

Reporting for duty

BY KIM MARSHALL

During my senior year in college, the U.S. was waging an ugly, immoral war in Southeast Asia, and I knew my draft board would come looking for me right after graduation. I considered registering as a conscientious objector, but mine wasn't a Quaker-like opposition to all wars, just a passionate opposition to this one. A sympathetic doctor offered to get me a medical deferment based on my occasionally rapid heartbeat, but this seemed like a cop-out; I was basically healthy. I thought about joining the Peace Corps or Vista, fleeing to Canada, or refusing induction (as Muhammad Ali had done in 1967), but those options involved leaving the Boston area or going to jail — and I wanted to stay close to the woman I loved, who was in her junior year at a nearby college.

At the time, most draft boards were giving deferments for work with disadvantaged students, so I wondered, *What about teaching?* Up to that point, I had no interest in being a teacher. Why would I do that when I'd spent the last 17 years in classrooms, and very few of my teachers had inspired me to follow in their footsteps? I had written a college paper on the struggle for community control in Boston schools, but it was about politics, not pedagogy. I saw myself following my father and older sister into international work — something glamorous, with global impact. But at this point my options were limited, so that summer I took certification courses at a local university, completed my student teaching, and mailed out a slew of applications. As rejection letters rolled in, I was ordered to show up for an Army physical. They pronounced me fit to serve.

In mid-August, as my desperation mounted, I heard about teaching vacancies at the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood. I called the school late on a Friday afternoon and got a busy signal. I dialed again on my rotary phone. Busy. Dialed again. Busy. Ten more times. Finally it rang and the principal, on his way out of the office, picked up. Yes, he was looking for a teacher in one of the school's self-contained 6th-grade classrooms, and I should come in for an interview. On August 20, 1969, I signed a provisional contract, with a salary of \$5,570, and my draft board gave me a teaching deferment. One day short of being drafted, I enlisted in a different form of national service.

Into the classroom

The day after Labor Day, up in Room 326 at the King School, 25 African-American students in Grade 6E checked out their new teacher. White, a little on the young side, but caring, well-educated, and idealistic. This was going to be great!

Well, not so much. After a brief honeymoon in which students humored me and my amphitheater desk arrangement and rah-rah lectures, classroom management became an issue. Somehow, that summer certification program hadn't taught me how to organize a group of energetic, savvy 6th graders and to win their attention and respect. And, sadly, many of my students had seen this movie before — a well-meaning teacher with very little idea how to teach, much less how to manage.

Privately, I howled at my misfortune. Why did the kids behave so well for the stern, uncaring teachers down

the hall, but not for me? I thought, *Hey, I'm a good guy! I care about your education!* For the first time in my privileged life, I found myself regularly losing my temper. I also found that shouting did no good. Not only did the kids continue to misbehave, but they teased me about how red my face got when I was angry. One time, I panicked and called for help on the intercom, inadvertently broadcasting the shrieks and cries of my out-of-control classroom to staff and visitors in the school's main office. (Nobody came to my rescue; they'd seen this movie as well.) Another time, a student dumped an entire ream of paper out the window, littering the neighborhood as far as the wind blew.

A few months in, I invited a professor from the Harvard Graduate School of Education to observe my class. Now, suddenly, the kids were on their best behavior, listening quietly and sitting still while an imposing university professor watched from the back of the room. Afterward, he shared his appraisal: He hadn't seen "one iota of learning" taking place. Clearly, discipline wasn't my only problem.

In the spring, I came up with a new discipline system, which I called *Law and Order in Grade 6E*. (Few students got my ironic reference to Richard Nixon, whose frequent calls to restore "law and order" in inner-city neighborhoods served as a dog whistle meant to scare white voters.) The new system, heavy on classroom rules and punishments, helped tamp down the misbehavior a bit, but the struggle continued. Moments of genuine teaching and learning continued to be rare.

A second chance

In late June, I staggered out of the year with my sense of efficacy shot to hell. I wrote a candid article for my college alumni magazine about the year, and to my surprise, it won an

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award. An anonymous letter to the magazine gave me a less favorable review: *Your article clearly shows that whites do NOT belong in Black schools. With all your woes and problems, you forget that the 25 Black students you “taught” have had another year robbed from them (and people wonder why when they become adults they can’t “make it” in society). It is unfortunate that you had to “gain your experience” by stealing 25 children’s lives for a year. However, Honky — your day will come!*

It’s hard to imagine a more forceful call to do better — or leave the profession. Getting out didn’t seem like an option, since the draft still loomed and my love was still in Boston. Fortunately, though, I did get another at-bat. Thanks to the teaching shortage that continued into the fall of 1970, the Boston public schools renewed my provisional contract. I had to make this work.

As my second year began, I adopted the “learning stations” system I’d observed at a suburban school over the summer, and the advantages were immediately clear. With kids working in groups most of the day, I spent much less time providing whole-class instruction, my weak point. Also, inspired by two colleagues on the 7th-grade corridor, I sat down every night and wrote six or seven worksheets (on purple ditto masters) and ran them off first thing in the morning. Boston’s rather traditional curriculum provided some guidance, but I did a lot of freelancing, writing up stories from the news (there was no shortage of national and international drama in 1970) and weaving in kids’ names and incidents from the classroom.

Colleagues and administrators who peeked into my room were struck by the productive, low-key hum of learning, and soon the new principal (the man who hired me had been promoted) started bringing visitors up to observe. Energized, I started taking black-and-white photos of my students, made 8x10 prints, and

posted them around the room, to general delight. At the same time, I put up large posters of Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, and Martin Luther King Jr., trying my best to be a woke white ally. I also began taking groups of four or five students on Saturday field trips around the city. We climbed to the top of Blue Hill, went to museums,

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and visited Logan Airport, where we were allowed to tour the cockpits of planes. I was walking on air, delighted that I was finally building positive relationships with kids and their families — at least on days when they didn’t bring me crashing back to earth. One time, I told a misbehaving student that he might be excluded from that Saturday’s outing if he didn’t straighten up. He delivered the obligatory response: “I don’t want to go on your cheap field trip, anyway.”

The curriculum I created was engaging and rigorous, but a lot of my language arts and social studies content was pretty random — the Kennedy assassination, movie plots, dramatic news stories. It was great fun for me and the kids, but because it wasn’t anchored in a K-12 sequence, the 7th-grade teachers who received my students didn’t have a clear and viable curriculum to build on. And my reliance on worksheets kept me from developing a weak area in my repertoire, facilitating whole-class discussion.

All these years later, I understand that a discerning supervisor or coach could have pointed this out and

helped me improve, perhaps suggesting to me and my colleagues on the 6th-grade corridor that we give grade-wide assessments and discuss the results together. Sadly, the notion of a professional learning community didn’t emerge until decades later. Truth be told, though, if our principal had suggested this idea, I’m sure we would have resisted it, refusing to give up our measure of “academic freedom.”

That spring, my draft board wanted to know if my urban teaching deferment was really justified. The principal, bless her heart, wrote a letter saying I was “irreplaceable.” That was gratifying and served as a counterpoint to my father’s unspoken query: What was I going to do when I grew up? Gradually, my attitude toward teaching was morphing — no longer just a way to avoid the draft, it occurred to me that this might even be my life’s work. A couple of years later, when the draft was no longer a threat, I knew I was committed to education. I was at the school for 11 years, developing a healthy synergy among the different parts of my professional life: writing curriculum every day, constantly refining my pedagogy, taking photos of the kids, giving workshops on learning stations, and writing articles and books about my teaching.

21st-century challenges

I don’t envy young people today, graduating from college and trying to find their way in a world turned upside down. But the many challenges they face may compel them to take action. The Vietnam War, with all its horror, forced many of my cohort to think about serving the nation in different ways. Today, in the midst of a pandemic that is widening achievement gaps in every school, teaching is critically important work, especially with students who have been set back by school closures, trauma at home, and the challenges of remote learning. We still need young people who are ready to serve. ■