

Special Ed Diaries

PART ONE: BARBARA FLUG COLIN

Henry Viscardi School, in Albertson, New York, is a New York State supported special education elementary and high school for severely disabled children. This article is dedicated to Dr. Henry Viscardi, Jr., the courageous founder of the school, who died at age 92 on April 13. Note: All names have been changed to protect student privacy.—Author's Note

Celine chooses *Woman Before an Aquarium* from my pack of Matisse postcards. She doesn't wait to hear my writing exercise, but heads straight for the computer:

The Mystery of a Goldfish

As she stares at the bowl wondering what are they thinking. Wanting to be like them but why? What makes them so different? Why didn't god make us the same? Don't you sometimes wonder? About life? And why we sometimes get so sad at the world.

She reads it aloud, proudly. "Never wait for me," I say.

I teach to give up responsibility, to let someone else do what I do not, cannot. I teach a self I forgot—disabled, speechless, immobile. I sit at the teacher's desk watching them write the flow I could never have on command.

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Domenika—whose fingers can never write as fast as words come through her, who sometimes tears up her poems after she completes them—doesn't want to read her poem written in response to *Making Apple Cider* by William S. Mount (Whitman's Long Island contemporary). She will read it here to her friends, but not at the assembly:

Here I am pulling this
 thing I don't even
 know why,
 but I'm moving
 as fast as I can
 or he whips me.
 Oh no, he's raising the
 whip, I can't move
 any faster, I've been
 at this for
 3 hours. How cruel
 can you be?
 Here it comes.
 Ow! Every inch of my body
 hurts, even my mane.

○

At the Metropolitan Museum, Domenika wheels her chair forward and away from Demuth's *The Figure 5 in Gold* and says that the three changing sizes of 5's are the motion of the fire engine approaching. For the first time I understand what Demuth's commotion means.

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Celine doesn't wait for the class to discuss Whitman. She writes:

Come with me and I will tell you the wounds of my mind?
 How the ends of the world were built,
 and the mystery of being dead.
 I will take you to God.
 He will tell you whose life he is taking next.

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Suddenly, like the cobra breaking in the locked transom of my dream last night, sweet seventh grader Steve is up out of his wheelchair shoving his desk across the floor to hit freckled John, screaming emotion his poems hide. The teacher calms them. When the class sees Matisse's *Black Leaf on Green Background*, John writes:

Black in a green universe
trying to see
inner blue.

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Preparing to go to the Chuck Close show by looking at his portrait, *John, 1993*, tenth grader Charles writes:

Your white hair a winter's day
your eyes a crumbling winter storm
many little emotions pass through you
like a horde of wild boars.

I watch my students:
humans being.

○

Domenika is gone. She convinced the school and her parents she could be mainstreamed.

Teaching is giving up of responsibility
or sharing responsibility or shaping
response ability.

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Three students read the Williams poem three different ways: Amy stops at the line breaks, Bernice races through, Joe is slow. But for the first time I hear, consistent in their reading rhythms, *bis* rhythms.

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Liam reads his poem: "It is night, the moon is shining on its fur./ The mind is gray. What are you?/ Who are you? You must go far away/ to find your life." How does one choose? Or does your life choose you? I never intended to teach, or teach here.



Fifth grader Gail smiles a signal: Yes, she wants to read. Annie wheels to her, turns to the poems written when we were looking at Monet's *La Pie* ("The Blackbird") and reading a Basho haiku about winter. She holds the book up close to Gail's face and whispers the words of Gail's poem into Gail's ear. The white plastic cylinder coming from Annie's neck grazes Gail's chin. Gail repeats: "Snow/ touching/ dead trees."



I take Celine's suicidal poem, "Dead Red," to the school psychologist, who says if she's writing about it she won't do it.



3:08. I walk exhausted out the high school automatic door, past the line of buses. Emptied. Fulfilled.

Teaching is selfish.



Tenth grade, blonde queen Samantha reads her poem, the class applauds, then Kyle, crew-cut sophisticate, refuses to read his. We beg, she pleads, reasons, but he refuses. Where's wild unselfconscious Kyle from fifth grade—I'm wondering as he folds the poem four-square and pockets it. At the end of class, rolling his wheelchair toward the door, he hands me the poem ("I'd die for golden Samantha").



Teaching is giving up of responsibility or sharing responsibility or shaping response ability.

Year-end reading from the eleventh grade book. Angel reads for Jed, a child unable to write or read. His Neruda-based poem begins: “Yo soy a Ferrari trapped in a Volkswagon body.” His loneliness poem ends: “A man blocked by snow he will eventually melt.”

Teaching is a transferring of responsibility.

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Cleaning my room piled with 13 years of accumulated postcards and calendars and folders, I find an Edward Hopper quote (“Maybe I am not very human. What I wanted was to paint sunlight on the side of a house”); a Robert Frost poem, “Come In” (which Hopper liked); an excerpt from Paul Auster’s *Moon Palace*; a passage from Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*; Galway Kinnell’s “Hitchhiker.” Without teaching, would I have read those books on Blake, or excavated Williams’s drafts or spent a summer on Miró? How much would I have not learned?

Teaching structures my curiosity.

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Domenika on the phone:
“My poems got me
into Brown University...”

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Dearest Dominika,

Even as a child, you had the courage and vision, in your life and in your art, to break any limits, to accomplish the extraordinary. Congratulations on your Brown graduation.

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Celine, found with knife, is expelled.

PART TWO: SARAH DOHRMANN

Inside the classroom, under the watchful eyes of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Abraham Lincoln, are cluttered desks and tables, and a bubbling tank a suckerfish calls home. I see students' papers strewn on the gray linoleum floor. I see, stacked beneath the grate-covered windows (which bring in only a trifling of daylight), endless rows of advanced workbooks that may never be cracked. Fluorescent lighting reverberates off what must be the twentieth layer of mint paint. A pervasive dust-mote pallor. Above the chalkboard a green poster displays the alphabet in neat cursive lettering. But all of the letters between "N" and "U" have gone mysteriously missing.

Four years ago I used to go to a school called P.S. 180. Two years past I went to P.A.L. I got kicked out of both schools. I went to P.S. 207. The first day I went on a trip that was the best trip ever. In that school, ten days later, I got kicked out so I came here. Special Ed for life.

—Jonny



The Department of Education has defined students with "emotional and behavioral disabilities" as students who exhibit one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects their educational performance:

- an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors;
- an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers or teachers;
- inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances;
- a generally pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or
- a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

Note: All names have been changed to protect student privacy.

I Wish I Could Be Happy in School

I wish I could go home so I could do my homework
and play Dreamcast.
I wish I was a baby so I wouldn't have to go to school.
I wish I was a snowman so I could melt.
I wish I was a fish so a lot of people could eat me up.
I wish I could be happy in school.

—*Nayta*

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It is hard not to feel alone. It is hard not to look down at my handful of William Carlos Williams poems and think, "What on earth am I doing?" It is hard, in the face of special needs children who are most likely fighting interior wars more daunting than any I've ever encountered, to not question if writing is a trivial endeavor. After all, how can I, as a teaching writer visiting just once a week for a short ten-week duration, do anything to help these children?

Can I? Can writing?

Letter to My Future Wife

I love you, future wife.
I want to get to the future to marry you.
You're the best wife. I'm a boy, but in the future
I will be a man.
I want you to come to the past.
In the past, I'm too little, but in the future
I will be a big man.
Me and my future wife.
She is in the future.
I am in the past.

—*Carlos*

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I ask you: What is a “generally pervasive mood”? What are “inappropriate types of feelings”? What are “normal circumstances”? Might all these factors be exacerbated by a child’s environment, his response to a certain teacher, his familial background, his living situation?

Untitled

My kitchen is mad dirty
 it's so full of stuff
 I can barely eat in it.
 And when I open my refrigerator
 all I see are leftovers.
 And when I go outside all I see
 are guns everywhere outside.

—*Jaquan*

○

I am not privy. I hear, “He’s living in foster care.” I hear, “Her mother just died.” I hear, “His medications are off,” and “You’ve got to understand something: our students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, broken families, parents that have been incarcerated, parents that have been killed violently or have otherwise succumbed to AIDS.” I hear, “Eighty-five percent of our students have been sexually molested.” I take these fragments to my writerly cave. I gnaw until I craft a little hole. I breathe inside it and hope to find oxygen on the other side. I forge a passage we can share—a channel to them.

Cool

It's a way of being chilled out, calm, looking fly, being cold on the outside but warm on the inside, the way of having super awesome hair, having nice shoes, dancing moves, doing the new shake, shimmy crib walk, wearing matrix blade glasses, black clothes, listening to music videos or having an okay crib (house), smelling like cold air/fog, looking like smoke.

Cold looks white or black, or peach, or yellow, or brown. It's the way of combing your hair front to back, side to side.

—*Ali*

I ask you: What is a “generally pervasive mood”? What are “inappropriate types of feelings”? What are “normal circumstances”?

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Meet Zane. He is new to our classroom. He is white and wiry. See one tattoo carved into the fleshy inside of his left forearm: WILD. See his right: OUTLAW. He jerks his chin toward me, says, “What do you do?”

I say, “I teach writing.”

He sits back, lets his left hipbone loosen, splay his leg. He says, “Well, *I don’t write.*”

I shrug. “Fine by me.”

The sun has risen over the already-blistering sands on the beach. Watching as the skies turn colors from fuchsia to baby blue, I’m stuck in a trance, listening to the waves beat on the rocks, as the seagulls call on one another. The day couldn’t get any better than it is. The softness of my beach blanket to the cold, refreshing feeling of the ocean as I dive in. What a wonderful day. I close my eyes and the breeze whispers to me.

—Zane

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I’ve woken three hours early. I try to go back to sleep. I lie in bed and pull my toes into little fists. Release them. I think of the students and their poems and of how—I am sure of it—I have not found a way through. I think, “Today, yet again, I will fail.” I imagine their anthology and see only stapled pages with flat words. I shut my eyes and try to chart an invisible course between caring completely and letting go. *Release. Pull.*

Faith

Faith is a man with a complexion like none seen before. He lives in a place that only his imagination can describe. The presence of this man gives everyone a sense of direction, a sense of making it somewhere. This very abstract man lives off other people’s success...just the thought of society depending on him, and not letting go, fills his oversized, but not seen, stomach. His voice is something like mine—even yours—and it keeps waking us up, knowing things are going to change.

—Jerrell



On the surface, my job is to teach creative writing. But the goal goes deeper. I am really striving to help each child find that voice inside him that's been silent for too long, to help him surprise himself, to help him feel not simply like a "special ed" child, but instead to come out feeling proud of his work, proud of the boy he is—brilliant, shy, energetic, beleaguered, creative, funny, odd, engaging, free of impediments. Most of all, free of the world that insists on terming him one thing: trouble.

Freedom

Freedom lived, but died when jails were stabbing it, war was slicing it, and government kept cutting it until a limb fell off. Freedom has not lived to be full-grown, it never went past adolescence. It was kidnapped from almost all of its parents in the world. And some of its parents have no idea who he is. Freedom has been skimpy to the knowledge of populations. Legend has it that Freedom is just lost somewhere. And one day, it will find its way home.

—*Davon*