

Grilled Cheeses with Laura

One Mentor's Experience

MEGHAN RABBITT

MY mom likes to tell a story about something my kindergarten teacher told her at their first parent-teacher meeting. “Mrs. Rabbitt,” my teacher said, “There are chiefs, and there are Indians—and I don’t think I have to tell you which one Meghan is.”

Okay, so I’m assertive. My younger sister calls me bossy. Co-workers call me opinionated. Managers call me a go-getter. I know this about myself: I am focused, driven, and try to make situations what I think they should be. And I think it was this that inspired me to become a mentor with Girls Write Now. After all, of course my mentee would learn from me. I was an editor at a national magazine with knowledge to impart and a passion for writing that would undoubtedly fire up her love for the written word. So I would enter this relationship like I entered most: as a chief, directing conversation and making our encounters as productive and memorable as possible. I would be paired with a young woman who was interested in writing, and we would write our way around the city. The image I always called up when I thought about this experience was my mentee and me at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, so inspired by the work hanging on the walls that we’d just have to find a cozy hang-out spot to release our emotions on paper.

When I first met my 18-year-old mentee, Laura, I knew we would hit it off. We were given the task of interviewing each other—finding out things like how many siblings we have and what the names of our pets are—but Laura and I kept straying from the assignment to talk about someone we both found a lot more interesting: New York Yankee Derek Jeter. We talked about his presence on the team (how could you possibly hate the Yanks with such a hottie for a shortstop?), his skill (how was he able to



Meghan and Laura. Photo by Denise Simon.

look so darn cute even while squinting to see a fast ball flying his way?), and of course, his potential (“I like to refer to him as my husband,” said Laura. “You know, that’s a great idea,” I replied. “Positive thinking is a powerful force.”).

As we embarked on this mentor/mentee journey, we started making plans to meet up every other week or so, and usually we’d pick a diner and get grilled cheese sandwiches. Our first few meetings were great, get-to-know-each-other encounters, where we seemed to talk about everything except writing. This was natural, I remember thinking. You can’t just say, “So, show me the poem you’re writing so I can hack at it,” without even knowing the kid’s friends’ names and favorite classes.

We continued getting to know each other over grilled cheeses, and some writing started to happen during our time together—but not in the way I thought it would. So much for reaction pieces to new exhibits at the Met; I was helping Laura edit her ten-page term papers for medieval literature. I always set out to include some creative writing sessions in each of our meetings. Maybe we’d try to write a poem together, I’d muse on my walk to meet Laura at Burger Heaven, or work on essays about our very

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different upbringings—hers as a Dominican Republic immigrant who landed here when she was six, mine as a privileged white kid from the suburbs. But Laura’s animated stories and craving for advice on everything from classes to cliques usually took us in a direction I hadn’t planned. And we started relating to each other in ways I never thought we would.

Even after three years of working together, meeting every other week or so, these departures from my expectations of what we’d do when we met frustrated me. There we’d be, bonding over office politics or Jeter’s prowess, and the chief in me would start watching the clock, wondering when we’d get cracking on our writing. But for some reason, I silenced my inner dictator. I rejected that bossy side screaming at me to make us start writing, and I let the conversation wander to wherever it was Laura wanted—and sometimes needed—it to go.

And what I started to realize—like so many mentors do—is that Laura was teaching me far more than I felt I was giving her. Because of her inner chief, Laura showed me how crucial it is to play the Indian once in a while. And it was because of this that I was able to see how the most wonderful and productive moments in a mentoring relationship often come over grilled cheeses at a diner—not Impressionist paintings at the Met.



GIRLS WRITE NOW

Where Are You? No Answer

A Girls Write Now Paired Writing Exercise

NATALIA VARGAS-CABA and ERICA SILBERMAN

E-Mail

ERICA

E-mail Natalia about setting a time to meet. Wait for a response. E-mail her again. Wait for a response. E-mail her again. Stop worrying about the tone of your e-mail. Stop checking your e-mail. Stop trying to get into the head of a seventeen-year-old girl. You were in a rush to get out of that head, why are you now rushing to get back in?

NATALIA

Met my mentor. Third mentor so far. Why do they always leave? Read e-mail from new mentor. Spend too much time on MySpace. Dad bans me from computer. No more computer. Never e-mailed mentor. I hope I won't have to ask for a change in mentors.

Phone

ERICA

Call Natalia. Call her again. Ignore her outgoing message, *"Hey this is Natalia, sorry I didn't pick up the phone. I did not want to hear your voice, so just leave a message,"*... and call her again. Don't ask her what she did to get her e-mail privileges suspended. She'll tell you on her own, if she wants to. If she wants to. If she ever wants to meet. Seems like she has no time for you. Wait a minute, she signed up for this. Who is the mentor and who is the mentee? Mentee. Mentee. Mentee. Ridiculous word. Sounds like candy. Or men golfing. Oh, my God! Natalia is you! You got you as a mentee. How did they know? Who's they? Probably Maya. How did Maya know what I was like at Natalia's age?

NATALIA

Return from school. Check messages. Listen to message from mentor, *“Hey Natalia, it’s Erica. It was really great meeting you at the workshop. I’m really glad you’re my mentee. So, so um, you can only make it on weekends. That’s fine. So let me know which day and what time you can meet. Ok, great so let me know. Bye.”* Yeah, she’s trying too hard. Too busy to return call. Call SAT people to find out about my scores.

Meeting**ERICA**

The place Natalia has chosen to meet is closed. Find a new place. Call Natalia. Where is she? No answer. Wait half an hour. Call again. Where is she? Where are you? An hour later she arrives. She’s not me. She’s so not me. Except that she is a low-talker like I was. But that’s it. And she’s so different from her outgoing message. She’s sweet and cool and candid. So candid. She tells me stories and asks for exactly what she needs: help with her college essay. We go over her workshop pieces. She writes with purple swirls of abstraction. I chase after her with a butterfly net. I tread softly. I choose my words carefully. I squeeze every bit of clarity from her, careful not to disturb her powdery wings, lest she never fly again. Really corny metaphor, but fitting.

NATALIA

Get out of train station. Phone rings. Yeah, I know mentor, I’m getting there. Arrive late. Try to be polite. Have a pleasant chat. Forces me to get down to business. Criticizes my work. What a great mentor. Buys me fruit milkshake. Lightens my mood. Listen to her advice. Smile more often. Consider her suggestions. She doesn’t seem quite so snippy now. Re-write together. Tell silly stories along the way. New mentor is Erica. Erica teaches me the value of simplicity. Third mentor is just who I need.

Chatting**ERICA**

Natalia sends me a Christmas card. I’m so touched, I cry. That’s so sweet. Too bad I’m Jewish. She would have known that if she hadn’t cancelled our last meeting. She’s a senior. Be patient. She tries to re-schedule for the weekend I’m in L.A. I bring her card with me. I’ll send her a postcard from the West Coast. She calls while I’m out there, forgetting I’m out of town. High on ladybugs, sunshine, and whale spot-

ting I tell her I'm staying. She screams, "**Not another one!**" I tell her she can join me after she finishes school. I forget to send a postcard.

NATALIA

Christmas is coming! **The goose is getting fat!** Can't make it to next scheduled meeting. Rummage through rubbish for box o' Christmas cards. Send Erica a Christmas card. I hope she likes it. A few days later. Call Erica. I'm in freezing New York. She's in summery L.A. She threatens to stay there. Don't leave me too! Wait. Told I can move after school's done. No, thank you. New York is just fine for me.

Erica and Natalia are still meeting and writing together in New York City.

