

A SEAT ON THE PLAYGROUND

The Joys of a Special Needs Teacher

Roe Braddy



Messianic & Christian Publisher

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May this book in particular touch people's hearts to care for handicapped children.

In honor to God, pronouns referring to the Trinity are capitalized. But not all Bible versions do this and legally must be printed as they are.

The names and identifying details in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of all individuals involved in the events portrayed.

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A SEAT ON THE PLAYGROUND: The Joys of a Special Needs Teacher

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Dedication

For all the children that God has blessed me with
the privilege to teach and be touched by.

Acknowledgements

There are many individuals that have encouraged me along the way in this journey. First I must give my Lord and Savior all praises for the gifts and talents that He has bestowed upon me. May this story bring Him honor and glory. To my dearest husband who financially allowed me to follow my dreams. Two years ago I joined a writing ministry lead by an incredibly gifted woman named Joyce Davis. Thank you, Joyce, for your constant dedication for seeing me through and reminding me that I am a writer and a writer isn't a writer unless they write. Thank you to my dearest pastor who taught me to know God for myself and to never stop fanning my gifts in the flames. Thank you all for traveling with me on this journey and seeing me through all the pit stops along the way.

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Chapter I

Haverhill

Middle School

His Grace His Mercy

The car sped around for the second time, skidded across the highway and for some strange, uncanny reason landed on the wrong side of the median strip. Rose and I sat there motionless. The last 22 years of our young lives was still playing before our eyes when a passing car, sliding the opposite direction, barely missed us by mere inches.

New Hampshire is part of the area known as the snow belt of the Northeast. You could never predict what winter would bring. I was now in my senior year of getting a degree in Special Education at the University of New Hampshire. In order to complete my student teaching, I had to travel fifteen miles to the elementary school in Rochester. At the time I had a little car that did not have much in the way of snow tires, but I was blessed because I remembered how hard my mother worked and saved to buy me this car.

On this particular day I awakened early to fifteen inches of new snow. Knowing that Rochester's schools were not subject to closing, I needed to somehow make my way to my class. Well, this turned out to be quite the adventure. After what seemed like hours of digging my car out of the snow drift my car-pool friend Rose and I started off down the highway hoping to get to school and not be marked absent for the day.

As we were traveling slowly down the highway, my little car hit a patch of ice and found its way on the opposite side of the road. Only seconds later another car came and started skidding, just missing us, by the grace of God. To make a long story short, after help with digging and pushing, we made it to school.

Like that day, the teaching career I was choosing was not going to be easy. It was going to have its hard days, scary

moments, and tough situations that would take hard work, determination, courage, and endurance given to me by God's strength to keep going. When I look back over my years of teaching and to this particular memory, I realize that God's grace and mercy has protected and kept me for a very long time.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

A Mentor Worth Mentioning

When I started my first year of college, my mother shared with me that there would not be a lot of money in her household budget to see me through four years. My hardworking father had passed away when I was thirteen and my mother was forced to raise me alone. Coming from parents with such strong work ethics, applying myself to meet a goal was not foreign to me. I knew that I would be able to find a job and balance my school work. It was not an option. It was the only way to reach my goals and see my dreams come to pass.

As a high school student, I was sure that the career path that I would take would be in nursing. I loved working with people and felt a sense of fulfillment caring for someone who needed my help. My father often told me that I had a nurturing spirit. During his illness, I spent a great deal of time helping my mother care for him, so it was something that I was naturally drawn to. During my junior year of high school, in pursuit of my chosen career, I volunteered as a candy striper at the local hospital where my father had been a patient. I was then hired as a nurse's aide in the same hospital during my senior year. This experience helped me to land a job as a freshman at the University of New Hampshire. I became a nurse's aide in the local nursing home in Durham, where I met Meena and my career path changed.

Meena was a resident at Bay View Manor. At the time of our meeting, Meena was 90 years old. There were eight nurse's aides assigned to each wing. I was assigned to Meena's wing. My duties included changing linen, filling water pitchers, and assisting the residents with meals. Because of my class schedule, I worked mostly in the evenings. When I arrived at work, the residents would be preparing to settle into their rooms for the evening. Meena's room was the last one at the end of the hall. As I would push my linen cart down the hall and stop in front of her door, she would be sitting in the chair by the window with her hair brush in her hand.

She would often look up and give me a gentle smile while holding up the hair brush. This was our signal that she was not too tired for me to stay and talk for a few minutes. It was during these times that our relationship had gotten close. She would sit and wait for me to finish all my duties knowing that I would come down her hall last and spend some time just sitting and talking.

Meena was a tiny, frail woman with long white hair that reached the middle of her back. Age had not stolen her looks. She was still a beautiful woman. She had a complexion the color of warm honey with very little wrinkles, large doe shaped brown eyes, and high cheekbones. She was a Navajo Native American. She had a soft, warm demeanor that was inviting and comforting. She reminded me a great deal of my father's great aunt whom I called Gramgram. My dear Gramgram lived to be one hundred and one. I prayed for that type of longevity for Meena.

Even though Meena did not physically look her age, time had taken its toll on her body. She had many ailments. She had a strong tenacity and vigor for life. The nurses often said that it was a miracle that she was still living. She had come short of passing away several times.

Despite all of her physical ailments, Meena's mind was still sharp as a tack. She was well liked by all the nurses and the residents. She kept the other residents young by reminding them that they still had something to offer. The times that I enjoyed most in my job were the moments I spent with her. I loved running the brush through her thick, white hair. It always seemed to trigger her memory and she would begin to share stories from her past about being a teacher on a Native American reservation in South Dakota.

Meena's stories were rich and full of detail about the hardships that the children she taught faced. Many of the children were severely retarded and many were unable to walk or talk. Meena's stories had passion. She had spent a life-time giving all that she had, pouring herself into the lives of these children and their families. Meena's memories of a fulfilled, meaningful life were her muse for living; her memories were what kept her going. God had given me the honor of being allowed to hear her retell these stories. After Meena passed away, I realized that nursing was not the path that I should follow. I found myself changing my major from nursing to special education. After teaching for over twenty-three years, I have never regretted changing directions. Because of Meena, I too now have a memory full of bittersweet stories to share. This book is my way of sharing those stories with you. So I say, thank you Meena for being my inspiration for "A Seat on the Playground."

The Misplaced Misfits

Today I decided to arrive at school early enough to prepare my classroom and lessons for my new students. The previous day I had met the principal. He asked me if I would mind coming in two days before the end of Thanksgiving

break in order to finalize paperwork and give myself an opportunity to become familiar with the school. I looked forward to having the extra time to prepare lesson plans and set up my classroom. After meeting the principal and touring the building, I was given the key to my very first classroom. This was my first year of teaching and I had been hired as a long term substitute at Haverhill Middle School. The class was an emotional support classroom located in the E hall.

Before I left, I took a quick look at the room. The furnishings lacked a lot. The room I was to call my classroom had no desks, only study carrels. There were eight of them arranged in two rows of four. Each student desk, or carrel, was surrounded by three walls that enveloped the students like a three-walled box. The walls were painted a dull green. Despite the fact that this school had been designed to support the open classroom concept, simply meaning that most of the classrooms had movable walls, I was placed in a regular enclosed classroom because of the nature of my student's emotional problems. The principal believed that the open concept would not be the most appropriate for students with this type of disability.

I approached the teacher's chair to discover that the classroom already had its first occupant, a pesky little mouse that greeted me by leaving a lovely little gift of droppings on top of the old wooden desk and inside the drawers. I cleaned the desk thoroughly and decided to move it to the left side of the room. That was yesterday. Unfortunately the little mouse had a distinctive ability to know exactly what my strategy was. This morning I arrived early only to find that the little rodent had found his way all the way across the room back to the top of my desk. I do have to admit, he was a determined little rascal, but unfortunately, not one that I had taken a liking to.

This was how I learned my first lesson that all teachers must know: become friends with the custodian. They can become a valuable resource for all those annoying little problems that administrators don't deal with, like my pesky little occupant.

As I stood at the door of my first classroom disgusted by the present that I found again on my desk, I could hear music blasting down at the other end of the hall. I decided to investigate and to my surprise, it belonged to the head custodian. His uniform badge said so. He was a big guy with a burly muscular build, probably in his late forties. He had a thick beard which was tinted with gray and his hair was a thick afro to match. He reminded me a little of a black Santa who spent a great deal of time at the gym.

In a deep baritone voice he said, "Hello, my name is Nick. I guess you could say that I'm the official welcome committee since I'm always here early, cleaning Hall E."

I replied, "It's nice to meet you, and I think that you are just the person I need to speak to. I have a pesky little four-legged friend that maybe you can help me evict."

Nick said, "Yes, little lady, I'm your guy. I'll have your little problem all taken care of by the end of the day. You can count on me." This was a relief. After all, tomorrow was the big day—the day that I would meet the students who were enrolled in my class. Nick told me, "It's good to see that the district has hired a young minority. The kids need to see that minorities can be good role models."

"I am excited about my first day of school! This is my first year of teaching."

The teacher who was contracted for this position had taken a sabbatical due to a long term illness. Upon her leav-

ing, there had been several day-to-day substitutes who filled in, but so far the principal had not found a long-term substitute for the remainder of the year.

Two weeks prior to being hired for this position, I had dropped off my resume and filled out the application at the Rochester School District administration building. After filling out the application and handing it to the receptionist, I simply thanked her and started to walk toward the door. The receptionist immediately noticed that I was certified in the area of special education. She asked me if I was in a hurry and told me that she wanted me to meet Don Michaels, the director of special education. She immediately took me to his office and told him that I was certified in special education. This was more than I had expected. I was simply there dropping off an application. I had planned on submitting applications to several school districts that day. To my surprise, I was ushered into Mr. Michael's office. He said, "Please come in and have a seat. I am really interested in talking with you." I was taken by surprise. I never thought that I would be asked to stay for an interview, and I couldn't believe that he was so willing to speak with me prior to seeing any of my credentials.

As I took a seat across from his desk, I said, "Thank you so much for taking the time to see me." Mr. Michaels was a tall thin man with a thick sandy brown mustache that turned up at the corners when he smiled. The receptionist handed him my resume and the completed application, and again she made a point to emphasize the fact that I was certified in special education before she closed the door behind herself, leaving us alone to talk.

He asked me where I was from originally. I told him that I was from Marlborough, part of the Greater Boston area. He told me that he was also from Boston, from Foxboro. He

asked me if I had ever gone to a Patriots football game. We made small talk about Boston for several more minutes, and then he proceeded to ask me if I would be interested in a position at the middle school as a long-term substitute for an emotional support class.

At this point I was in total disbelief. This man was offering me a job and he had only glanced at my resume and the application. I had no teaching experience other than student teaching—I was green behind the ears! As we concluded our discussion that had little to do with my employment experience, he said to me, “See Mrs. Knight. She will give you all the information that you will need to schedule a visit with the principal to see if the position is the right fit for you.” In only an hour, I had signed my teaching contract and met with the principal.

All of this was happening so quickly. The students would be leaving for Thanksgiving in two days, and I would be starting the next week after the break. Miracles can happen and one had just happened to me. Even though I had just landed my first teaching job, I was frightened by the fact that it would be teaching one of the most difficult exceptionalities in the field of special education. Teaching kids with emotional problems is usually very draining. It takes everything in you not to become emotionally attached.

I was frightened about what was to come, but I was unnervingly surprised by my own willingness to immediately accept this position without fully knowing what I was in for. *Here I go, off for my first ride!*

Nick proceeded to warn me about being too eager to gain the confidence of my students. He said, “I’ll share this with you. The last substitute that had this position didn’t last long. Them wild kids drove her straight out of here. The poor girl probably never wants to have anything else to do

with kids again.” He ensued to tell me about the students that were enrolled in my class. He put it this way, “They are a rough bunch of hooligans. Good luck.” His words were not exactly comforting. I realized that this was only his opinion. I simply decided to take the challenge and refused to formalize negative images of these students.

I simply smiled at his comment and said, “I guess I will see very soon.” After all, miracles can happen. The way I received this position was a miracle. Nick would simply have to keep his opinions to himself.

Nick told me that he would come down to my room with a sticky trap to catch my little friend. That thought and image totally put a damper on the visions I had for this classroom. However, there were no other alternatives to this small dilemma. I started up the hall toward my class, saying over my shoulder, “Thanks. Could you do me a favor and put the trap somewhere out of plain sight?”

He said, “Don’t worry. I’ll be sure that you never knew he was ever there.” I smiled with a great deal of gratitude and proceeded back to my classroom. I felt some comfort in knowing that there was someone in the building that I could turn to for help. However, Nick’s words continued to echo in my head, I replayed my hiring experience. Were these people a little anxious to find someone to fill this position? Was Nick’s comment more of the truth than what was shared with me by the director and the principal? What had I gotten myself into? I swallowed the hard lump that was forming in the back of my throat and went to my room to see what I could do to turn it from a dungeon into a cheerful place where these students would feel welcomed.

The day went by quickly. Tomorrow was my big day when the kids would finally arrive. I was excited, but apprehensive about what the first day would bring. I had much to prepare.

College never prepares you for the quivering nerves that begin in anticipation of the very first time you step into your own classroom with “real students.” This is truly different; no lead teacher, just me. I spent most of the evening fine tuning my lesson plans for the first week and praying that the students would accept me as their new teacher.

It was a cold, crisp November morning. I headed off to school in my little Monza. It was a noisy little contraption that often gave me a bit of trouble getting started, however this morning it started without having to turn the motor over several times. This was definitely the sign for a great day. It was a short drive to Haverhill Middle School. The school was located on a main road in the center of the city. It was a fairly new building. The district had voted to adopt the open classroom concept. This educational concept thrived on the theory that classrooms should be communities—that students should not be isolated by walls, and that learning worked best when teachers had access to both each other and a variety of materials.

The concept worked well in theory. However, the principal shared with me that this concept did have its shortcomings. For one thing, it could get quite noisy and when confrontations occurred with students, it was difficult to contain. Unfortunately, this was a reoccurring event. The school board had bought into the idea quickly, but the administration and most of the teachers had their doubts that it would maintain longevity. As I headed off to Hall E, which housed the special education classrooms, all self-contained in their own department, I could hear the sound of Nick’s music, a blend of Motown oldies. I stopped to say good morning to Nick and to check on whether or not he was able to capture that annoying little creature. He heard me coming down the hall and greeted me with a boisterous good morning. Before

I could say anything, he told me that he was able to catch my little friend. This was a start to what seemed like a great morning!

I was scheduled to meet with the principal and the rest of the special education team that I would be working with. I continued on to my classroom to put down my things and find my way to the conference room where the meeting would be held. In my search, I took notice of what the open classroom concept really involved. Most of the classrooms that were in the connecting hallways were divided by large partitions instead of walls. On the outside of each partition there were small signs indicating each class and the teacher who taught the class. Student work was also posted on the outside of each partition. These classrooms were only occupied by regular education teachers. All of the special education classes were held in the older part of the building where the original classrooms were still maintained. This reminded me of what the lead teacher I worked with while completing my student teaching said about special education, “It continues to be a separate part of the education field.” Now I understood what she had meant by that comment.

When I finally saw a sign up ahead marking the conference room, I met one of my teammates who was also on her way to the meeting. She stopped and introduced herself as Shelly. She was a heavy-set woman in her mid-thirties. Her long brown hair was twisted on top of her head in a mass of spiral curls. She was wearing a casual outfit of jeans and a blouse. I was not sure of the school’s dress code, so I had taken the liberty of wearing one of the dressiest outfits that I owned, a brown tweed skirt with a blue sweater and a modest pair of brown pumps. As we continued down the hall, Shelly said, “I’m glad that they have finally hired someone for the remainder of the school year for this position. Welcome to

Haverstville. If you need anything, don't be afraid to ask."

I said, "Thank you for such a warm welcome, I am sure I will be taking you up on that."

She also said that the group that I had was a tough group. Her words reminded me of what Nick said to me just a day ago. However, she also told me that the rest of the team would be willing to help me with supplies and other materials. She said, "We are a tight-knit group that works well together, and we do our best to help each other out. That seems to be the best way to stay ahead of the game around here." This truly gave me a sense of relief. I could not wait to meet the rest of the teachers. I wanted to become part of a team. As we neared the conference room, we were joined by another member of the team. Shelly introduced me to Henry, a short balding man in his mid-forties who wore thick corduroys that rustled as he walked. Henry said in a soft-spoken, high pitched voice, "It's nice to meet you. Welcome to Haverstville." Upon entering the room I was introduced by the principal to the rest of the team.

There were a total of three women. Henry was the only man. The principal introduced me to Brenda who was the head of our department. Brenda reached out to shake my hand. She was an attractive woman with a warm smile and a strong handshake. She welcomed me to the team and told me that I would be teaching three subjects, Science, Health and English. I then met Dee who was in her mid-thirties. She put down the stack of folders she was holding, in order to shake my hand. She said, "Good luck, you're gonna need it." I thanked her.

The principal told the group to help me get settled and to let him know if there was anything that I needed. He then left the room and headed toward his office. As he closed the door behind him, Dee said, "Now that the little short man is

gone, we can all school this little girl on the real deal about this place." I was taken by surprise by her words.

Brenda interjected, "Dee, we don't want to frighten Roe."

I asked them both, "What do you mean about 'the real deal'?"

Dee proceeded to tell me. "Let me tell you, sista. Mr. Shalinger is full of it. That will be the last time he will ever ask you if you need any assistance with anything. He is not a principal who supports any of the teachers, and he will lie about you in a minute to save his own face when it comes down to it." I thought the fact that she called me a "sista" would have really offended Shelly, but she seemed to take it in stride. It seemed that the team was used to Dee's outspokenness.

I became quite apprehensive about how this meeting was going to turn out. Brenda said, "Dee is not always tactful when she talks about the working conditions around here. However, I assure you that this team is here to help you get started with the materials you'll need to implement the courses you will be teaching." There was a slight tension in the air between Brenda and Dee.

Henry chimed in, "I have some extra Science books that you can come and take a look at." Henry, with his high pitched, squeaky voice, seemed timid and meek. I wondered how he fared with this group of strong-willed women. His comment didn't clear the air much. Brenda was assigned to be my mentor. She told me that we would be meeting either every Monday or Friday in order to ensure that I understood the goals and objectives that were written in my student's IEPs (Individual Education Plans). All students who are enrolled in special education classes have IEPs. They are the documents that outline the student's disability and give both

the parents and the teachers guidelines for facilitating learning activities that meet their individual needs.

Brenda asked, “Have you had a chance to look over any of the previous lesson plans that were left by the previous substitute?” I replied by telling her that I had come in a day earlier to review the ones that were left in the sub kit. She said, “Great, it sounds like you have a grasp on at least what the rest of the week will be like.”

I said, “Well, I’m not totally sure about how strong of a grasp I have. I would really appreciate it if you and I could meet to at least review the plans just to make sure that I am headed in the right direction.” She said, “Sure, as your mentor I’m always available to help.”

Brenda brought the meeting to a congenial end. I told Shelly, Henry, and Dee that it was nice meeting them and we all said we would see each other later in the day. As Brenda and I started walking toward my classroom she became quite serious in her approach about clearing up exactly what Dee meant. She told me that Dee was a little blunt in how she said what she said, but her comment about the students in my class was pretty much an accurate statement. We were approaching the door to my class when Brenda turned, looked me in the eye, and said, “These kids are indeed a tough group, but they need someone who would be able to stick it out for the long haul. They have been through so many changes during this school year. These kids are definitely taking the rocky road in life, but they deserve a chance. They need someone who believes in them.” As I stood listening to her, I could see that she truly enjoyed the kids and that she had a vested interest in them.

I told her, “I plan on giving the kids all my best. However, I do admit that I feel slightly intimidated by what Dee and Nick have said.”

Brenda said, “Nick is a good guy who is well liked by all the staff in this building. He is someone who can show you around the building. He really is a great guy. He knows these kids very well because he lives in the same neighborhood. He looks after some of them and keeps them out of trouble. I’ve known him to take in some of them and feed them when there was nothing in their homes for them to eat.”

Brenda assured me that the first day would be more about getting to know the kids and letting them get to know me. She told me that it was always a good idea to have well-written plans, but sometimes I would need to lay the plans aside and feel my way around based upon the direction of the kids. Brenda indicated that these kids were not your traditional learners. They needed a great deal of support when it came down to gaining confidence in their own learning.

She told me that she did not have a first period class and that she would be able to stay with me for the first forty minutes of the day. I silently thanked God that He had sent an angel of mercy in Brenda. During the twenty minutes before homeroom began, Brenda told me a little about each of the students that were in my class.

She told me that Lorraine was the only girl in the class. Her life was a hard one. Lorraine and her mother were really struggling. Her mother had recently lost her job and Lorraine would often come to school wearing the same clothes for the entire week.

Then there was Matthew. He was a strong willed kid who really had a great deal of trouble believing anything positive about himself. He would be a tough sell. I would really have to work hard to gain his trust. Brenda said that she had known all the kids for several years before they came to Haverhill. She had a good relationship with most of them

because she used to teach at the elementary school where they all attended.

She told me about Al, he was a tough kid who was raising himself. His father was a known drug dealer and there had been a great deal of talk about whether or not Al was also selling drugs. He would often come to school wearing a new pair of sneakers or sporting a piece of jewelry that was not common place for a middle school student to have.

There was also a boy named Hank who was considered the odd man out. He did not have any friends, and he was often teased because of his hand-me-downs and his deep southern accent. Hank and his mother had moved to New Hampshire from Texas. His mother was a single parent who held several jobs to make ends meet.

When I asked Brenda if this was all the kids that were currently enrolled in the class, she said, “Think of the small number as a blessing. Kids with emotional problems come with a variety of issues that can be overwhelming. Trust me when I say, having a small class is a blessing.” Brenda indicated that I would need to spend a great deal of time getting to know each student’s likes and dislikes, and that this would be difficult to do if the class size was large. I agreed and thanked her for all her assistance. By the time we had finished talking, the bell was ringing for homeroom. The kids would arrive any minute. Brenda assured me again that it would be a good day. I went over to the board and wrote my name on it in big, bold letters, “Miss Williams.” I took a deep breath and waited by the door with Brenda for the kids to come down the hall.

The wait seemed to last an eternity, but the first group of students who were housed in E hall started coming down the hall. There was a short, pudgy boy coming toward me that

I recognized right away based upon Brenda’s description. It was Hank. He wore a worn pair of jeans that had seen their better days, a pair of sneakers that looked like they were too small, and a sweat shirt with the words “Texas Rangers” written across the front of it. He stopped at the door and said “Hi” to Brenda. She was indeed right, even this short greeting had a deep southern twang. He gave me a curious look, but did not greet me. He stepped inside the room and took a seat in the corner by the window.

As Brenda and I continued to stand by the door waiting for the rest of my students, many of her previous students stopped by to say hello. They greeted her with smiles. Several even stopped and gave her a hug. It warmed my heart to watch this connection between teacher and student. I wondered to myself if I would ever be able to connect with the students that would soon be arriving to my classroom.

Matthew was the next student to arrive. He was a tall, thin boy with a dark brown complexion and a face full of adolescent pimples. He stopped and said, “Hello, Mrs. Baer. How was your Thanksgiving?” She said it was great and asked how his was. He replied that his was okay. For a very brief moment, he and I made eye contact and I actually heard a mumbled, “Hi.” I smiled and said hello. He stepped passed me and took a seat directly across from my desk.

My heart leaped. This was the one student that Brenda had said I would have to work hard for in order to gain his trust. I knew that it would take more than a “hi” to gain his trust and assurance, but at least it was a start. Wondering with anticipation who would arrive next, I heard a loud whistle that echoed throughout the hall. I was not quite sure where or who it was coming from. Up the hall I saw a crowd of girls surrounding one boy. As the boy emerged from the

crowd, Brenda said, “Here comes Al. That boy always has to make a grand entrance.” Al was a short Hispanic boy with pitch black hair and deep set brown eyes. He was dressed in a very colorful T-shirt that had a picture of Tupac the rapper on the front of it. He wore what appeared to be real gold chains around his neck and he sported the latest pair of brand-named sneakers. He was very physically mature for his age. He was muscular and had a great deal of facial hair that made him look much older than the eighth grader that he was. As he walked toward the class, several of the girls that were walking with him gave him kisses on the cheek and swooned that they would see him later. I was totally amazed that one kid could be so popular with the opposite sex and cause so much commotion. This boy came with his own set of groupies! As he approached the doorway, he stopped and greeted Brenda with a casual, “How ya doing, Mrs. Baer?” He looked over at me and asked Brenda, “She the new teacher?”

She replied, “Yes, this is Miss Williams. She will be your new teacher for the remainder of the school year.” I smiled and said hello.

Al reached his hand out, shook my hand, and said, “Nice to meet you,” as he entered the room and took the very last seat in the back.

Brenda whispered in my ear, “Take that introduction from Al with a grain of salt. He was probably thinking that you could become one of his next babes. Remember, you are not that much older than most of these kids. Al, the oldest kid in the class, is fifteen, and he thinks of himself as quite the ladies’ man. Be careful with him.” I realized that her words were true. I had heard that several teachers had lost their jobs because of unprofessional relationships that

they were having with their students. Wow, there was so much that my student teaching experience did not teach me. Again, I silently thanked God that He had sent Brenda. Her help was invaluable.

The bell rang that indicated that homeroom announcements were ready to begin. I asked Brenda about Lorraine, the only girl in my class. She replied, “Lorraine often misses a great deal of school or comes late. She may or may not be here today.”

We came into the room and Brenda closed the door behind us. We both stood in front of the class and Brenda introduced me. She told them that I would be here for the remainder of the school year.

Hank raised his hand and asked, “What happened to the last teacher that was here before, were we so bad that she left and decided never to come back?” Brenda indicated that the last two teachers were not certified in special education and that they only received emergency certification until a certified special education teacher could be found for the remainder of the school year. Hank replied, “Oh yeah, they needed a nut case teacher who could teach the crazy kids, and I guess she is it.”

“Hank,” I interjected, “I would like to know why you think of yourself and your classmates as crazy. And I would like you to know that I feel rather insulted that you think of anyone who takes this position as ‘crazy’.”

His reply was rather surprising; he looked me in the eye with total seriousness and asked me, “Why did you decide to take this position when you know that this class is for kids that everyone says is crazy?”

“I do not think of any of you as crazy,” I told him. “I believe you all have the potential to be just like anyone else.”

At this point Al decided to join the conversation, “Have you ever taught kids with special problems before? Why do you want to teach problem kids when you could work with the regular kids?”

“No, Al, I haven’t worked with special needs students yet. This is my first full-time teaching position. But I majored in special education because I knew that it would be a rewarding career.”

He merely looked at me, grinned with total disbelief, and said, “Yeah, right.” He roused the whole class into waving their hands and giving me a disheartening chorus of “Yeah, right.”

At this point Brenda stood up for me by saying, “I won’t tolerate this disrespect. You need to give her a chance.”

Hank tuned in again by saying, “Well, I’m as crazy as they come, and I ain’t got no potential for doing nothing.” I looked at Brenda. Before she could respond, I told her that I could handle this and that I would like to finish the conversation because we needed to clear the air and discuss all of our feelings if we were ever going to gel as a class. She agreed and took a seat at my desk. I pulled up a chair directly in front of the three students who desperately wanted answers about the woman who sat before them. The bell for the end of the first period was ringing. The first forty minutes of the day had passed and I was still there. It could only get better.

Building Trust

I braced myself for the discussion I was about to dive into. I told the class about attending the University of New Hampshire in Durham. I started off with the normal details, sharing with them the friends that I had and the classes

that I took. They were not at all impressed, after all, they were not expecting to go to college nor did they have any family member that completed college. However, they were quiet and appeared to be listening.

They became intrigued when I shared with them about Meena, and about how I worked my way through school as a personal care attendant for students with disabilities who attended the college. They asked me questions about why I wanted to become a personal care attendant. I told them. “At first I just thought it was a great way to make money for school.” (It was one of the highest paying student jobs on campus.) I continued, “But after I got to know the people that I worked with, we became good friends. Then, I wanted to be there because they needed my help in order to be able to get out of bed to go to class. They enjoyed my company and I enjoyed being able to do something worthwhile for another person.”

I told them about Meena—my very first mentor and the person who inspired me to become a teacher—and related some of her stories about teaching Native Americans. Lee asked, “What do you know about Native American reservations?” I shared with him more stories that Meena had told me about her life and what it was like to grow up and work on a reservation. He stopped me and said, “My great grandmother was part Navajo.”

“I’m glad that you shared that with me, Hank! We will be doing several Social Studies activities on the lives of the Native Americans.” I almost caught the glimpse of a smile, but he caught himself and gave me a head nod instead. Soon the bell rang. Brenda reminded me that she had a third period class and needed to leave. I told her that we would be fine and that I would see her for lunch.

As she got up from my desk, she turned to the kids and said, “I am very proud of you for being such good listeners.” She left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Suddenly the door sprang open again and standing there was a tall, thin girl wearing a long black trench coat and carrying a large backpack. I turned and said, “You must be Lorraine!”

“Yes, that’s my name, but who are you?”

Before I could introduce myself, Al interjected, “Get in here and close the door!” She quickly obeyed. I watched her as she shuffled to her seat, carrying the awkward backpack. When she passed in front of me to get to her seat, my nostrils picked up a slight hint of body odor and what smelled like a damp basement. I remembered what Brenda had shared with me earlier about Lorraine’s home life. It made me want to try even harder to make a connection with this young girl.

After she was seated, I said, “Lorraine, my name is Miss Williams. I am your new teacher and I will be with this class for the remainder of the year.”

Lorraine replied by saying, “They actually found somebody who will teach this class?”

Hank interjected, “Wait a minute, Rainne. This one might not be so bad. She was telling us about why she wanted to work with us. I want her to finish the story, so shut up.”

I gave Hank a sharp look and gently reminded him, “Remember that Mrs. Baer wants a full report on how the morning goes, and I want to be able to share with her that everyone was respectful to each other.” He gave me a curt look, but to my surprise he refrained from saying any more. I waited for retaliation from Lorraine, however there was no comment returned. I asked her, “Is Rainne the name you like to be called?”

She replied, “By the people I like.”

I simply said, “That’s fair.” I noticed that Lorraine had dark circles under her eyes and her hair was short and unkempt. She did not take off the coat that she wore. However, she unbuttoned several of the buttons, and I could see a glimpse of a dirty white T-shirt. She wore a tattered pair of jeans and a pair of sneakers that had small holes in the soles. She leaned back into the chair and crossed her arms. I took this as approval that it was okay to finish the previous conversation. We spent the remainder of the morning discussing what classes I would be teaching and what classes they would be having with other teachers.

They had listened well to what I had to share about myself, but they were unwilling at this point to open up and share about themselves. Brenda warned me that I would need to move slowly and give them time to gain my trust. One thing I could gather was the pecking order of the class. Al ruled the roost. Hank followed him as second in command, and Matthew and Lorraine were the pecked ones. Matthew had very little to say throughout the morning, however now he stated matter-of-factly, “I hate both math and reading and I don’t do any homework for anyone, no matter how nice the teacher is.

Al chimed in, “Yeah, I only do homework if one of my babes knows how to do it.” Al appeared to be a smooth talker with both his peers and all the teachers, but was definitely not motivated academically. He only came to school for the social atmosphere and possibly the free lunch. Hank however, did seem to have some interest in school. He had seemed to perk up when I mentioned that we would be completing a unit on Native Americans. I was not sure what would grab Lorraine’s attention and keep it. She was a hard one to read.

I told them that we would be completing a short assessment so that I could determine where I should start teach-

ing. They told me that they had been tested to death from all the other teachers. Hank told me that Mrs. Smith had all the tests that they had already taken. They were referring to Dee, the outspoken teacher that I had met that morning. I told them that I would get the results from her, so therefore we would wait before taking another test. They seemed content with my choice. We spent the remainder of the morning reviewing the assignments that they had completed before the Thanksgiving break.

Before I knew it, it was lunch time. Hank told me that the cafeteria was on Hall A on the other side of the building, and that they had 40 minutes for lunch. I thanked him for his assistance and told the class that after lunch we would be working on the Social Studies unit on Native Americans that I had mentioned earlier. Hank actually gave me a brief smile. Matthew had little to say and Lorraine sat daydreaming. She seem quit distant. She was a pretty girl despite her unkempt hair and dirty clothes. She had deep set dimples and hazel eyes. It was a shame that her mother did not spend enough time addressing her hygiene issues. I was sure that something could be done to improve her appearance. If nothing else, a daily shower would be a great help. The bell rang for lunch and Al was the first one out of his seat. He said, "See ya, I got babes to meet." He headed for the cafeteria with the rest following suit.

When the room was empty, I sat quietly at my desk and thanked God that I had survived the morning. Just as I stood to go get my packed lunch from the faculty lunch room, Brenda came through the door. She smiled at me, "I'm glad to see that you survived the morning!" We spent a few minutes talking about how it went and then she suggested that I come down to her room for lunch. I was slightly hesitant

to take her up on her offer. I told her that I really needed to read over my lesson plans to be sure that I was prepared for the rest of the day. She saw my hesitancy, "I just wanted to tell you that I know Dee came on a little strong this morning, but she really does have a heart for the kids. It's just her way. Sometimes it takes us all a little time to adjust to the way she delivers her message."

"I understand. I didn't take what she said to heart, but I do have a question. What did she mean when she said that Mr. Shalinger was not a very supportive principal?"

"Come have lunch with me and I will explain."

As we walked up the hall toward Brenda's room via the teacher's lounge, she said, "I'm sure that eventually Dee will share this story with you, but I would rather it come from me than her. Maybe that way you can understand the depths of the problems that these kids have. A few years ago I had a student in my class that came from a very troubled family. His father had been in prison for rape and robbery. John was a struggling student who had failed the eighth grade the year before and felt like he was just not going anywhere. He had given up trying. When his father went to prison he was a baby, so he never really knew him. He lived with his aunt who was already raising two kids. Adding a third to the mix was not what she had in mind. The living situation was not a good one.

"The morning that changed everything for John was two years ago. One morning I came in early to get started for a meeting and I ran into John in the parking lot. There wasn't anyone else around but the two of us. That's never a good situation. Before I knew it John grabbed me around the neck from behind and tried to pull me toward the ground. He never counted on the fact that I would be able to overtake

him. I have a black belt in Tae Kwon Do.” As she told this story I could see in her eyes the pain that the memory still held. She said, “John was doing extremely well. He had just started to really open up and understand the purpose of school.”

We reached the teacher’s lounge, grabbed our brown paper bag lunches out of the fridge, and crossed the hall to her room. As we sat down at her desk, I said, “This whole story sounds like something that you watch on television. It’s hard to believe that a kid would think he could get away with attacking the teacher.” I was dismayed with what I was hearing and also a little nervous about the safety of the school.

Brenda must have been able to read the expression on my face because she said, “Don’t worry, this happened a few years ago and since then they have installed cameras around all the entrances of the school. They haven’t had a problem since then.” Continuing her story, she said, “I was able to quickly subdue John. By the time other faculty members started to arrive in the parking lot I was sitting on the ground with my knee pressing into the center of his back. Several male teachers came and helped me get him out of the parking lot and into the building. Then we called the police who took him to a juvenile detention center where, sadly, he still is today.” Brenda went on to tell me that during the hearing Mr. Shalinger was asked to speak on her behalf as a character witness regarding the relationship that she had with her students. “His comments at the hearing were very supportive, but after I came back from my leave, he has hardly even mentioned the incident.” The school board had given her a week off with full compensation.

This cold distance from the principal did not really seem to bother Brenda. After all, she really wanted to put the is-

sue behind her. However the rest of the team, especially Dee, took it rather personally and felt that Mr. Shalinger did not have a great deal of empathy for all that Brenda had gone through. Dee and Brenda were good friends. Dee felt as though Brenda’s dedication to her students had been ignored and taken lightly. “But I have come to realize that some administrators simply feel the need to protect themselves emotionally from all that happens with both the staff and the students. Sometimes this is their only defense in order to remain strong leaders who do not wear their hearts on their sleeves. I think I understand Mr. Shalinger’s position. After all he did truly come to my defense during the hearing. He told the hearing officer that I was a dedicated teacher who spent a great deal of my time utilizing the resources that I had to ensure that my students were not only obtaining the best education possible, but also receiving counseling services for their emotional needs. That’s pretty good support, wouldn’t you say?”

Brenda seemed to take comfort in knowing that her reputation as an educator with both high educational expectations and strong moral ethics had been upheld publically by Mr. Shalinger. “But Dee thinks that I should have been compensated on a personal level by Mr. Shalinger. She is having trouble forgiving him for that.” After Brenda shared this story with me I had a better understanding of the comment Dee had made earlier that day.

After Brenda and I had finished lunch I walked back to my room to meet the students who were on their way back from the cafeteria. I stopped by Dee’s room to pick up the testing materials the students had told me about, and I witnessed Dee interacting with her students. Dee was a short, stout brown skinned woman who wore her glasses at the tip of her nose. She was talking with her hand on her hip and

giving one of the girls in her class “A word from Dee” about not turning in her assignments. I heard her telling this young girl, “You have the potential to do whatever you put your mind to, and I will not stand by and not let you reach your potential.” She spoke sternly, but I could tell that there was a lot of love and protection placed in her words. When I first met Dee I thought that she had a tough exterior that kept both her students and her colleagues at bay, but after Brenda shared her story and I had this opportunity to see how she interacted with her students, my opinion changed.

The rest of the day went fairly smoothly. We spent the remainder of the time reviewing spelling words for the week and completing the social studies activity on the Native Americans. When the bell rang for dismissal my small class gathered their things and told me that they would see me tomorrow. As they headed toward the door, Hank lingered for a few minutes. He asked me with a very serious look on his face, which was full of little brown freckles, “Are you really going to come back tomorrow?”

I assured him, “I will be waiting for you tomorrow morning and you need to be prepared to help me with the unit on the Navajos.” This was the moment that Hank and I made the teacher- student connection that I had longed for.

He shot me a smile and said in his soft southern draw, “I am counting on it.”

It was hard to believe that five months had suddenly gone by. I had gained the trust and respect of Al, Lorraine, Matthew and Hank. However, Hank and I had developed a special bond. My unit on Native Americans had really grabbed his interest. He was blossoming into a student who truly enjoyed school. My other three students were holding their own with completing their assignments and maintain-

ing some degree of interest in the topics we covered, however Hank had turned into my “A” student for all of his subjects. Of course, this did not help him win any popularity contests with his peers. He was jeered and called the teacher’s pet by both Lorraine and Al. Teasing was never permitted in my room. I told the rest of the class that they had just as much potential as Hank. They could also have A’s if they would put their minds to it.

Al’s response was typical, “That would take away from my time with the honeys.” Al, who deemed himself the ladies man, had a difficult time with staying focused for more than a few moments at a time. His main focus in school was the social aspect. Having the respect of his “posse,” as he called his group of friends, would always come first in Al’s life. The importance of school and obtaining an education had not been emphasized at home. He seemingly came to school to meet girls and hang out with his friends. I counted myself lucky. After all he was coming to school.

Matthew, on the other hand, came from a two-parent household who tried their best to emphasize the importance of school, but he had been diagnosed with depression. There would be times no one could reach him. He was a distant young man who seemed deeply troubled and weighted down with all that life brought. At times I could spark an interest in him. He seemed to enjoy math, which has always been my favorite subject. Every now and then I could get him to complete an assignment. These were the good days when he took his medication. Both of Matthew’s parents worked a variety of odd jobs at different shifts. There would be times that Matthew would be home by himself, making it difficult for anyone to oversee whether or not he took his medication. The medication seemed to make a difference in his attitude toward school. Unfortunately, it just was not consistent.

Lorraine continued to struggle with getting to school. She would often miss several days in a row. When she did return, it was evident that she had not bathed or changed her clothes. She continued to wear the long black trench coat that she wore the first day that I met her. It may have only been washed once or twice during the entire school year. When she returned after being gone two or three days, she would often be too tired to maintain any interest in school. She would often put her head down on her desk and fall asleep. On one particular day, I decided that I would need to take more of an aggressive approach with Lorraine to find out why she was missing so much school. I decided to go and speak with her guidance counselor and see if I could obtain any information about Lorraine's parents. Mrs. Lyle was the eighth grade guidance counselor. I decided that I would make an appointment to speak with her during my prep period later in the day.

As I walked up the hall toward the guidance department, I ran into Henry. We were headed in the same direction. I greeted him and he remarked, "I haven't seen much of you in the last two days."

"I haven't made it up to your end of the hall for lunch because I've been spending my lunch time grading papers and developing new social studies units."

He remarked in his high voice, "You can't seclude yourself every day. You have to get out and see people. If not, you're gonna burn yourself out. It happens quick around here."

"I'll be up for lunch today." He gave me a quick smile and patted my hand.

Henry didn't seem to have many male friends on the faculty. He fit in better with the women in the special education department. I felt sorry for him. When we all got together to

have lunch in Brenda's room, Henry would often attempt to engage in the conversations about the students. However, we women tended to steer away from talking about the kids. It was our way of building a little quiet time for ourselves. Our conversations usually consisted of swapping new recipes and talking about what sales we could catch—things that didn't always interest Henry.

I discovered, though, that Henry was an excellent cook, so the recipe swapping did sometimes interest him. I found out that he still lived at home with his parents and that he did most of the cooking. He would often tell us not to bring lunch in because he would be cooking something for his parents and there was always enough for the next several days. He was indeed a great cook. Our thirty-minute lunch would turn into a gourmet delight. He told me that he made lunch today and that there was enough for me. "In that case I will definitely see the team for lunch!" We said goodbye and I headed toward the guidance counselor's office. Henry continued down the hall toward the other end of the building. As he walked away, I thought to myself that I was pretty lucky. I really enjoyed the people that I worked with.

Just as I headed toward Mrs. Lyles' office, I saw Mr. Shalinger. He said, "Good morning, Miss Williams. Where are you headed off to?" I told him that I needed to speak with Mrs. Lyles regarding some concerns that I was having for Lorraine. "Could you stop by my office when you're finished?"

"Sure!" He continued walking down the hall toward the cafeteria. Even though I had given him a confident "Sure," I was frightened about what he wanted to discuss with me. Had I done something wrong? Was I not following the school guidelines for the faculty? What could possibly be the reason that I was being asked to see the principal?

Panic and fear started to sink in. I stopped midstream, standing in the middle of the hall in front of the guidance office. Was I about to lose my job? As a new teacher, I was low man on the totem pole. I was only a long-term sub with only a day-to-day contract. For some uncomfortable reason I suddenly knew that this was what Mr. Shalinger wanted to speak with me about. However, I still had a job to do, I needed to speak with Mrs. Lyles about the concerns that I had for Lorraine. I laid my troubling thoughts aside and went into the guidance suite where Mrs. Leport, the head guidance secretary, was stationed. She welcomed me with a big, bright smile.

Mrs. Leport was close to retirement. She had salt and pepper hair that she wore pulled back in a neat chignon and big brown expressive eyes that seemed to twinkle when she spoke about her “babies.” She and Nick were really good friends. I could see why. They both had that way of making you feel welcomed. Mrs. Leport scheduled all the appointments for the six guidance counselors from grades six through eight.

She asked me who I needed to see. I told her that I needed to speak with Mrs. Lyles about Lorraine. She wrote it down on the pad that she kept on her desk. She told me that she would have Mrs. Lyles give me a call, and we could schedule a convenient time for both of us since Mrs. Lyles was away from the building today. I told her that I felt that Lorraine’s matter seemed rather urgent.

Mrs. Leport motioned with her finger for me to come closer to her desk. As I did so, she told me, “I know that I should not be sharing information regarding the students, but I feel a need to because this is important information.” At first I was a little leery, but I moved closer. Mrs. Leport whispered, “Baby, Lorraine’s mother and my daughter have been good

friends for years. Last week my daughter shared with me that Lorraine’s mother has lost her job and is about to be evicted from her apartment. She has no family nearby. It’s a sad story, and she has a real bad drinking problem, too.”

There was very little that I could say to what Mrs. Leport shared with me. I thanked her for her concern and told her that I would still need to follow up with Mrs. Lyles and could she be sure to have her call me as soon as she got back in. She said, “Sure, baby, I certainly will.”

Mrs. Leport called everyone “baby.” She was a very nurturing person who always seemed to have the best intentions for everyone. I had seen her bring in bags of clothing for some of the girls who did not have anything to wear during the colder months. She really seemed to care a great deal about Lorraine. Several days before Christmas, Mrs. Leport gave me a large bag full of winter clothes and asked me to be sure to give them to Lorraine at the end of the school day.

When I asked Lorraine if she could stay after school to pick up the clothes she beamed from ear to ear and asked me if she could be excused from class so that she could run up and tell Mrs. Leport thank you. I wrote her a pass and sent her up to Mrs. Leport’s office. When she returned to class she completed all of her assignments without having to be prompted multiple times. Mrs. Leport had indeed lifted Lorraine’s spirits with the bag of clothes. I just hoped that Lorraine and her mother were not as bad off as what Mrs. Leport had indicated. However, I got the sinking feeling that there was more to this story. I would have to wait until I could speak with Mrs. Lyles. At least I felt as though I had gotten the ball rolling with making an appointment.

I still needed to stop by Mr. Shalinger’s office and address the issue there. As I walked toward the main office, I ran into Shelly. She told me that she wanted to talk with me later