village varsity basketball team traveled to Manhattan for a PSAL playoff showdown against the LAB School, I was there. It was the first time I had ever followed the team for an away game. The gym, packed to the brim with LAB supporters, was hot and sticky. Tension filled the air. As he had done all season, Nick carried his team. Every time Mott Haven Village needed a basket, Nick came through. And when he did, much to the dismay of the home team's fans, I cheered as loudly as I could. It was a seesaw battle – each team unable to put the other away. Late in the fourth quarter, with the game tied, Nick made an almost impossible shot to put his team up by two. With twenty seconds left, LAB evened the score. And then, in the blink of an eye, Mott Haven gave the game away. A costly turnover on the most routine of plays gave LAB an opportunity to win the game in regulation.

With seconds left on the clock, LAB's top player nailed a perfect shot from the top of the key to seal the win. My heart sank as the rest of the crowd erupted in joy. Our season was over, and my heart ached for our players who had left everything they had on the court.

My experience attending the Mott Haven Village boys varsity basketball games throughout the 2019-2020 season taught me two valuable lessons that made me a better teacher. The first is that in order to build strong relationships with students, you must acknowledge and support their interests. The second is that your support, in whatever form, never goes unnoticed. With the spring semester just underway, I was determined to keep these lessons in mind. I knew that a few of my students were on the baseball team, and with the season approaching, I hoped to attend as many games as I could. I now understood that staying for just a few innings would send a strong message. But unfortunately, the season was canceled before one pitch could ever be thrown.

On January 30, 2020 I gave the twenty-two students in my ENL class a current events assignment. The assignment asked them to read a newspaper article, complete five reading comprehension questions in complete sentences, and then write a simple paragraph. The article opened with a warning: "The world is preparing for a possible outbreak of a deadly new virus. The coronavirus started in the Chinese city of Wuhan. It has killed 17 people. Over 540 people are in the hospital. It has spread to the USA, Japan, Korea, and Thailand. The World Health Organization is trying to decide whether the outbreak is a global emergency."

Over the following weeks, the reports about the "novel coronavirus" became impossible to ignore. As the media began to ramp up their reporting, strange terms like "shelter in place" and "social distancing" began to enter our vernacular. At the school, some of my colleagues became obsessed with wiping down their desks, hoping their disinfectant wipes would protect

them from contracting this virus that was supposedly sweeping the world. And then there were others, like myself, who were skeptical of the fear. To me, the idea that a global pandemic was on the verge of turning the world upside down was incomprehensible. In fact, this defiance was partially to blame for my decision to attend our school's playoff game. But by the beginning of March, there was no denying the gravity of the situation.

Teaching during this time became almost impossible. For students and teachers alike, a blanket of fear and anxiety suffocated any sort of normalcy. As New York City, and in particular the Bronx, quickly become the epicenter of this new pandemic, there was a real fear that the school year would be interrupted or canceled indefinitely. Nobody knew for sure what that meant, but rumblings of a switch to "remote learning" became louder and louder.

With all this going on around us, my wife and I were on the verge of making a decision that would define our lives for the foreseeable future. After quitting her job as a line cook, she had started her own catering company that operated out of our small apartment. As the business quickly grew, we became determined to find her a commercial kitchen that she could call her own. In late 2019 we began to visit various options around Brooklyn, but we were unable to find anything that worked for us. And then, in the first week of March 2020, something we thought would never be an option became available. The location was perfect – right on the corner of Newkirk Avenue and Rugby Road – a mere thirty-second walk from our apartment. It had everything we were looking for: A large kitchen in the back, space for tables if she ever wanted to open a restaurant, and a large open area that other people could work in if she ever wanted to share the space. However, it would be the biggest financial decision either of us had ever made, and the thought of making that kind of commitment amidst a global pandemic was terrifying. Day after day we debated what to do. Finally, we decided to go for it. On March 13, 2020, two

days after the World Health Organization declared the Coronavirus a global emergency, my wife and I signed the lease, and put our life savings on a deposit for what would become the new home of Cedarstar Catering. Two days later, in a televised address, Mayor Bill De Blasio announced the closing of New York City Public Schools. One week after that, with tears of joy streaming down her face, my wife told me she was pregnant.

For the first time since I had become a teacher, I put myself ahead of my students. In a few short weeks my reality had been completely upended. Long gone were the worry-free days of my youth. As if being a new business owner forced to navigate all the unknowns of the worst public health crisis in over a century wasn't stressful enough, I now had to do it against the backdrop of becoming a father. I tried my best to remain calm and confident, but in reality, I was terrified and full of regret. I began to question everything in my life, including my desire to teach. If there was ever a time to pursue a different path, this was it. I envisioned all the things I could have, and perhaps should have, pursued, and I envisioned what life would be like if I were to take the leap. But in the end, I decided to stay.

Once the shutdown of the New York City Public School system became official, the first order of business was to make sure every single student in our school had a working laptop or ipad. This was particularly difficult due to the social distancing guidelines that had been imposed by both the city and the state. With the Bronx still very much in crisis, nobody wanted to willingly put themselves in harm's way. Eventually a multi-step plan was implemented by our administration that gave students the opportunity to either pick up a device at the school or arrange for it to be delivered to them at a predetermined date and time. Once that had been completed, the next order of business was to make sure all our students had internet access at home. In order to do this, each teacher was asked to personally reach out to a pre-determined list

of ten to twelve students. This task gave me a window into my students' personal lives that I had never had before, and was my first glimpse into the challenges that lay ahead.

I took the job of getting in touch with my students seriously. If the switch to remote learning was going to be successful, it was imperative that our students know what was going on, and have the ability to join their classes from afar. But this proved to be a difficult task. Many of the phone numbers listed on our school's internal documents were either out of service or simply wrong. Furthermore, many of my calls were not answered or went straight to voicemail. On the rare occasions when I was able to get through, it was disheartening to find that some students lacked access to the internet – a major obstacle if they were to participate in online learning. On the rare occasions when a student was fully prepared to start remote learning, I viewed it as a major win.

It had taken me four years to establish myself in the classroom. I had been thrown into the fire, and I had survived. And now I was being forced to do it all over again. When remote learning began in the spring of 2020, I felt like a brand-new teacher. I had never used Zoom before, I had never heard of Google Classroom, and I had never talked to a group of thirty-four teenagers through a computer. Once again, even the most basic tasks, like taking attendance, became an adventure.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of remote learning was finding my voice. In the classroom I was confident, but on Zoom I was timid. In the classroom I used the space to my advantage, but on Zoom I was confined to a small box on a screen. And lastly, in the classroom I kept students engaged, but on Zoom I was muted. From the very beginning, I had difficulty finding any sort of comfort on camera.

But the ones who suffered most from this were my students. In this new era of remote learning, they enjoyed freedoms that were unheard of in a traditional classroom setting. Chief among these was their ability to mute themselves and turn off their cameras. This made it impossible to confirm whether they were actually in class or not. On occasion, a student would forget to turn off their camera as they played video games or watched movies. My class had become a shell of itself, filled with students who had clicked "join" on their screens, but were anything but present.

As the pandemic raged on, debate swirled over how to make remote learning more engaging for students who, through no fault of their own, were falling behind academically. Searching for answers, teachers were all of a sudden forced to participate in numerous professional development activities that were supposed to help them conquer their new realities. It almost felt as if I was back in graduate school taking an accelerated course in remote instruction. Feeling completely overwhelmed, I welcomed any help I could get. It was in these meetings that I was introduced to breakout rooms, virtual white boards, and a handful of virtual games I never knew existed. But these professional development sessions assumed that the students in our classes were showing up regularly, ready and eager to learn. They did not take into account the opposite scenario, one in which students were confused, nervous, and hesitant to converse with others. Like many other pedagogical trainings I had taken in the past, the assumptions were far from reality.

A group that had an especially difficult time adjusting to remote learning was the English Language Learners – the very group I was responsible for supporting. Removed from the safe haven that the physical classroom provided, these students were forced to adapt to new routines and new types of classes without fully understanding what was going on and what was expected

of them. They were told to attend classes without explicit instructions on how to do so. They were given homework and projects without the scaffolds and extra help many of them relied on. And they were not given much opportunity to improve their reading, writing, or speaking skills.

In order to support this vulnerable group, in the beginning of May 2020 I proposed starting a remote version of the ENL Academic Support group. The club I had run for three and a half years at Mott Haven Village had been a casualty of the switch to remote learning. With so many changes happening at once, as a school, we focused more on making sure students were logging on to their classes as opposed to assisting those students who desperately needed academic support. After a meeting with the principal, the club was reinstated. We agreed that there would be no cap on the number of students who wanted to join – everyone was welcome. We would meet Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays for an hour after school. The participating students would log on the same way they did to any other class, but they were expected to be prepared with questions they wanted to have answered – we would not waste our precious time with new instruction.

On the club's first Monday, twelve students logged on. My first reaction was disappointment. After a swift email campaign which included messages to students and parents in both English and Spanish, I had expected more students to attend. But in reality, given the madness that was playing out in our country, our city, and our school system, I should have viewed the fact that twelve students had voluntarily logged on to a remote after-school program as a major win. But the program itself did not play out the way I had intended. I had overlooked the logistical challenges of a remote setting – most notably the difficulty of having one-on-one conversations without distracting the whole group. Additionally, a lack of time made addressing everyone's questions extremely challenging. By Wednesday it was clear that the old way of

doing things would not work – if this was going to be beneficial, a more creative approach was going to be needed.

But what I thought was beneficial to the students and what actually was beneficial to them, were two completely different things. In one of my courses at Lehman College, early on in my graduate program, the teacher began every class by giving each student an opportunity to share what was happening at their new schools and in their new classes. Each student was a brand-new teacher, and these impromptu " group therapy" sessions gave us an opportunity to voice our new realities, frustrations, concerns, things that were going well, and things that needed to change. I remember initially feeling frustrated by this routine. I was always tired, hungry, stressed, and in a rush to plan for the next day of school. I couldn't believe that I had to travel such a long way in order to participate in these types of discussions, and the fact that they were being held in a graduate school setting. But after hearing other people's stories, and sharing my own, I always felt more relaxed and at ease. And very often, when times got tough, it was comforting to know that other people were experiencing the same difficulties I was.

In the second week of our new club, as students were still logging on, Camila, in Spanish, posed a question that, at the time, was very relevant. "Are you all wiping down the food you get from the grocery store?" This innocent question began a conversation that lasted almost the full hour. It was entirely in Spanish, and completely student-led. They spoke about everything that was going on around them – people they knew who had contracted Covid, their desire to see their friends and family members, their confusion regarding the rest of the school year, T.V. shows they had watched already or were interested in watching, and what they were doing with all their free time. The conversation was natural and free-flowing, and although it wasn't happening during a real class, it was refreshing to hear. Toward the end of the session I realized

how beneficial this type of unstructured environment was. In the midst of all the fear, the unknown, and the changes that were taking place around us, I had overlooked the importance of social interaction. For the rest of our sessions together I tried my best to encourage this type of discourse. Some sessions were better than others, but knowing that I was providing just the slightest bit of positivity in such a dark time made me feel like I was making a difference.

In late June of 2020, the most tumultuous school year of my young career was coming to an end. For three and a half months the students and teachers of Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School had navigated extraordinary circumstances during the worst public health crisis in over a hundred years. The South Bronx had been deemed the "Covid Capital," causing widespread panic and psychological trauma. Under these circumstances, our school's staff had rallied around each other in an effort to prepare both our students and ourselves for the historic transition to remote learning. We had done our best to keep our students present and engaged. While the results might not have turned out the way we would have liked, it was not due to a lack of effort.

On the last day of school, the members of the Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School class of 2020 prepared to graduate. This would be the first class that I would see complete the four-year high school cycle. While the pandemic made it impossible for them to experience the thrill of an in-person graduation, given what they had just been through, it was only fitting for them to complete their high school experience virtually. As I surveyed the list of students who were set to begin their lives outside the friendly confines of Mott Haven Village, a rush of memories flooded through my thoughts. Four years earlier we had started at Mott Haven together – myself a young twenty-seven-year-old man, so naïve to the realities of daily life in places like the South Bronx, and them raw fourteen-year-old kids, who in many instances had

just recently begun their lives in the United States. Destiny had brought us together in the most unlikely of places. They had taught me important lessons about the world, and I had helped them negotiate life in their new home. I was so proud of them for making it to the finish line. But I deeply regretted that I could not give them a proper goodbye.

Chapter 6

Four months after the initial outbreak of Covid-19 the world remained in crisis. With terms like quarantining, contact tracing, and antibodies now firmly entrenched in our minds, as the spring turned to summer, it became clear that the pandemic was far from over. In their daily briefings, politicians from all over the country encouraged everybody to stay home and avoid any sort of public gathering. They claimed that this was the only way to "flatten the curve," and return any sort of normalcy to big cities and small towns alike.

But by July of 2020 it seemed as if nothing would ever be normal. A few months earlier, a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota had been caught on camera suffocating an African American man during an attempted arrest. When the nine-minute video of Derek Chauvin murdering George Floyd went viral, protests erupted all over the United States. Millions of people defied government orders and marched in solidarity with the "Black Lives Matter" movement that demanded equal rights for African Americans and other people of color. Loud calls to defund the police illustrated the deep divisions that existed in American society; so too did the violence and looting by mobs whose sole purpose was to instill a sense of fear and distress among the population. I watched all this unfold on a television screen from my Brooklyn apartment, very aware of the significance of the moment. In the midst of a global pandemic a social crisis had emerged, and it was clear that the nation's open wounds would not be healed easily – if they were to be healed at all.

That summer, for the first time since I had become a teacher, I agreed to teach summer school. I figured that if I was going to be stuck at home, I might as well make a little extra money, especially with a baby on the way. Before the summer session began, I thought about what approach I would take and what content I would teach. In those turbulent times, I felt as

though I could not teach the same curriculum I had become so accustomed to using. I wanted my students, none of them racially white, to engage in activities that allowed them to reflect on the social and political chaos that was taking place around them; my goal was to provide them an outlet they could use to make sense of it all.

One idea I considered was to have them compare the "Black Lives Matter" movement to other Civil Rights protests that had taken place throughout American history. This would not only teach them about minorities' historical struggle for equal rights in the United States, but would also drive home the fact that what was happening in the summer of 2020 was a moment in time – something that would be remembered forever. In the days leading up to summer school I researched texts I could use, contemplated which words and phrases I would have to explicitly teach, and considered what type of assignment I would have the students complete for their final project. I was working backwards, just as I had been taught to do in graduate school – my professors would have been proud.

But the night before summer school was scheduled to begin, I realized that none of this was going to be possible. In an email from a district representative I was informed that, in an effort to assist the number of students who needed to make up credits, schools would be combining their programs, and rosters would be expanded. This meant that students from Mott Haven Village would now have to take virtual classes with students from other schools in the area. It also meant that teachers from different schools would be forced to work with each other regardless of whether they had ever met in person. Upon receiving this information, two thoughts immediately came to mind: 1) We would have a very difficult time getting our students to participate in large virtual classrooms where very few classmates knew each other and 2) The class I had envisioned would never work in this type of setting.

Something I was not prepared for was the job I was given by my summer school principal on the first day of the term. Instead of teaching, I was told that for the next six weeks, I would be best utilized in a support role usually reserved for guidance counselors or deans. My main responsibility would be to contact chronic absentees so that they would not fall even further behind in terms of credits than they already were. I was also supposed to assist students with any technological issues they experienced throughout the summer. The decision to throw me into this role without giving me an opportunity to teach was puzzling, but very indicative of the dysfunction that existed within the New York City Department of Education at that time. With so much going on, it was extremely difficult for administrators to utilize their staff in the proper ways, and in the summer of 2020, it was unfortunate that I was never given the opportunity to help students who desperately needed it. Nonetheless, I was healthy and had a remote job with a steady income – two things that many people throughout that summer desperately wished for.

As the calendar moved from July to August, debate raged over whether it was finally safe to reopen New York City's public schools. On one hand, it was obvious that the switch to remote learning had been detrimental to the overwhelming majority of the city's one million public school students. Not only had their academic growth been stunted, but their social and emotional well-being had been severely impacted as well. On the other hand, members of the United Federation of Teachers doubted the Department of Education's pledge to make every school building safe for all school personnel. In a report, it had come out that many buildings lacked proper ventilation, which directly affected the air quality. Moreover, it was not a given that every school would have the space to adhere to the social distancing guidelines suggested by city health officials. Teachers all over the city anxiously awaited the decision.

When I heard about the plan I was taken aback by its complexity. After transitioning to full remote learning in the spring, teachers were now being asked to simultaneously teach online and in person – a scenario I found particularly daunting. The idea behind the decision was that it would appease both the students who preferred to come back to the classroom and those who felt that it was still safer to stay home. Under the plan, teachers were expected to report to their school buildings every day just as they had done before the switch to remote learning. I tried to make sense of it all, but had a difficult time accepting the fact that I was now being asked to commute over an hour to the South Bronx in order to teach a few students in the classroom and the rest through a computer screen. Furthermore, with my wife just a few months away from giving birth, I did not want to risk getting myself or anybody else sick. I grappled with what to do. Once again, I considered stepping away.

On September 8th, 2020 I entered the front doors of Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School for the first time in six months. I did so with an N95 mask covering my nose and mouth, making it difficult to take deep breaths. Before I could even gather my thoughts, a school aide in the front lobby gave me a plastic face shield and advised me to put that on as well. The scene felt surreal: Empty hallways, teachers unsure of how to interact with each other, and classrooms that had been untouched in half a year. When I entered room 412B, papers and workbooks from the previous school year were scattered on the long tables in no particular order. On my desk were piles of folders and various textbooks that had never been put away. On the white board were faded notes that had never been erased.

That morning the entire staff sat in front of their computers, each person in their own classroom, listening on Zoom as the principal laid out the plan for the coming school year. She spoke about the number of students who were expected to be in the building, and the

expectations with regard to how we would simultaneously teach both the students in our classrooms and the students who preferred to log on virtually. She laid out the social distancing guidelines, the requirements for the use of personal protective equipment, and the grading policy changes that were being adopted in order to help students pass their classes. She admitted that the situation was not ideal, but encouraged us to keep doing our best in an effort to meet the needs of a struggling student population. I tried to wrap my head around it all, but everything felt so new, so forced, and so complicated. The thought of commuting to the Bronx every day in order to teach remotely made no sense to me, and whether rational or not, I began to feel that this new arrangement was putting me in harm's way – especially considering that my wife was just a few months away from giving birth.

One week of this new arrangement reinforced my views. As I had expected, I had a very difficult time balancing the responsibilities of simultaneously teaching both in person and online. When I voiced my frustrations to our school's union representative, he gave me advice that would change the course of the upcoming school year for me. "You have anything that makes you high risk for Covid? If so, go and get yourself a waiver as soon as you can." I mentioned to him that I had high blood pressure, and asked if that would count. "It's worth a shot" he advised. A little research told me that those approved for this waiver would spend the entire 2020-2021 school year teaching remotely, and would not be expected to show up to the school for live, in-person classes. When I met with my doctor I explained the situation. She confirmed that my blood pressure was still high, and wrote me a note that became my ticket to working remotely for the upcoming school year. For once I had put myself first, and I had no regrets about that.

At many points throughout my teaching experience during the pandemic I thought about what I wasn't doing as opposed to what I was. In the classroom I knew the type of impact I was

making. Even if I was not helping a student academically, each high-five or fist bump I gave helped create a sense of trust between myself and my kids. My steady presence at school every day gave them a sense of consistency and normalcy that eluded many of them at home. Our discussions helped me get to know them and allowed them to get to know me. As Ms. Rodriguez had advised during my first year, the time I spent with them mattered – it was only when I wasn't spending time with them that I understood how true that really was. During the first semester of what would become the strangest school year of my career, I once again thought about the type of impact I was making, or if I was making any impact at all.

I was also thinking about something else. In just a few short months I was going to be a father. What that really meant I was not quite sure, but it weighed heavily on my mind. Part of me felt guilty – was it fair to bring a child into such a chaotic world? Another part of me was full of nerves – when do we go to the hospital? Is it a boy or a girl? What will be its name? As the days and weeks went by it was impossible to ignore the titanic shift that was on the verge of changing my life forever. First it was the stroller, then it was the crib. Then it was the stuffed animals and packs of onesies that arrived in wrapped boxes with a bow. "Are babies really that small?" I thought as my wife placed the folded onesies into the recently built dresser. Physically and mentally detached from my students and my school, and overwhelmed by what was happening in both the outside world and my personal life, I unintentionally overlooked my professional responsibilities. The unfortunate reality was that I barely even cared.

On December 17th, 2020, in the midst of a blizzard and a global pandemic, my son was born. Two days later, from our hospital room, I logged on to Zoom to teach my classes. In reality, I didn't do very much teaching at all, but the students were busy, and by monitoring their progress on their Google Docs, I could tell that they were working. In the weeks leading up to

my son's birth, I had changed my remote teaching style. I no longer saw the point of trying to force discussion with students who refused to turn their cameras on or speak during class. I figured that it was more beneficial for everyone to have them work individually, and submit their assignments upon completion. This allowed me to give meaningful feedback quickly without having to disturb those students who were still working on the task. It also allowed me to teach from my hospital room forty-eight hours after the birth of my child. Perhaps most importantly, it gave me a sense of comfort and routine that I desperately needed.

The second semester of my remote school year started with a surprise. One result of the pandemic was that people were leaving New York in droves, and the Bronx was no exception. But it was only when I received my roster for the spring term that I realized how dire the situation actually was. Three students. In all my years at Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School my classes had been packed – most of the time to the brim. In my first year I had thirty-four students – the maximum number allowed under the teacher's union contract – three periods in a row. And now, in my two stand-alone English As a New Language classes, I had three.

In normal times I would have been ecstatic with that number. Having such a small roster would have allowed me to be more creative and become more of a risk-taker with my planning and execution. It would have made it possible for me to not worry so much about classroom management, and instead focus more on real student improvement across all four language domains. But these times were far from normal. Having three students in my classes was indicative of the dire situation our school faced by early February 2021 – almost a year since the world had been turned upside down. My initial thought was that perhaps it was just my students – those who were new to the country – who had decided to leave and pursue other options. But conversations with other teachers confirmed that this was not the case. The truth was that our

school's enrollment numbers were dropping significantly and there were rumblings that, if that trend continued, the school would be forced to close.

The prospect of a school closure was nerve-wracking. It wasn't so much that I feared to start to over in a new place. Now with almost five years of experience, I was confident in my abilities. At this point in my career I had learned the system. I had a general understanding of what could be accomplished and what could be changed. More importantly, I now understood what couldn't be accomplished, and what couldn't be changed. What worried me the most about a potential school closure was the possibility of being placed at another random school in the Bronx – one even further away from my apartment than Mott Haven Village. After speaking with a representative from the teacher's union, my understanding was that in the event of a school closure, the NYC Department of Education had the power to transfer a teacher to any school within the same district they had formerly been working in. If this was true my daily commute, already unbearably long, had the potential to become significantly worse.

In the beginning of March 2021 I got a glimpse of what life after Mott Haven Village could potentially look like. As the winter turned to spring, it was finally time for me to receive my first Covid-19 vaccine. As fate would have it, the location I was given was Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn. One of New York City's legendary high schools, Lincoln is everything Mott Haven Village isn't. Its massive build and architectural beauty contrast greatly to Mott Haven Village's tight space and simple structure. Its thousands of students give the hallways a sense of life and energy that a small school like Mott Haven cannot match. When entering the building it is simply impossible to ignore its aura and mystique. Most important to me was its location – a mere twenty-minute subway ride from my apartment. While waiting for my jab I surveyed my surroundings and imagined life here. I thought about which classes I

would teach, which after-school programs I could become a part of, and the possibility of one of my students becoming the next in a long line of famous Lincoln High School alumni. Whether rational or not, I thought about the days of Stephon Marbury, and the pulsating energy that he, and years later Sebastian Telfair, must have brought to these hallways as they took Lincoln by storm on their way to becoming the top high school basketball players in the nation. In that moment I realized that I had underestimated the power of inertia. I could no longer deny that a place like this was where I now belonged.

That same week I started my search. I now had a clear vision of where I wanted to be, and the type of environment I wanted to be in. Five years of working in a small, tight-knit school had convinced me that I belonged in the opposite type of setting – a large school with many professional development opportunities, and a plethora of extra-curricular activities to potentially get involved with. I began the process by searching all the large public high schools within a half-hour radius of my home. I wrote down the names of the schools, the names of the principals, their email addresses, and their distance from my apartment. Eleven schools made the list – naturally, some more attractive than others. The next step was to email each principal and explain to them why I, a five-year veteran with significant teaching experience in one of the most difficult districts in New York City, was the perfect fit for their school.

An important detail I had overlooked in my exit plan was the timing. March is historically a difficult month for both teachers and administrators. At this point of the year even the most optimistic staff members can't quite see the light at the end of the tunnel. The weather, at least in New York City, is still cold; the days still dark. There are no days off to look forward to, and state testing is right around the corner. Administrators, especially those at larger schools, are bogged down with their normal day-to-day responsibilities – they are more focused on

finishing the school year at hand than planning for the next one. They are not especially concerned with hiring teachers as they still do not know who will stay and who will go. I did not think about this important variable. As the weeks went by I grew frustrated with the lack of responses. Throughout the spring I sent numerous follow-up emails, but heard nothing back. My frustration grew. When it reached a breaking point I completely disengaged, and shifted all my attention to my four-month old baby who seemed to be growing every minute. After a while I simply gave up; another year in the Bronx loomed.

One thing I had often been warned about through my first five years in the system was "teacher burnout." On numerous occasions, veteran teachers I had crossed paths with warned that as time went on, it would become increasingly difficult to maintain the determination and enthusiasm that are common characteristics of new teachers. I was told that as I got older my patience with "the system" would wane, and my focus would begin to erode. During my first five years in the classroom I had not felt that way. Yes, I had become frustrated with the grind of remote learning, but my beliefs about the importance of education, and the critical role I could play in my students' lives, had not diminished one bit. In fact, working in the South Bronx and seeing first-hand the tremendous hurdles many of my students had to overcome in their young lives reinforced the importance of what I was doing.

But by the beginning of year six burnout did begin to creep its way into my psyche. After failing in my quest to find a new job closer to home, I began the 2021-2022 school year at Mott Haven Village with "one foot in and one foot out." I was pleased to be back in the classroom after a tumultuous year-and-a-half of online teaching, but I could no longer take the brutal commute nor the pressure that went along with a possible school closure. Moreover, with my personal responsibilities now trumping my professional ones, I no longer felt the same desire

to be involved with after-school activities. My routine every day was essentially the same: Go to work, teach my classes, and immediately come home. I spent very little time planning, and even less time interacting with either my colleagues or my students. Days, weeks, and months passed. Winter finally gave way to spring, and before I knew it, another summer of freedom was on the horizon.

And then it happened.

I had always expected gun shots to sound different. In the movies they sound like controlled explosions that have the power to shake an entire neighborhood. But in real life they sounded like quick, piercing firecrackers…pop pop pop. All five of us in room 412B immediately looked up. After a moment of silence, we heard the screams. Outside my window, a massive group of teenagers was sprinting from north to south on 156th street. The speed at which they ran left no doubt that an active shooter was in the vicinity of our school. Moments later, an announcement came over the loudspeaker informing everybody in the building that we were in a lockdown – the voice made a point to confirm that this was not a drill.

I had never been in a real lockdown before. The worst-case scenarios raced through my mind: Had anybody been killed? Was the shooter on his way toward us? Would I make it home to my wife and baby? Hearing a group of students in the hallway, I quickly opened the door and shoved them into my classroom. The three new students joined the four others who had been in my room since the chaos began. I locked the door, put a white sheet of chart paper over the glass, and told everyone to move toward the back of the room. The anxiety was contagious as we all sat in silence. "Are we going to be OK, Mr. Ramer?" Michelle whispered. "We'll be fine" I replied confidently. But in my heart, it was impossible to be sure.

For the next two hours the eight of us sat together in silence in Room 412B. Most of the students scrolled on their phones, distracted by social media or their favorite games. In that moment I was thankful for the devices I often battled with for their attention. At around 4:30pm, two hours after the lockdown began, there was a loud knock on the classroom door. Everybody froze. My students begged me not to open it. After a few moments, I got on the floor and peeked through the tiny space at the bottom of the door to see if I could get a glimpse of the shoes of the person on the other side. I couldn't. And then, thankfully, the sound of a familiar voice. "Ramer, you in there?" Without even thinking, I opened the door and gave my assistant principal a hug. We had never hugged before, but given the situation it felt neither strange nor awkward. I pressed her for information, but she said she was not yet authorized to talk about what had happened. She did inform us that we were finally able to leave the building through the side door. We were all relieved.

I walked out of the school on that tragic afternoon emotionally drained. The police cars whizzing past me in both directions made it clear that this nightmare was far from over. On the corner of 156th Street and St. Ann's Avenue yellow caution tape blocked off an area directly in front of the bodega I went to every morning for a cup of coffee – an obvious indication that this was the scene of the crime. Only then did it dawn on me that the shooter who had already caused so much fear and concern could still be on the loose. For the first time since I had started working in the South Bronx, I was scared to walk to the subway or even be on it.

It was during my ride home that I received the email from the principal. As I read it, my heart sank. The message stated that as our students were leaving for dismissal, there had been a shooting at the corner of 156th street and St. Ann's Avenue. A sixteen-year-old girl who attended a charter school up the block had been shot in the chest and killed. Two students from

my school were shot – one in the buttocks, and one in the left leg – and were in stable condition. When I read who the students were, I had to hold back tears. I couldn't believe that two of my students, who had been in my class hours before, were now lying wounded in hospital beds. All I could do was pray that they would make it.

On the Monday after the shooting I decided to drive to work instead of taking the train. Still scarred by what had happened, I skipped my usual stop at the bodega and went straight into school. I wasn't sure how New York City would respond to this tragedy, but I was relieved to see a strong police presence at the entrance to the building. In a strange way, the unfamiliar faces I passed as I walked through the hallways were comforting. I knew that nothing would be normal on this day, and I appreciated the help and support my school community was receiving. My first class that day was a 10th grade English class. As the students began to trickle in, it became clear who had witnessed the shooting, and who had been lucky enough to experience it from afar. Before I even had a chance to address my class, my principal, along with three other adults, entered the room and explained how the next forty-five minutes would be spent. She said that social workers from the Department of Education would be joining all the English classes in the school, and students would have the opportunity to speak with them in a group setting. I was pleased by this announcement because I felt that it was important to give our students an opportunity to openly discuss their feelings about what had happened. I was also relieved to have professional social workers lead the discussion as opposed to doing it myself.

After the students split up into small groups the discussions began. It took a couple of minutes for them to feel comfortable with this new setup, but once the ice was broken, the emotions began to flow. One young man began sobbing as he replayed the image of the girl who had been shot and killed right in front of him. A couple of his classmates comforted him with a

long embrace. Another young lady spoke about her experience running away the second she heard the gun shots. One student who had not been at school that day explained how lucky he felt to have avoided everything that had happened. The conversations in each group were fluid, and lasted the entire class period. It was only through those conversations that I realized how many kids had been at the scene of the crime, and would continue to be haunted by the mental repercussions of it. During that difficult time, I was impressed with my students' honesty and maturity, and I was proud to be their teacher.

Over the next week, my school would unite in a way that I had never seen before. During our weekly senior outreach (an initiative that allowed seniors to mentor freshmen), students worked together to create posters and signs that sent strong messages against gun violence. Two massive cards were created for the two students who had survived the shooting, and every student and teacher in the entire school was encouraged to sign them. Some teachers turned their classes into peer mediation groups where students were given the opportunity to act as social workers, and check in with their peers about how they were feeling. In my English classes, we started each period with a five-to-ten-minute meditation session that gave students an opportunity to relax and reflect. Each teacher handled the situation in his or her own unique way, knowing full well that our classrooms were now safe havens for our traumatized students. Appreciative of our efforts, the students continued to show up every day – we were all impressed by their courage.

The shooting on April 8th, 2022 received limited coverage in the press. One week later, the framed pictures, teddy bears, flowers, and candles that had been placed at the site of the crime had been removed. That Friday afternoon, in the area around the crime scene, music blasted as pedestrians made their way up and down the sun-drenched street. People sat in their

cars and on their stoops smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. Groups of locals laughed together as they ate sandwiches and drank coffee. It was only then that I realized that the horrific event that had shaken my world was nothing new in these parts; those who had been killed and wounded in this tragedy were just the latest victims of New York City's battle with gun violence; that it was only a matter of time before something like this would happen again; and that April 8th, 2022 would go down in history as just another day in the South Bronx.

When the bell rang to mark the end of my longest week at Mott Haven Village, I slowly erased the notes I had made on the white board. I organized the pile of papers on my desk and placed them in my backpack. I pushed the two long tables together to make sure they lined up perfectly, and pushed in all the chairs. I locked the closet, shut off both lights, and then closed the door of room 412B.

Epilogue

My time in the South Bronx now feels like a distant memory. Two years ago, after numerous attempts, I finally relocated to a large high school in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn – the exact type of school I had envisioned myself in on that March day at Lincoln. I teach predominantly English Language Arts classes, but every year at least one English as a New Language course finds its way onto my schedule. More often than not, the students placed in these classes have recently arrived to the United States, and are at the very beginning of their English-language journeys. The first book I put in front of them is Manny's Journey. It's a surreal feeling to know that at this point, hundreds of students on both the high school and college levels have now used this workbook in their quest to become independent readers and writers. My hope is that these fictional stories will convince them that a bright future is possible in their new home.

My move to Brooklyn has opened my eyes to some concerning realities about the state of education in New York City. As was the case at Mott Haven Village, many students at my new school find themselves well below grade-level in reading and writing. It is worth noting that a significant portion of the 3,000 students are English Language Learners and many others have had severe interruptions in their formal education – two factors that directly affect literacy rates. I would argue that the overwhelming majority of new teachers are not ready to tackle these immense challenges in their classrooms. They enter the profession eager to "fight the good fight," but they are shocked by the realities on the ground. More than anything else, I believe that this is what drives many dedicated and talented educators away from the profession after just a few years.

With this in mind, the logical question is what can be done to keep these talented people in the classroom for the long haul? Teacher preparation programs must do a better job of preparing the teachers of tomorrow for the types of challenges they will face. These programs should stress the importance of classroom routines. They should make literacy training a central point of emphasis, and explicitly teach techniques for teaching writing such as the Hochman Method. Perhaps most important, they should encourage future teachers to read about the experiences of others.

Teacher memoirs can and should play a central role in any teacher development program. The lessons we can learn from the experiences of others are invaluable, and the world of education is no exception to this. The teacher memoirs I have been exposed to throughout the completion of this project have enlightened me with new ideas, have helped me form a new perspective, and have reminded me that there are some things that are completely out of my control. I will undoubtedly keep these lessons in mind as I enter a new chapter in my teaching career. If my own memoir can have the same effect on others, I would be very proud.

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Neil M. Ramer

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