

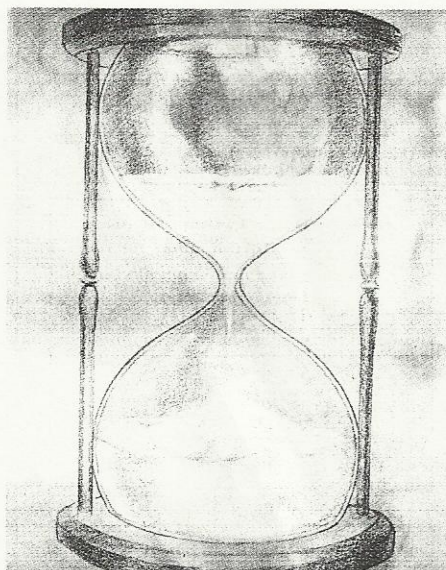
A SINGLE SMILE

One minute that defined my career

It was one minute into the first day of the new school year, and already a tiny little second grader in the first row was chattering away with her neighbor. She was saying something about how I was her first “man teacher,” how strange it all seemed to her, and that she hoped I wasn’t “mean.” She thought I wasn’t, but the girl next to her had yet to be convinced. She was staring up at me, eyes wide, apparently wondering how this frowning stranger at the front of the classroom was going to react to all this chit-chat.

I was harboring a terrible secret. This wasn’t just the first day of the new school year—it was the first day of my career. And, like many beginning teachers, I was being introduced to the profession by the sink-or-swim method. I’d simply been given a pat on the back and sent off to my doom with the words, “Keep the desks in rows, don’t smile until Christmas, and make them respect you. They’ll learn to like you later.”

Despite my confident facade, I was worried that the students would discover my secret. After all, I was a *rookie* teacher, while they were *veteran* students. They had the power to sabotage my lessons with endless questions, generate intolerable noise, or go home and tell stories that



would turn their parents against me. There was no doubt they could quickly drive me to tyranny.

And here in the front row this tiny little girl was talking.

I wanted to run next door and ask for help. But I had been warned: I had to be tough. I knew the next minute could determine the classroom behavior for the entire year. Would I react sternly? Would I speak with authority? What I didn’t know was that the next minute would define my career.

Over the course of that first year, I was to be challenged at every turn. Kids who couldn’t read, second language learners, and children with anger issues combined with my own inexperience to make for some

rough days. Amee, the ultra-talkative second grader, was often a difficult case. Many times, I soothed her in a tearful moment.

Today, Amee is no longer a tiny little girl. Though she’s experienced more than her share of hardship during the last eight years, she’s still just as charming and talkative as ever. I know this because the relationship we began forming during that first minute has proven hard to break. This March—as with every March past—when my family and I take her out to celebrate her birthday, we’ll do so under the pretense that I’m staying in touch with Amee to protect her welfare. In part, that is so. Yet, in part, my motives are far more selfish. I stay in touch with Amee—and so many other children like her—because it brings me joy.

Whether it is singing karaoke with Alyssa or attending Mischa’s bar mitzvah, these are the teaching rewards I’ve come to live for. While not the stuff of predicates and vowel blends, these are the friendships that make my career worthwhile.

Maybe that’s why I always make sure I smile during that first minute—and once or twice before Christmas. ■

.....
Mack Lewis teaches third grade in Sams Valley, Oregon.