

Ralph's Stories

In Memoriam
Ralph Parish
University of Missouri-Kansas City

Ralph Parish passed away in the spring of 1998 while working in a school in the Kansas City area. Our colleague had been on the UM-Kansas City faculty for several years and was a presence who influenced many to focus attention on the children and youth in urban schools. For him, as for many of us, schooling has not been the access to the benefits of mainstream United States. The rationale many give to students, "Learn so you can get ahead" was and is an unfilled promise for many.

He had prospective administrators write stories about the conditions, events, and lives in schools. He desperately wanted the stories to change as the culture of the schools changed. Ralph contributed several stories his students created. To the students in Ralph's project, "Thanks for sharing your stories. " I have selected those that seem to me express the heart and soul of Ralph's passion about schools -- their failures and, most importantly, the hope they offer.

Directions: In the table below, the reader can click on the title and proceed immediately to the story. At the end of the story is a marker that will return the page to this table. Alternatively, the reader can scroll through the page. I hope you enjoy reading these stories and struggling with the issues they raise individually and collectively.

James E. Walter
Executive Secretary
July, 1998

Mary	Chantilly	Piss on You	Breeze
An Agreement	Teacher Lounge Talk	The Uncle	The Custodian and the Teacher

MARY

Mary is a student in the 7th Grade at Eons Middle School. Eons is an 80 year old building that was first a high school, converted to a Jr. High School and recently changed to a middle school. While the school has been maintained well, it has not been modernized to any great extent. Eons is located in an area of the city that was once a middle class and professional neighborhood, but slowly the neighborhood has changed so that now it is predominately a working class and poverty class neighborhood. The school is 70% White and 30% children of color with the majority of these being African American.

One day Mary raised her hand during the time the teacher was explaining a new step in math. Mary asked to go to the rest room. The teacher, Ms. Thompson, said, " Wait a little, Mary, until I am through explaining the lesson." Mary said "OK." Shortly, Mary jumped up and said, "I don't have to put with this *****. I'm going to the bath room. Ms. Thompson stepped in front of Mary and asked if she is not feeling well. Mary said, "Yes. I am sick of you." When she pushed Ms. Thompson aside, she tripped and fell to the floor. Mary left the room, went to the rest room, and then called her father. There had been no previous hostility or problems between Mary and Ms. Thompson or between Mary and any other teacher.

The father came to school and accused Ms. Thompson of embarrassing his daughter and endangering her health. The principal, in the second year of being a principal, was informed of the incident. Ms. Thompson, a teacher of 23 years experience in the school, informed the principal that she intended to file charges against Mary for assault.

The principal went to the classroom, while the class was still in session, and asked Ms. Thompson to step out. The principal asked the students in the class what they had observed. The students essentially told the story that Ms. Thompson had told the principal. Upon leaving the room the principal said to Ms. Thompson, "Well, I guess I believe your version. We'll deal with the discipline. However, you will not file an assault charge. If you do the school district will not support you." Mary was suspended for three days.

Within two weeks after her return to school, Mary pushed a handicapped student down stairs and was suspended for ten days.

You are part of a group that has been asked to review this incident and others like it and make recommendations to the district for any actions or changes in policy that might improve the situation.

Chantilly

Chantilly is an elementary teacher at Going To The Sun Elementary. For additional compensation she supervises the extended detention in the school. For students who have minor disciplinary incidents or who are first offenders there is an after school detention called "long office detentions." This detention ends at 5:30 in the evening and parents are informed that they must make arrangements for picking up their children. It is not unusual for parents to be 15 -20, minutes late in picking up their child. Chantilly is paid only until 5:30.

On one occasion a parent had not picked up a 6th Grade female student by 6 pm Chantilly began calling the home at 5:50 pm. There was no answer. The student said that they had just moved and did not know any neighbors, nor did she have a house key so that she could be taken home. By 6:30 Chantilly called the administrator in charge and asked what to do. The administrator said to keep calling home and to tell the mother that if there were any more incidents, the student would be given out-of-school suspension. Calls were made every ten minutes and by 7 pm the mother answered the phone. She had been at a mall shopping and had forgotten. The mother drove to get her daughter and was seen driving by the school. She had forgotten where the school was.

The parent was upset with the school. When Chantilly informed her of the principal's words about being suspended the next time, responded with words that Chantilly felt were rude and offensive. In short the parent told Chantilly what she could do with her threats. Chantilly informed the principal of what had occurred and the principal indicated that he "would take care if it."

Later, Chantilly learned that the principal had done nothing and had not called the parent nor had any further conversation about it.

Chantilly believes she was not supported. First, she relayed a message to a parent about suspensions and only an administrator can suspend. Secondly, she was verbally abused and

nothing was done. She has garnered much support from other teachers. There is a growing belief in the school that the principal is not supporting staff.

How would you have handled this situation? What is the underlying problem here? Does this story, as provided by Chantilly, raise an essential problem?

Piss On You

This story is about a first year white teacher and a teacher of six year's experience who taught 4th grade together in an urban school with a majority of African American students. The student involved is a 4th grade African American male who had been "in trouble" with the two teachers previously for his playground behavior.

On the occasion in question, he approached them and asked if he could go to the rest room. They told him he would have to wait until they returned to their room after recess, their normal practice. He told them that he could not wait. They told him that he would have to. He then walked behind them and began to urinate on the ground, and some splashed on their legs.

One teacher immediately took him to the principal and reported the incident. After about an hour, the student was returned to the first-year teacher's classroom and no additional action was taken. The first-year teacher and her colleague were incensed that nothing more was done. The first-year teacher resigned at the end of the first year at some expense to herself. (She had to repay a loan that would have been forgiven if she had taught two years). The other teacher remained at the school.

Who was creating the darkness here? What story do you suppose is being told around the school?

Breeze

Two years ago I had a very different 6th Hour. The sophomore cheerleaders always have health the last quarter during 6th hour. Since I was their sponsor, I thought this class would be fun. Health class can at times deal with sensitive issues, and it requires trust and caring to be able to deal with the more difficult issues. However, on the first day of class I noticed that in addition to the Sophomores there was a Senior enrolled in class. Her name was "Breeze." She was the school photographer and had Mohawk styled spiked hair. She was taking health as a senior because she was part of the gifted program and had not had time during her Sophomore year. "Should be interesting," I thought.

Breeze wanted to know, "what kind of a class is this." It was explained that this was a sophomore cheerleader health class, but that others are welcome to take it. "Cheerleaders? You have to be kidding me!" One student asked, "Since you are a senior, why haven't you taken health already?" Breeze said that since she was a gifted student, she hadn't had time.

The first class lesson or two is devoted to developing the curriculum by having students identify needs they have for learning about one another and health. One cheerleader indicated that

learning about how to accept one another was very important. Being non-judgmental in a judgmental world was also included in their list of needs. After class that first day, Breeze stayed after class and indicated that she was surprised at how well she had been accepted. One day Breeze was absent because of senior skip day. The students in the class remarked about how much they missed her and the ideas she brought to class. They remarked about how much they had learned about stereotyping and how harmful it was.

Later in the quarter, we discussed depression and suicide and it turned very emotional. I shared that I had a relative with Bi-polar disease who had tried to commit suicide during her senior year. What had occurred in this class had enabled me as the teacher to share this story. As a result, all of the students opened up and shared personal things with the class. All of a sudden Breeze stood up and told the class how sorry she was for misjudging "cheerleading types" all of her life. She told the class that she had learned more about life and people in this class than she had all of the other 13 years she had been in school.

She invited the class to her graduation open house and most of the class was able to go. Her "cheerleader friends" were a shock to her other friends. She told them that these girls were "cool" and that settled that. Her parents told me later that they were aware of how this class had influenced Breeze who had become more accepting of others. "More important than any subject she ever studied", they said.

An Agreement

Edna and I had an agreement. When she had a student, particularly a minority male student who became so disruptive in her class that she had to send him out, she could bring him down the hall to me and I would give a time out.

Recently, on a day when I had a major piece of work to be done for the district, in a rush as usual, she brought a "Jahnnie" to the room. He was clearly a student of mixed race and very attractive. The two female journalism students that were helping me noticed that right away. I told Edna, "I'm sorry, not today. I don't have time. I'm very busy." She asked again, and I said that this work had to be done.

She came to me and said, "He called me a MF B.... You know what will happen to him if I send him to the office."

"Ok," I said. "Let him stay."

I turned to the student and said, "I really don't have time to talk with you today, can you just find something to work on?"

He said, "Can I help."

Startled, I thought for a moment and then explained about some work I had to do on the computer. He said, "Ok, I can do that." And he did, and his work was as good as any of my journalism students I had trained.

After some time he finished the work I gave him. I turned to him and asked, "Tell me your story."

We had been discussing this approach in one of my Ph.D. classes.

He then told me that his younger brother had shot and killed their mother and the boyfriend in bed with her. Later, the brother had been assigned to the juvenile system, but had just recently been assigned to an adult prison. His brother was of mixed race and attractive, also. He knew what must be happening to him.

"You love your brother don't you?" I asked.

He nodded with tears in his eyes. "My mother loved us both. I don't know why he was so angry." He was not living with his father whom he had not known before all this happened.

"You loved your mother too didn't you?"

Again he nodded and then told me the story of when he was little and his mother was getting an associate degree in computers and would take him with her when she went to the lab to work.

"That's where you learned about computers isn't it?" I asked. He nodded.

We talked about his anger and outburst and how we would work on that. He then went on to finish his classes for the day. We will be talking more and Edna now understands. What I wondered about later was why didn't we know about this? He was clearly a bright capable student. I can see that anyone would want him as a student. He told me that I was the first one he had ever talked to about what had happened.

I wondered about two things. What is there about schools that makes it difficult for most to talk about these things with students? And, what would it be like if we had a school full of adults who only asked, "Tell me your story," when something happened out of the ordinary and then listened.

Teacher Lounge Talk

Listen to three experienced (more than ten years) teachers talking in a faculty lounge.

"I wish we could go back to the days when kids behaved."

"Ah, that was fun. These kids today don't care."

"They're crazy"

"What do you mean crazy?"

"They are nuts. You know, bonkers!"

"Boy, that's for sure."

"Arthur, these kids just don't care."

"All of the kids?"

"No, not all. But there are 4-5 in every room. I really mean in every room. How am I supposed to teach? There is no discipline."

"You know, students just get up and leave the classroom. I can't chase them and leave the other 24 kids unattended."

"What do you do?"

"We send a note to the office stating what time they left the room"

If you had to guess, what type of school would this most likely be? Given these teacher stories, what are the barriers to developing this school into a learning culture?

The Uncle

This story is about a Caucasian 4th grade teacher, an African-American 4th grade student and the African- American mother. It was the first day of 4th grade for the student. She was a beautiful girl and a leader among the girls. According to the teacher, however, the student had a bad attitude in class.

"She acts like a smart Alec," the teacher informed the principal.

She would arrive late almost every day. Her home work was almost never done, and she would not bring her books or have supplies. She often fell asleep in class. Whenever the teacher asked her about these things she would sass her back, stomp her feet, give her the finger, or stand at the teacher's desk with her arms folded and refuse to sit down.

After many such incidents, the teacher referred the student to "step 2" discipline (time-out in the classroom). The student often refused to do this. Therefore, she would be sent to "step 3" (time-out in another classroom). If the student was disruptive, then she would be sent to the office. The teacher and principal worked out a plan. Every 15 minutes in class that the student was good, she would receive a smiley face and if she was disruptive or non-responsive she would receive a minus. There was a brief improvement and then things returned to what they had been when the student was receiving all minuses. The student was referred to the counselor at the Positive Actions Center (PAC) and to the Student Assistance Team (SAT). The teacher was in contact with the mother, but the mother felt the teacher did not like her daughter and was mean to her. The records showed that this student had been exhibiting this behavior since second grade. The mother asked that the student be moved to another teacher.

The younger brother in 1st grade was also having trouble. He seemed to be crying a lot. By December, the student was moved to a classroom where there was an African-American teacher. The problems seemed to decrease. In the Spring of that school year, some of the other students came to the teacher and said that "_____ says her vagina hurts and she can't sit down." The teacher started to write a note to the nurse when the mother showed up at the door bringing the daughter something she had forgotten. The teacher asked about what the girl had said, and the mother said she had been to the doctor and he told her it was just part of growing up. The teacher took no further action.

During the next school year the brother mentioned to his teacher about the "uncle" who lived with them and how he was treating them. The police were called and discovered that the man had been molesting them before school for some time and that the mother knew it. The children were placed in a foster home.

What might you do to avoid such a situation if you were a principal?

The Custodian and the Teacher

A special education teacher was forced to do much of her teaching in a hall area of the school, because there were no classrooms for her. She felt that the custodian who was assigned to clean the hall where she had to do her teaching often did not clean it well. She had asked him on more than one occasion to do a better job. The custodian became belligerent with the teacher and indicated that the hall area in question was being cleaned as good as it was going to be. The teacher then reported the conflict to the principal and asked that something be done.

The custodian became angered about being reported and began threatening the teacher with bodily harm unless she stopped her complaining and reporting him to the principal. He refused to do any more cleaning than he had. The teacher made a second report to the principal.

The custodian attacked the teacher verbally and pushed her in a classroom near the hallway in question. The teacher went a third time to the principal and indicated her concern about the work and the custodian's threats. The principal asked the teacher to wait until he had time to investigate. The custodian cornered the teacher in the faculty lounge and attempted to harm her. Other faculty intervened and separated them. The teacher called her husband to come sit with her on the job until the principal acted and did something to rectify the situation.

The principal had security come and remove the husband and then scheduled a conference with the teacher and custodian. The custodian claimed that the teacher had spoken to him with demeaning language and had trashed the hall on purpose to make more work for him. "That's why I am angry," he said.

The teacher received a written reprimand in her personnel file for endangering students by having her husband come to school. (He may have caused a conflict or even come with a weapon, although he did neither.) The custodian was sent home for a day and given a letter of reprimand.

What other information might be important to ask or know? What is your view of how it was handled?