

Stories

For the Invisible College

David Sawyer
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There are a few colleagues here and there in higher education who have captured my respect and affection, some of whom are here at Highlander. But, I remain connected to the academy because of my deep admiration for the students I work with and for the great privilege of being an influence in their lives. The stories that I want to share with you are not part of the canon of great literature, but they are great stories, and have brought me goosebumps, tears, and insight. They are the stories of my students and the stories of those they serve.

My younger colleagues are amazing, like Jeannette Humphrey, the black student who tutored a 17 year old boy whose mountain family had never sent him to school and was later honored by ABC-TV as one of America's Unsung Heroes and by a position on the COOL Board. Like Mary Roenker, a non traditional student with a tough past who started a literacy program for adults and was a Campus Compact Student Humanitarian Award Winner in 1991. Every student as a story to tell. What follows are excerpts from some that have moved me deeply.

Consider the sad and true short story that Brian Jones, himself a high school dropout, wrote about a little boy he worked with last year.

I wish that beer wasn't in there. Last time Mom had beer she got mad because I had the TV on too loud. She was so mad she didn't even whip me—she burnt me with her cigarette. I got places on my back and my leg where she used the cigarette. She's like that most of the time now, so mad the belt isn't enough. Once she even punched me with her fists. But I didn't holler. Hollering is for sissies. Hulk Hogan doesn't holler or cry.

Dale McHenry who graduated last year, recently had an article published called Respect My Words about an experience he had last summer at our day camp for kids.

One day this past summer, I was teasing a young girl. . .I can't remember how I was pestering her, but she told me to stop. Being a born aggravator, I had to pick on her one more time. She looked me dead in the eye and said, "respect my words". I have since spent much time pondering the social and personal significance of her statement. I am often taken back by the language of young children, often asking 11 to 12 year old boys to stop cussing. It troubles me that children feel they have to stand in our faces and scream obscenities so they feel they have been heard. One girl has taught me a lesson that all of my professors, teachers, pastors, and mentors had not. Language is useless if it is not respected. I will listen to those whom I serve and to those who serve me. I will try with all my might to respect them by respecting their words.

Only one American college student was asked to address the National Governor's Association annual meeting in 1992. Foula Dimopoulos did not mince her words.

In education, most of today's learning comes from books and lectures. These activities do not challenge the young, do not teach them to think critically about problems, and above all else, do nothing for their self-esteem. One way to invest in young people is to integrate service-learning programs into the curriculums of your schools. When I was a new student at Berea I did not have a high self-esteem, did not have good grades in high school. Service had everything to do with my positive outlook concerning myself.

Krista Bender, who will become our student director in the fall of 1994, recently wrote a paper for her senior requirement class after we had had a long conversation over at the coffee shop. I wish more of our public officials and college leaders had her insight.

The fourth aspect of service work and the most controversial for me, is the issue of power. I never faced the fact that I had a real problem with power and perhaps authority figures. I realize now that I dislike the idea of people having power over me, or of me having power over others, as much as I actually like having it. This sounds confusing and it is, but I no longer view power as the enemy. I have come to understand that power means making decisions, giving direction to certain things, being exposed to certain information, and being able to positively or negatively affect situations. I can now acknowledge that I do like the idea of having power and influence with people, but must always remember that with power comes huge responsibilities.

One afternoon I was shocked to find this story by a 13 year old Kentucky girl named Jennifer sitting on my desk after I had casually asked her for a short biographical essay for our newsletter.

When I was age five my real father remarried a woman. At this time I started getting slapped in the face for no reason at all. My father beat me with a belt buckle. He beat me so hard on my back that I bled and to this day I have bad marks on my back from beatings. I am now 14 and about a year ago I moved to Berea to live with my mother. In school my grades were not good at all. I was making straight F's. I got a tutor and she helped me with my homework and my grades came up. Right now I have a B average. My tutor is great—she is like a big sister. I have realized I did not write why I was abused all this time. I guess the reason I forgot is because they abused me for no reason.

Lisa Perkins grew up in a family that was desperately poor, deep in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. The basement home her family lived in flooded when it rained. She was too ashamed to bring friends home and remembers folks from the church bringing her family food and clothing. She entered college, the first ever in her family and worked with Students for Appalachia during her junior and senior years. Lisa wrote this before she graduated:

My life has been changed forever by the experiences I have had, through the people I have helped and through the service I have been part of. No longer am I without purpose. I have come from being a woman full of unfocused anger at the system, to a woman working towards a better world, focusing my anger, my frustrations, my energy towards the work that I do, the speeches that I give, the hugs that I share, and the education that I provide. I have become a servant-leader, serving those who need to be served.

Earlier this year Vanessa Brotzge, another mountain girl from a small town in eastern Kentucky was appointed by Governor Brereton Jones to the Kentucky Commission on National and Community Service. She wrote this last month.

And to think it all started here. In this dilapidated building full of screaming children with dirty faces. And often screaming staff members too. It all happened so fast, and before I knew it someone was calling me a leader and forcing me to stretch my wings and the next thing I knew I was devoting my life to full time service. Service is a way of life, and what a life it is.

Some of you might remember a piece called Of Kings and Points of Light written by Blake Jones that appeared in the NSEE newsletter. .

This was supposed to be a happy occasion. Students for Appalachia has just won the Annual Points of Light Award and we were in Washington to accept it from President Bush. At 6am, after driving all night from Berea, nine of us pulled into the Pullman Highland Hotel, charged with weary excitement. The black ballboy opened the van and was immediately greeted with the wild, musky odor of bologna sandwiches and unwashed bodies. We helped him unload our bags, and amid upturned noses in the plush lobby, trudged our way up to the third floor. I flipped on CNN to catch the morning news and was accosted by my first images of Los Angeles on fire. My stomach churned as a long-haired trucker was pulled from his truck and beaten....The blood poured from an open gash in his head and I was reminded of the stonings during Biblical times.

At the banquet, as our group of nine SFA students ate delicate finger sandwiches and listened to jazz at the venerable Mayflower Hotel in downtown D.C., I thought again of our double edged American lives. Studies in denial. We wished that the thousand dollars spent on our rooms and travel could be forwarded to the hungry and homeless just outside our door. As a middle class white student, it is ridiculous for me to try to feel empathy for the victims of south central Los Angeles. I am too far

removed. My mind cannot fathom the hopeless despair and naked rage that plague the young black man who is told to "get a job" when there are no jobs to be had.

As we headed back to Berea and our work with Students for Appalachia much of the prestige of our trip to Washington was lost to the desperation of our troubled times. We were sobered by the graphic message of just how far we have to go to create miracles of justice in America.

I have saved a very touching piece for last, excerpts from a keynote speech given by former student director Linda Bayes to a statewide conference on National Youth Service Day.

In my world, there's carpet on the floor, Daddy's without knives, teachers who say "you can", neighborhoods without gangs, and snacks to look forward to when you come home from school. In my world there's a mommy to read books before bedtime, bathtubs with bubbles and toys, and brothers you don't fear.

In Madena's world, love means nobody hits you, and occasionally, it means a hug. Brothers who are eleven and expected to raise you, and trains that run twenty feet from your house to sing you to sleep at night. Temporary mommies that are better than your own, and teachers that will probably never see beyond the dirt on your face to say, "you can".

Madena is a four year old girl with blond hair and blue eyes. Last week she told me she loved me for the first time as I carried her up the driveway to her house. Tears welled in my eyes as she looked up into the night sky and said, "Oh Linda, don't you wish 'em stars were brighter so we could see 'em better?" Seems a little thing, but what amazed me so much was that this little child, who has suffered more in her four years than any of us here, was able to love and appreciate something most of us take for granted. As I walked back down the driveway I thought to myself, "How much I could learn from this little girl."

There is a difference between my world and Madena's world. There are some things about her life I will never understand, that I will never experience. But there is a bridge that can be built to bring our worlds together, and that bridge is built through service.

I want to leave you with a challenge today. Make yourself listen to the little girl who has a speech impediment but a whole world to share. Make yourself vulnerable to a child's pain that you can't completely stop. Lay your pride down at the feet of a seventy year old woman who chooses to live in a house where her own feces lay around in buckets, where she is content to be. Do not pass by this other world. Don't give up building the bridge for fear of what lay on the other side. Because if you do then I will always be in my world and Madena will always be in hers, and two lives will never be changed. I challenge you to make a commitment not to allow the wealth of love and knowledge within you to go unshared, or let the wealth of love and knowledge within someone else to go unnoticed. Go into their unsafe, insecure world, and show them how they too, can build their own bridges.

Now you know what keeps me connected to the academy.