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From Seed to Apple

Inspirational stories and lessons learned
from Washington's 2016 Teachers of the Year





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The names of all students featured in this volume have been changed unless permission for their use has been obtained.

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Inspirational stories and lessons learned
from Washington's 2016 Teachers of the Year

Foreword

I learned quickly as Washington's Teacher of the Year that there are many great teachers in our state who should be celebrated, revered, and listened to. A handful of those teachers are represented here, but there are many more.

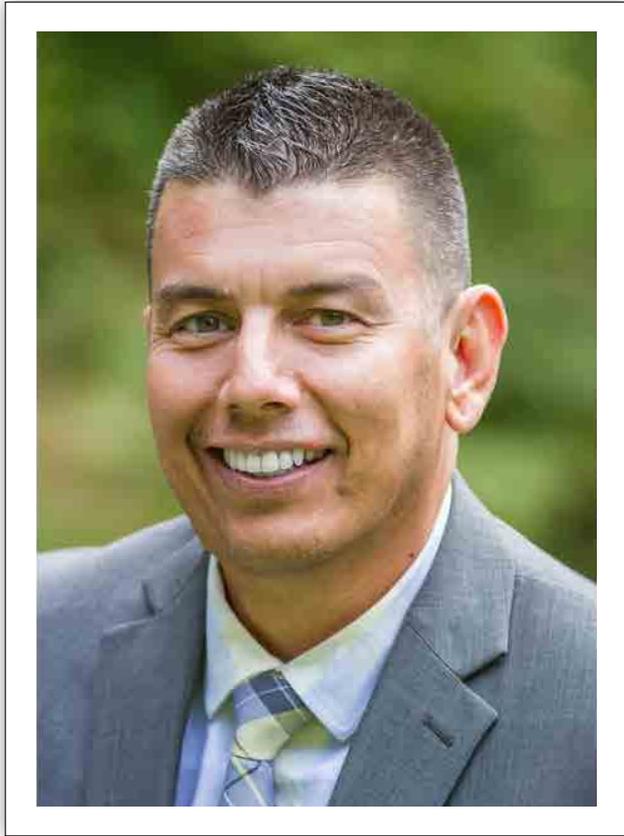
The teachers in this collection don't just teach kids in a subject area—they inspire colleagues, support families, and help kids face unimaginable challenges. Like so many thousands of teachers across our state they provide inspiration, compassion, and empathy on a daily basis. It's time for us to start paying attention to their stories. These stories from real classrooms with real kids matter to all of us and should serve as a guide for how to improve education in our state.

The teachers in this collection are part of the Washington Teacher Advisory Council—a group committed to spreading the voice of accomplished teachers. You can learn more about our work at: www.k12.wa.us/watac.

The student success stories in *From Seed to Apple* will inspire you to believe in the power of the teacher. Prepare to be moved. Prepare to be inspired. Prepare to see the hearts of great teachers spread open on the page. You will find that the heart of a teacher is huge.

Lyon Terry

2015 Washington Teacher of the Year
Lawton Elementary
Seattle School District



Omar Escalera

ESD 123 Regional Teacher of the Year
McLoughlin Middle School
Pasco School District

Looking at Myself in the Mirror

“Nine tenths of education is encouragement.”

– Anatole France

I have had the pleasure of working with many amazing dual language students over the past nine years. I have learned a lot from them, and I would like to believe that they have learned some things from me. There is always that one class that you hold dear to your heart. My first fourth grade class is that one for me.

This particular class was the first dual language class in the Pasco School District, and they were unique individuals – a great academic and social bunch. Among these students was a skinny, bald, and full of swagger kid named Rolando AKA “Rolo.”

I grew up in the streets of Ciudad Juarez, a violent and dangerous border town, and I had been around tough individuals. When I began to look at Rolo’s records, I could tell that this 10-year-old kid was tough. I hadn’t seen a file that thick in elementary. I saw suspensions, referrals, absence reports, failing grades on report cards, low assessment scores in both English and Spanish, and even copies of police records for gang affiliation and violence. I wanted desperately to make an impact on Rolo’s life. I wanted to get his parents on board. Coming from poverty and having escaped gang life myself, I felt like I could reach him and collaborate with his family.

During that entire fourth grade year I set up tutoring sessions for Rolo, made multiple home visits, tried to have heart-to-heart conversations and positively encourage this kid. Nothing worked. I changed approaches. Instead of trying to understand him I was going to challenge him with high expectations, teach him work and study habits, and demand excellence. Again nothing. I was mentally and emotionally exhausted. All my other

students were thriving and meeting or exceeding expectations. They were killing our district's benchmark assessments and always outperformed peers in common assessments.

As we got ready to take the state test that year, I knew that my students were ready. I looked at each one in the eye and said: "You are ready. You will pass." When my eyes met Rolo's, I looked away. I knew he wasn't ready. I knew he wasn't going to pass. I did not say anything encouraging or positive to him.

My fourth grade class took the test in English that year. Even though they had never done math in English they performed better than the state average. I looked at Rolo's scores. He had failed miserably in Math. I don't know the exact moment when I realized that I had failed him, but I knew it was because I gave up on him. I worried too much about our performance on the state test, and I had not honored my commitment to teach ALL students. For a whole year, I punished myself emotionally and vowed to never feel that way again.

After two years a 6th grade dual language math and science position opened at McLoughlin Middle School. I jumped all over the opportunity because I knew that I would get to work with that same special fourth grade class. I owed Rolo. We had something to prove.

At the start of our year, I knew what I had to do. By now Rolo had a reputation for violence, gang affiliation, defiance, and drug use. Nobody wanted him. The first day of class I asked Rolo to stay after.

"I am sorry," I said. "I want you to know that I will not allow you to fail. I will not be ok with you not trying to learn."

"Esca, what are you talking about? What are you sorry for?"

Rolo's reaction confused me. I told him that in fourth grade I had given up on him and towards the end of the year I just stopped trying.

"Esca, it's ok man. School isn't for me. Besides, you were the only teacher that went to look for me at home. You called. You made me stay and finish work. I hated you. I even wanted to break your windows, but then I didn't mind so I didn't do anything. I just want to know why you cared so much."

I explained to Rolo that growing up I struggled with English. My family was very poor. My dad drank too much, and I would get hit for no reason. I could feel his guard slowly drop as our conversation evolved. He asked me about my gang involvement and how I had gotten out. He wanted to know how I was able to go to college and how much money I made a year. He began to trust me, and I began to care for him. We created a bond, a relationship that extended far beyond the classroom walls. That year Rolo scored 125 points better on the state test than the previous year and he passed! The year ended, and students moved on.

Last spring, I was walking through the hallways of our high school, and I heard a familiar nickname: "Esca!" Only students from that fourth grade class called me that. It was Rolo. He gave me the family handshake.

"I want you to know that I am getting C's and B's, and I am on track to graduate high school. I want to become an electrician."

"Congratulations my man," I said. I looked at him right in his eyes and this time, and I didn't look away. "I am proud of you Rolo. Keep it up. Do not give up. You are a fighter. You remind me of myself."

He stepped back a little. "For reals?"

"Yes you do!" I said with a big smile on my face.

I was suddenly looking at myself in the mirror. This capable but misunderstood young man was dealt a bad hand in life. He had been cast aside time and time again, even by me. I am glad Rolo forgave me and had the courage to still consider me a part of his life.

I will never forget you, Rolo. I would like you to know that you transformed me as a teacher and a human being.



Theresa Holland-Schmid

Olympic ESD 114
Regional Teacher of the Year
Kingston High School
North Kitsap School District

Teaching is an Act of Hope

Learning is hope realized

Hope. Is it trust? Faith? Yearning? Blind idealism?

Teaching has taught me that hope is a mindset; that everyone and everything is precious. No one is disposable or dispensable. As a teacher, that means I must believe that every student deserves to be served and sometimes can be saved.

Her body was rigid with anger. Her top and bottom lips were ringed with hoop piercings. The F word was a substitute modifier for “very,” and sometimes just a spoken sigh. Brash and unrefined, the eighteen-year-old showed up at our small “last chance” alternative school (Renaissance in Bremerton), not ready to drop out. She wasn’t thinking about a diploma, although we were. She was looking for a place to belong. In two years, she earned a diploma just before aging out at twenty-one.

Her external metamorphosis included dentures, removal of piercings, and skin that glowed with sobriety. Her internal metamorphosis included anger management, grief counseling, and eyes that sparkled with a can-do attitude. The most striking of changes was the softness in her smile—washed clean of contempt. Her graduation was a chain of helplessness broken—she was the first in her family to graduate from high school. Her mother did not show up, just as she hadn’t visited her in rehab. That day, our staff celebrated that our efforts had salvaged Vanessa from the wreckage of her life.

My principal set up her first job.

One month into her new life, she attempted suicide.

My principal and I shed tears together.

Our memories, both hard and sweet, were revisited in mourning. The fight

I broke up. Our visits to Vanessa in rehab. Reciting her poem on Open-Mic night. The learning to learn, then learning to write, to study, to grow, to hope for a future. What essential process did we omit? She was like an art sculpture that cracked in the kiln. Defeated, I turned to prayer. Teaching is an act of hope, and I was drained. I needed to be filled up.

I received an answer. It was simple, tender, and profoundly moving. At that very moment, my vocation was indelibly changed. “You gave Vanessa 360 days of love, belonging, and empowerment. Whatever she faces, she can draw strength from those days. Focus on the present.”

Focusing on the present has sustained me throughout my twenty-three years of teaching. Too many of my students have died: some murdered, some by tragedy, some by illness. One student who was terminal with cancer just wanted a diploma. Not only did we serve her in her final months, we served her friends who grappled with death and its life-altering effect. Some of my students returned to prison, or addiction, or retreated from view. Some of my students went on to college, apprenticeships, and into the workforce. Some are electricians, nurses, managers, welders, youth counselors, and artists. By focusing on the present, I teach with hope. By treating them as precious, I teach them that they are needed by the world, and must prepare for their role. By validating who they are, I teach them that they can learn. I teach them to hope.

Toby could have easily “slipped through the cracks.” He navigated the school halls of a large comprehensive high school with his invisibility cloak. Quietly, he struggled with reading and writing. However, I reached him with music and graphics and unbeknownst to me, my announcing that every student can revise an essay as many times as needed. Resiliency, I told my class, is learning to endure frustration and building up stamina in the exertion of mental labor.

One morning, he asked if he could earn a “real” grade, in exchange for his IEP stipulated P or F. After many drafts, Toby presented his power point—a

compare/contrast essay that had to utilize humorous devices—to his class. Shyly, he stood before the group. The chuckles began. The audience oohed and aahed over his clever formatting style. His legs, once a bit shaky, were now sturdy tree trunks. He was grounded, confident, and in control. His peers were engaged, and Toby was no longer invisible. He lifted the P as well, earning a B on his essay. Teaching with hope, I am open to their hope for themselves.

Christine was charged with attempted murder. When she first came to me, she hid behind a curtain of unkempt hair, drowning in the shame of incest. She barely knew how to write. We started with poems, and one word in front of another, her phrases became sentences. I had one year with her. For one year, I taught her with hope. Then, she was arrested.

The next time I saw her was at her hearing in which a judge would decide whether to transfer her to adult criminal court. I testified on her behalf. She was the only one of four that was not tried as an adult. Once sentenced, she went into a juvenile detention center. Several years later, I received a letter from her—she had just been released at twenty-one. Her letter was written in sentences and paragraphs, evidence a teacher picked up where our staff had left off. In the letter she thanked me—for seeing and believing the good in her. We gave Christine 150 days of hope, and like a well, she drew from it. Teaching is an act of hope, and learning is that hope realized.



Michael Werner

Northwest ESD 189
Regional Teacher of the Year
Granite Falls High School
Granite Falls School District

Beyond Content

The other half of education

I wasn't surprised when my student, Jenna, won a State and National Essay Contest. Her essay described her experience as part of my "ShopGirls" Eco Marathon Car Team. It was also not a surprise to read what she explained as being the most important thing that she and her team mates learned from their efforts. Experiences helped them relate to academic subjects and see the real-world application. Furthermore, it helped them understand and learn from failure. "If we screwed up it's because we made a mistake, not because of our gender."

ShopGirls was the first all-girl team, nationally, to design and build a prototype vehicle and compete in a Global Fuel Efficiency competition for Universities and High Schools from North and South Americas.

The Eco Car classes began in 2009. My now late Career and Technical Education Director Vervia asked me if I could create a program for "women in non-traditional roles." When I decided what we would do, she successfully wrote a grant for \$10,000 to get us started. Nine girls joined up, little knowing what they were about to take on. Some expressed an interest to work in engineering fields. Some wanted to be part of something uniquely different. Some loved math and wanted to test their abilities. Others wanted to be part of a group bonding experience and have fun. One girl said she just wanted to go to Texas and eat barbeque (the event was being held in Houston).

Renowned sculptor Alexander Calder said, "If you can't imagine things, you can't make them." I have to admit it was tough envisioning that first class of nine girls actually ready to compete that year. We also had a co-ed team that would complete in a different classification at the same event.

What lay ahead were two projects of enormous complexity with stringent

technical inspection and compliance rules. It would be a challenge – even for those with some practical knowledge of mechanics and engineering. But the project also required work in aerodynamics, machining, composite materials, electrical systems, fabrication (metal and fiberglass), welding, braking and steering systems, ergonomics, and safety and driving strategies.

The teams would have to be at school at 6:30AM each day and pull together many different kinds of thinking styles and abilities. They were school valedictorians and students on the verge of dropping out. They each had responsibilities and were accountable for different parts of the car. It was necessary to interface and communicate with any number of outside institutions in order to order parts, research questions, and find answers. They had to dive in to using welding equipment and all manner of tools.

As their teacher, I was learning to see concepts through the lens of different life experiences. The girls told me that bonding layers of fiberglass together by sanding them was similar to having your fingernails buffed and sanded before you put on the polish.

They were tested to articulate the technical aspects of their project in a variety of media settings. At the “Aspen Ideas Festival” they were interviewed by a writer for “The Atlantic” magazine. National Geographic and Shell Energy produced videos of them doing outreach at a local elementary school. They were famous.

One week before we travelled to the competition, we met at 1:30AM in the morning to load the car onto the trailer bound for Houston. With screams and tears of joy, they drove their lime green and pink car, appropriately named “Iron Maiden”, for the first time. They had done it!

In Houston, our goal was to pass tech and safety inspection (we did), have a valid run (we had a few) and achieve a decent mileage goal (we made 520 mpg), a major achievement, and a classification win (they bested a university team).

When Jenna wrote her essay, she spoke poignantly of being confronted for the first time in her life with the risk of failure. She described how she and her team struggled and pressed forward doing things over and over and over again until they were exhausted and until they finally got them right. She wrote of their anxiety. They knew they were underdogs in the competition. But these girls from a small rural high school bonded together and were determined to make it happen. “By chancing failure we had achieved something great,” she said. “We all reached beyond what we thought we could do, working on creating something that was nothing in the beginning.”

Of that class, four young women went into engineering programs. Two were accepted to MIT, one was accepted to Stanford, and another to the engineering program at WSU. Jenna, who found that engineering is not her passion, is studying on scholarship with NOAA. Others went on to secure good jobs with local companies.

As an educator, I am frustrated to see CTE pushed more and more to the fringes of education. It is there where the important content of what students learn in academics comes alive in application. The life skills learned in CTE classrooms become the backbone of a student’s ability to implement their knowledge in a highly complex and challenging world. MIT and Stanford both wrote in their acceptance letters that it was the participation in the Eco Teams project that led to the selection out of many outstanding academic candidates.

My students didn’t just learn to build a vehicle. They learned to be resourceful and work with others who think differently. They learned what is inherent in following through and developing ideas – to reach out for answers and solutions and interact with other organizations and people. Most importantly, they became comfortable with and insightful about the value of overcoming failure as an important component of success – something they will encounter over and over again in the real world.

Six industry partners and some terrific parents have dedicated themselves to partnering in our program for the past seven years as mentors. Vervia's passion is still remembered fondly by all those students. What she started left a valuable legacy that continues to inspire new generations of high school youth and show what is possible with imagination, hands-on learning, and the willingness to risk failure.





Ashley Leneway

North Central ESD 171
Regional Teacher of the Year
Morgen Owings Elementary
Lake Chelan School District

The Girl in the Photograph

Rising above when life happens

Kat came into my life in my second year of teaching. As I prepared our classroom for the incoming group of second graders, I sifted through their photographs from the previous year, trying to memorize unique qualities and features to help me learn their names.

I stood by my door that first day, and I greeted each face by name. An unfamiliar face appeared before me, and I knelt down to greet this mystery friend.

“Well hello! I don’t think we have met; I am Mrs. Leneway. What is your name?”

The child’s beautiful brown eyes dodged eye contact and her gaze quickly fell upon the floor.

“I’m Katia, but they call me Kat,” she replied as she shoved her hands into the pocket of her jeans that were two sizes too big.

There was only a glimmer of recognition of the bright eyed, cheery face of the girl with long, beautiful black hair in the photograph I had studied. I tried to hide the surprised reaction on my face. Kat’s head was completely shaved. She sat quietly in her chair, shrinking as students entered the room and glanced in her direction.

At recess on the second day, I went to the playground to collect my students and found that Kat and another child were missing. I asked the playground supervisor, and she informed me they had been sent to the office for fighting. The counselor brought the young man back to my classroom and informed me that Kat had punched him in the face and was in the office, refusing to talk. She wasn’t allowed to return to our classroom that day, and I was asked to bring work for her.

At lunch, I gathered some math work and headed to the office. I sat in silence with Kat, who had her head on the table and her eyes hidden. Quietly, I said,

“I have brought some work for you to complete.”

I explained that I was disappointed about the choice she had made because we had a fun afternoon planned, and I had been looking forward to sharing it with her. I paused and asked,

“Why did you do it? Why did you feel you had to punch him?”

Kat lifted her head. Tears were streaming down her face. With a voice quivering with anger, she screamed,

“He called me a boy! I am not a boy. I’m a girl. My name is Kat, and I am a girl.”

I sat there, frozen, unsure of the direction of my next step - my next comment. I reached out for her hand, and she did not flinch or pull away. In fact, for the first time, she looked me in the eyes, and I saw the little girl from that photograph; I saw Kat.

She then began to explain how she and her siblings had bugs in their hair and how her mom had tried lots of shampoo but just couldn’t kill all the bugs. She couldn’t afford any more shampoo, and she couldn’t keep them home until the bugs were gone. So, her mom had lined up all the kids outside and shaved their heads.

For the next three months, we worked on building Kat’s sense of self as her hair began to grow back. We talked about and practiced calming herself down when she felt herself getting angry. We worked as a class to build character skills and to teach the value of diversity. I showed Kat photographs of strong, beautiful women who wore their hair short just like her. Her favorite was Halle Berry, and she asked me if she could have a

photograph to put in her folder, “You know, for when I need a reminder,” she said. She was struggling in math and reading, but, day after day, her eyes brightened. She sat taller, and her smile grew.

As the last leaves fell from the trees and the ground began to glisten with frost, I noticed Kat was coming to school with the same old sneakers, hole in the toe, no socks, and no coat. I pulled her aside and asked if she had warm clothes for winter. She said “no.” I went through the Children’s Fund and received some money to purchase Kat winter boots. On Friday, after school, I went shopping.

On Monday morning, before first recess, I pulled Kat into the hallway and gave her the bag of winter clothing. She was given purple boots, a package of warm socks, ski pants, a gorgeous jacket with a faux fur lined hood, a pair of mittens with a matching scarf, and a warm winter hat. She vibrated with excitement as she joyfully played in the snow at recess.

About a week later, pieces of this warm ensemble began to disappear. First the mittens and scarf, then the ski pants, and when she showed up without her boots for the third day, I asked her to stay in and talk to me. I was frustrated that she had been given warm clothing, and she had not taken responsibility to care for them.

With a bubbly smile on her face and energy in her voice, she explained that she had given the ski pants to her older sister and the boots, mittens, and scarf to a younger sibling.

“It made them smile like Halle Berry makes me smile,” she told me.

Then, she proceeded to take off her tennis shoes and show me how she layered three pair of socks to keep her feet warm even without her boots. The whole time she smiled ear to ear, and the feeling of giving radiated from her little soul. She finally asked, with a tentative look on her face,

“Am I in trouble?”

“Of course not,” I said. “I’m incredibly proud of who you are Kat.” Then I gave her a giant hug as I choked back tears.

I do not know where Kat is today. She left our district after our year together, and I lost track of her. However, the lessons Kat taught me were invaluable. As a young teacher I learned that things happen and are sometimes even done to us that are out of our control. She taught me about the importance of having strategies to deal with the hand we are dealt in positive ways and the power behind sharing that message with kids.

Kat came to me broken, as many children do. Her sense of self, her identity, had literally been shaved from her head. I think of Kat often and wonder what more I could have done to reach her. Despite my best efforts, Kat didn’t make her expected growth in mathematics or reading for second grade. I think back to her face on that first day of school, the way she shrank in her chair as her peers looked in her direction. I remember the anger in her voice as she screamed, “My name is Kat, and I am a girl.”

Then I see her sitting in the hallway, grinning ear to ear, scrambling to take off her worn shoes to show me her layered socks. She made growth, significant, real-life growth that couldn’t be measured by a test. She worked on healing during our year together. Even in the midst of her own suffering and healing, she found ways to reach out and help those around her. Kat had joy in her eyes again. She walked a little lighter and stood a little taller. She grew back into that bright eyed, cheery young girl from the photograph.





Joyce Stark

ESD 105 Regional Teacher of the Year
Sunnyside High School
Sunnyside School District

Science Dynasty

*Long-lasting consequences
of a student- teacher relationship*

Experimenting
Walnuts inhibit plant growth
Grand Prize to I-SEF

~ A Science Teacher's Haiku

My husband accepted a job with Washington State University in Prosser, Washington, and we moved from Pennsylvania. During my interview with the Sunnyside School District, the Superintendent asked me what I could do for the school district if I were hired. I told him that I wanted to teach science to students as scientists do science.

"To learn science, students must do science."

I wanted to start a science fair program where students could develop and conduct their own experiments. I wanted them to be able to present their posters at local, regional, and international competitions and interact with judges who were scientists and engineers.

After a year with the school district, I volunteered to be the publicity chairperson for the Mid-Columbia Regional Science and Engineering Fair in the Tri-Cities while I was developing my local science fair program in Sunnyside. After three years with the regional fair, I was asked to chaperone the two Grand Prize winners to the International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF) in Minnesota. My school district released me for a week to chaperone these students from another school district. It was an incredible experience. Students and teachers from around the world networked, shared their research experiences, and visited colleges and research laboratories.

Energized and inspired by this event, I became the Director of the Mid-Columbia Regional Science and Engineering Fair the following year, hoping that a Sunnyside student would be the Grand Prize winner. My school was located in a low-socioeconomic rural area and there were no resources to support a science fair program. Students sold candy, held bake sales, washed cars, and sponsored dances to pay for their supplies and equipment. They conducted their research at my school lab after school and on weekends.

The next year, my student Teri Alvarez, then a junior, won first place and numerous special awards. She fell short of winning the Grand Prize and was so disappointed. Then in 1982, as a senior, Teri won the Grand Prize and received an all-expense-paid trip to ISEF in Houston. Her project “The Inhibitory Effects of *Juglans nigra*,” showed that black walnuts (*Juglans nigra*) would prevent plant growth and could be used for weed control.

Teri made improvements in her project, and there was such excitement and camaraderie as we planned the itinerary for her week. Despite my food poisoning and the tropical storm flooding our hotel, Teri had a life-changing experience. She was a great role model for my other students as they set their goals to attend ISEF.

Teri had planned to become an X-ray Technician, but during her training she was involved in a serious car accident. After a year of recovery, she worked in the medical field in Seattle. We stayed in touch but did not see each other very often. She married, had a daughter, and eventually moved back to Sunnyside, continuing to work in the medical field. She encouraged her daughter to do science fair in middle and high school. Teri helped chaperone Sunnyside students competing at the Washington State Science and Engineering Fair in Bremerton.

During this time, Teri decided to return to school and received her B.A. in Science, minor in Biology and M.A. in Education from Heritage University. In 2004 she accepted a teaching job with our Alternative School and when that program phased out she transferred to Sunnyside High School. The

regional science fair encourages all our Grand Prize winners to give back to their communities, and Teri volunteered to be the chair of the Scientific Review Committee of the Mid-Columbia Regional Science and Engineering Fair.

Teri and I are now experiencing the long-lasting consequences of that original student-teacher relationship; we teach together. We plan together, and our teaching philosophy focuses on problem solving, critical thinking, inquiry, and hands-on activities. As our school experiences educational reform, we continue to work together in a Professional Learning Community.

In 2011, we started teaching Honors Biology and introduced a long-term project where each student could develop and conduct an individual experiment and present a poster. We had 120 students complete projects last year. We encouraged them to enter their projects in the local science fair and earn points to attend the regional and state competitions. Last year our students won the coveted traveling trophies both for the Excellence in Scientific and Engineering Achievement Award and School of the Year at the Washington State Science and Engineering Fair.

Henry Ford once said, “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.” Thank you, Teri Alvarez-Ziegler, for making my dream come true. You were the first Sunnyside student of 28 to attend ISEF. Thank you for nominating me for Teacher of the Year. Today, our science dynasty is continuing to change the lives of students.



Alecia McAdams-Sing

Northeast ESD 101
Regional Teacher of the Year
Lakeside High School
Nine Mile Falls School District

Lost and Found

Patience and encouragement unlock the artist and writer in a disconnected student

I want to tell you the story of a lost boy. I am asking you to come closer than the usual mythologies, generalized demographics, and testing data. I am asking you to look into the heart of a child, beyond the statistics and stereotypes, to hear his story.

He was lost when he came to Lakeside High School, his small frame overwhelmed by the immense shag of black bangs covering every inch from brow to cheekbone. As he passed, I noted a strange, fuzzy, raccoon-like tail dangling from his belt loop (the only such garb in the school).

He gingerly sidled into a seat a full row away from the other kids and right next to the door. I called the name on my roster; he flicked his chin upward and I caught glimpse of a left eye. The name was wrong. He corrected me: Ben, not Olivia. The entire class period, he neither looked up nor spoke. But he drew. And drew, and drew, and drew. I passed by his desk several times, my heart pounding as I watched a tiny masterpiece emerging in the left margin. My God, I thought, here is a composer of beautiful things.

Days went by, and try as I might to package my sales pitch, he drew and did little else. When he spoke, it generally began as an apology.

“Mrs. Sing, I’m sorry to bother you...”

“This is probably dumb, but...”

“I’m so sorry.”

A week went by, and I still wasn’t getting through – not with choice, not with demand. I started asking about Ben’s art, encouraging him to use it in his class assignments. His depictions of characters and concepts showed

deep understanding, critical thought, and creative connection. Slowly, Ben began to relax and share his ideas. He talked about becoming a tattoo artist. I worried he might not see how much he really had to offer, how well a college like Evergreen would suit him.

One day we crossed paths in a hallway, and he told me he was transgender. His speech was peppered with “sorrys.”

My anger boiled at whatever had brought this boy to feel his every movement and thought needed apology. I took a deep breath, and calmly informed Ben he wasn’t allowed to apologize anymore unless he did something terrible and intended to make it right. I tried to clarify: his gender expression, his ideas, his questions weren’t anything requiring apology. I told him it was imperative for him to flip his inner script. I wanted him to feel his profound value, but words are a weak substitute for deeply felt self-worth.

I discovered, however, that seeds are amazingly hardy things, growing (so so slowly) despite desperate situations. Ben’s apologies slowed over the next months. He spoke and wrote more in class – not much, but more. His natural intelligence and sympathies began to take shape. His essays revealed passion and an artist’s sense of imagery and metaphor development. Ben delivered several memorable “shout outs,” proving himself insightful and articulate.

By January, he competed in the school Poetry Out Loud competition, bringing his artist’s heart to a moving recitation. He was our school’s regionals alternative. The bangs were swept aside occasionally, and his interactions with peers in class relaxed. Other students asked questions about his gender, and Ben had the opportunity to explain. In our class, Ben’s peers respected and welcomed him.

That spring, Ben read a short fiction piece he created. We were astounded by the cohesive storyline, the level of detail in his imagery, and the narrator’s rage and madness. The piece was Steven-King-worthy horror, and had most of us feeling queasy: it was brilliant.

Another young man, Kyle, was clearly nervous and opened with the self-deprecating caveat, “This isn’t very good.” A shy introvert, he had been struggling to make connections in class. After Kyle finished reading his beautiful, spare story of regret and loneliness, Ben complimented Kyle’s insight into the character’s internal struggle and his ability to parallel the emotional situation with his writing style. Ben delivered this encouragement in a strong voice from across the room, with full eye contact and not an apology in sight. My heart soared as I watched this young man reach out to encourage another who was struggling with some of the same hurdles he himself faced.

In order to further support Ben’s composition in art, I gave him an application to Spokane’s “manhole cover art” contest and offered him our class’s semester extra credit points if he entered. Though his art wasn’t chosen, Ben was named a runner-up and was recognized in local news and social media, including our district website and school twitter feed.

Not long before we heard the art contest results, Ben entered an eating disorder treatment program. He was not with us for the state tests in the spring. In fact, he didn’t return home until well into the summer. This fall, Ben and his shaggy bangs and tail returned to my classroom. He still wants to be a tattoo artist. I still want him to apply to Evergreen. We still have valuable learning to pursue.

I have no statistics to prove it, but I know Ben experienced huge personal and academic growth last year. Though hard work remains before us, Ben isn’t lost any more. He has a place where he is expected to dream big and is offered the opportunity to work toward that dream. Test prep, daily targets, and getting “through” the material didn’t engage or strengthen or challenge Ben; relationships and the art of learning did. I have one school year left with him – I won’t waste it preparing Ben for a standardized test. I know those skills will come naturally as we pursue learning that connects his art to his voice to his value to his dreams. Helping Ben find the path to his dream is my goal.



Maegan Skoubo

ESD 113 Regional Teacher of the Year
Raymond Junior Senior High School
Raymond School District

An Unexpected Motherhood

A teacher's childhood dream fulfilled

As a young, new teacher I dreamt of the family I would one day have. To say I loved kids would be an understatement. I couldn't wait to be a mom. I didn't know how many kids I wanted; I just knew I wanted lots of them. After years of longing for a big family, I've learned the hard way that things don't always work out the way you plan. The picture I had in my mind of the perfect family hasn't materialized, but I have discovered that I have the big family I always wanted right in my classroom.

"Mom...uh, I mean Mrs. Skoubo," Riley said with a sheepish, apologetic look on his face. He was frozen in space waiting for kids to make fun of him or for me to scold him. In a split second, a huge smile crossed my face. Students started giggling. Another student, Julie, said, "It's OK if you accidentally call her mom. She is kinda like our mom, and we are kinda like her kids."

"All of you are my kids," I replied. "I love being your teacher, and it is like being your mom too!"

In that moment it hit me. These students, my students, were the family I had been wishing for. I remember what they look like with gaps in their teeth, dressed in Halloween costumes. I comfort them when they get hurt and give them hugs when they are sad. I celebrate their achievements and encourage them when they are down. I give them the tools to make decisions that will affect the rest of their life, and I hug them goodbye when they leave for college. I cry when they get married. This was the case for Chloe and Maddie.

Chloe was very shy and wouldn't talk in class. When I saw her in the hallway she was walking with her face down, looking at the floor, and avoiding any eye contact. Later, at a parent meeting, I learned she had a

form of autism called Asperger's. I worked hard with Chloe to create a positive relationship that promoted success in the classroom. I wanted her to feel comfortable talking to me in class.

As the year progressed, she was doing better than ever before in math. She was asking questions in class and was performing higher than usual on her tests. Chloe went from staring at the ground in the hallway to waving at me as she walked by. Her small shy waves grew into a small smile, which grew into a barely audible "hello" and finally became an easy to hear "Hi Mrs. Skoubo!"

I was devastated when I had to tell Chloe I was moving to a different state. She asked for my mailing address and wanted to know if she could keep in touch. "Of course," I said. I knew how special it was that she was building a relationship with me. I was so excited that she wanted to keep in touch! I told her she could call or email me anytime, and she did. Sometimes she called just to see how I was doing. Other times she called to get help on a math assignment. We got together for coffee when I came back to town. Chloe painted pictures in high school and mailed them to me.

When I found out Chloe was getting married, I knew I had to be there. When she saw me, she ran over to me and gave me a big hug. She was still quiet and shy, and I could tell she was a little uncomfortable, but I knew she was happy to see me. As I was leaving, she gave me one last hug.

"Mrs. Skoubo, seeing you at my wedding was the best wedding gift!"

I was definitely a proud "mom" when I saw how happy she was and how well she was doing in life. She was all grown up and had come a long way from that 7th grader shuffling down the hallway with her eyes cast down.

Maddie was in foster care when I met her in 7th grade. She wasn't in contact with her parents or siblings. Her mom was a drug addict, and her dad was in and out of jail. She told me that she lived with her Grandma "Big Maddie" and her Grandpa.

One day in class she asked me if I had ever been clam digging. When I told her no, she said "Next time we go I'll have my grandma call you so you can go with us." The next month her grandmother called me and invited me to go clam digging. Maddie showed me how to find the clams in the sand, how to dig the clams, and how to clean them. They invited me to dinner that night and showed me pictures of "Little Maddie."

Around Christmas-time, Maddie asked me what I was doing over my weekend. I told her I was baking cookies. She said that her grandparents didn't bake much – kind of hinting that she wanted to come over and help. I called her grandmother and invited both of them over. We spent the day in the kitchen baking and getting to know each other. Maddie loved pugs almost as much as I did. To this day, we still get together around Christmas-time to make cookies.

When it came time for Maddie to start thinking about college, her caseworker asked me to be her mentor in the "Foster Care to College" program. I knew that Maddie wanted to go to college and make better choices than her parents had. I also knew that her grandmother wanted her to go to college, but she wasn't sure how to help. We started by making sure her FAFSA was filed as soon as possible. We researched colleges and discussed what she wanted to study. When she told me she wanted to be a teacher, just like me, I was excited as any mom could be. Maddie once told me that she looked up to me. She saw the choices I made in life had a positive influence on her and helped her make better choices. Maddie was looking up to me like I look up to my mom.

When Maddie graduated from college with her teaching degree and got her first teaching job, I cried tears of joy. We celebrated. I passed some of my classroom materials and books on to her, just like I would if my own daughter was setting up her first classroom.

Chloe and Maddie and so many others will forever be a part of my family.

I never imagined, after that first parent meeting with Chloe, that 12 years later we would still be emailing, getting together for coffee, and sending each other cards. When I first met Maddie as a 7th grader, I didn't think the holiday traditions we started 10 years ago would continue to this day. Being a teacher has given me a family in more amazing ways than I could have ever dreamed.





Bethany Rivard

ESD 112 Regional Teacher of the Year
Fort Vancouver High School
Vancouver School District

I Take You With Me

*How losing a student transforms
a teacher's life and practice*

Dear Hannah,

You were the new girl in Yearbook class; a sophomore who had just transferred from our rival school. I was a second year teacher with no idea what to do with a rowdy class I had absolutely no experience in. I struggled to focus and engage the students who took Yearbook for an easy “A” and unfettered access to roaming the school with cameras. I floundered with classroom management, maintaining a barrier between myself and the students, letting frustration show plainly on my face. I tried strategies from my classroom management classes in college, but nothing felt right. I took behavior issues personally. What was I doing wrong?

You saw my frustration. Saw me struggle. Quietly, you had been compiling a list of things you thought would make the Yearbook better. You were frustrated too and wanted to help me solve the problem. I felt such relief that a student cared enough to help, and a little embarrassed that I couldn't figure it out myself. Of course I made you editor the next year and the year after. You basically ran the publication single-handedly. Occasionally, you called me at home about deadlines. Once, my sister was there and asked, “You give out your number to students?” I replied, “It's not students, it's Hannah.” You were different.

Over the years we grew together. I grew as a teacher. I took behavior issues less personally, relaxed a little, and let students see my sense of humor. You became a leader, collected a little group of creative friends, and made amazing yearbooks. Your independence and self-confidence expanded. You began to visualize yourself soaring, going to college, recognizing your

immense value as a fierce young woman who would make her mark on the world. I wanted to help you realize your dreams in whatever way I could. While we worked and reworked your scholarship essay, you told me that no one in your family had ever gone to college. You would be the first.

You spent more time in my classroom than anywhere else. You were in my English classes, my TA, and my Yearbook Editor. We spent the better part of the day together in class, working, planning, and plotting your life after high school. Your last year of high school (your last year), we had our pictures side by side in the yearbook: editor and advisor. After graduation, you still came to school, even though you didn't have to be there. You said you couldn't imagine not being in my classroom anymore. I felt the same way; I wasn't ready to let my school daughter go quite yet. We looked through the finished yearbook, your swan song, and analyzed every page. I remember picking flowers out of my garden to give you for graduation. After the ceremony, your mom took a picture of the two of us together and told me how much you appreciated me. The feeling was mutual. I thanked your mom for raising such an amazing young woman.

Your best friend Ivan was sitting next to you that day as you drove to the public library. You were headed there to use a computer in order to fill out a housing application for Eastern Washington University. You wanted to be sure to get it in before the deadline, you were always so conscientious. On your way, the front tire of a cement truck going the opposite direction burst and the massive vehicle slammed into you head on. They say you were killed instantly. After I found out about the accident, I went to your apartment to talk to your mom and noticed she had a "Proud Mother of an Eastern Washington University Student" bumper sticker on her car. It was apparent how much she loved you, and how your sisters looked up to you. You were an example of what was possible for their own lives.

I was with your mom when they brought back your belongings – salvaged from the wreckage. We pulled your shattered glasses from the pile. You

had just gotten them, and they made you look so collegiate, fully like your emerging new self. You would have been a senior this year, getting ready to graduate from Eastern Washington University. You had a full ride first generation scholarship.

Your mom decided to have your service at school. It was the place you loved most. We held it in the auditorium. When I spoke at your service, I read the letter of recommendation I wrote for you. The one you would never be able to use. All your friends wore fake moustaches because you thought fake moustaches were hilarious.

Ivan said he didn't remember anything from the crash. He still had a year of high school to finish after it happened. Instead of enjoying his senior year and taking a few road trips to see you at EWU, he spent the majority of that year sitting in my classroom in a fog. He lost his mother a year earlier, and you helped him through the grief. Now who would help him through the grief of losing you?

You have been on my mind more than usual lately because one of my fellow teachers lost his first student. Another teacher told me, "You don't really become a teacher until you lose a student." That sentiment made me angry, and I asked him why he would say such a thing. The more I thought about what he said, though, I understood what he meant. Nothing is fair about how you were so abruptly stolen before you could collect experiences: beautiful ones, ugly ones, heartbreaking ones...all of them. But, your death transformed me as a teacher and stripped me of the illusion that I can keep my students safe.

You were killed in July, and I was still drowning in grief when the school year began. My heart wasn't in it. I was disappointed every time a student walked through my doors and it wasn't you. I was sure that I would never be able to care about my students in the same way I cared for you; I would be too afraid to lose them. Surprisingly, the opposite happened. Perhaps because I am too aware that life can be snatched away in a moment, I try to

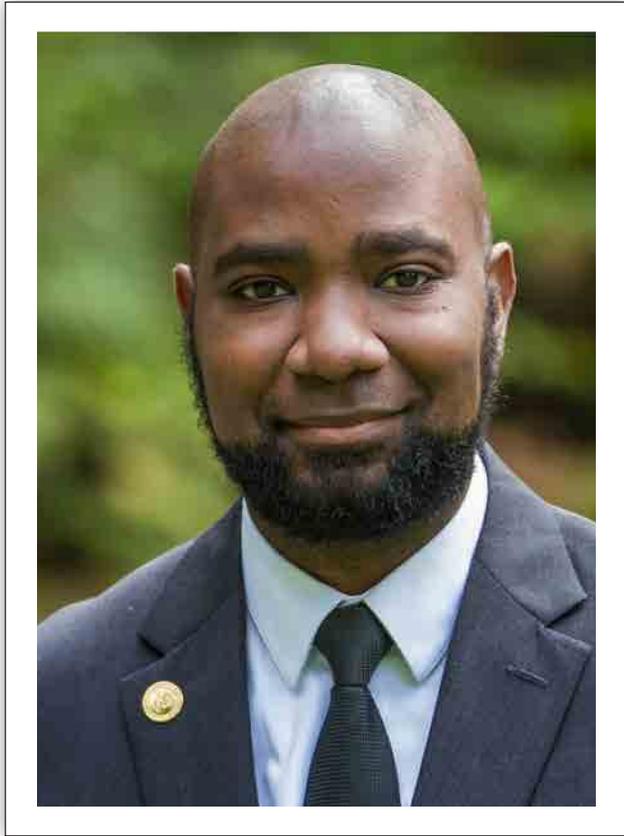
make the time I have with students more meaningful. I became more of a mother to my students, not less. Hannah, I want you to know that I bring you to school with me every day. To honor you, I try not to forget my sacred duty of helping students find their own voices.

I will never stop being furious that you did not get to go to your first day of college classes, or that you never got to decorate your own apartment. However, your life taught me more about teaching than any professional development ever could. You taught me to be kind and dedicated. You taught me the preciousness of time, and not to be afraid to give too much praise or support. I bring you with me when I listen to difficult stories that my students need to tell, and I think about you and Ivan when I observe the beautiful and complicated friendships that are fostered in high school. I see your spirit in every young woman who faces barriers and fiercely breaks them down in order to forge their own success. I share your story because I want others to understand what it means for a teacher to lose a school child, to lose school children. I want them to understand how deeply our students live in our hearts and how much you mean to us.

Thank you for your life, Hannah. For you I work more, care more, give more.

With so much love,
Rivard





Nathan G. Gibbs-Bowling

Washington State Teacher of the Year
Lincoln High School
Tacoma School District

What We Know

Our students' ability to achieve is only limited by our own investment in their success

There are ten former students of Lincoln High School currently in jail for murder or manslaughter.

This isn't their story. But their story and that number animate the work we do. It is the fuel that drives our staff. The stakes in a high-poverty schools are life and death. We know this. The kids we don't reach will be lost to incarceration, unemployment, shortened life expectancy, and a lifetime of poverty. We know this. Vice President Joe Biden once said, "Don't tell me what you value, show me your budget, and I'll tell you what you value." I can tell you that society doesn't value our students. We know this.

They live in segregated housing on tattered and pothole filled roads. We've closed their elementary schools, local libraries, and Boys & Girls Club. We've cutback service hours and bus routes that serve their neighborhoods. They live in a food desert. My students are invisible. Tacoma, the City of Destiny, is infamous for its "grit" and often is mocked for its ramshackle appearance, but its future rests in the hands of my staff. We are planting seeds. We know this.

Our staff supports our students and our alumni academically, emotionally, and economically. Schools are the barometers of the health of our communities. Throughout my seven years at Lincoln, I have watched as families struggle and fall further behind. As a staff, we fill an ever widening gap between what the state provides and what our families need. We stock our desk and filing cabinet drawers with food. We run food drives to collect food to feed families over winter break. We buy and collect ties and dress clothes for job interviews.

We pay for SATs when students have exhausted their fee waivers. We pool money to get people's lights turned on after being shut-off or to prevent evictions. We buy textbooks for alumni at Evergreen. We buy linen for alumni from CWU. We send winter clothes to alumni at UW. We help when the paperwork from the financial aid office appears to be written in Vulgate Latin. We hire alumni on break from college todo yard. We shed tears. We sacrifice time with our own families. We celebrate our students' successes.

In recent years our graduation rate has risen by 22%. We have sent an increasing number of kids off to higher education. But "sending them off" is not enough. We tell ourselves a lie when we treat the education of a young mind as some sort of transaction that ends at the end of school day, school year, or even graduation. The role of a Lincoln teacher extends into life and adulthood of our students. We continue to fertilize and till. Our students often don't have uncles or aunts who are college graduates. They have us.

Last fall during planning with the senior team, a few of us hatched an idea to support our graduates in college and inspire our current students. We batted around the idea of a road trip; an Alumni Support Tour. The plan was to visit over two dozen recent grads in colleges east of the mountains. Nearly all these students were first generation college students and the majority were students of color. We had been getting calls and emails from students who were struggling to adjust and debating coming home. In late September, I sat on the phone for nearly an hour telling a homesick alumna that she owed it to herself to stay at Whitworth.

"You will hate yourself if you quit."

"It doesn't matter how they look at you, we both know you are smart enough."

"I know there are no other black students, we talked about this before you left. This is how it will be."

As I hung up the phone with her the road trip went from an idea to a necessity.

In October, Mrs. Teague-Bowling, Ms. Bockus, and I piled into my Kia Soul and hit the road to visit the Lincoln Class of 2014 at Central Washington, Washington State University, Gonzaga, and Whitworth College. Along the way we asked why we hadn't done this before. We wondered how the kids were holding up with the workload. Had we prepared them? We were curious about who might be struggling. But, most importantly, we questioned: why isn't this kind of support the norm?

We stayed in a Super 8 in Ellensburg and a HoJo in North Spokane. We met our charges at each of their campuses and brought them pizza or burgers. Older Lincoln Alumni showed up as well. "I am so proud of you." Tears were shed. "We did this, together." Hugs were exchanged. We visited dining halls, toured campuses, and heard familiar tales of adjustment. They shared their syllabi and dorm rooms with us. We shared our pride and joy with them. They thanked us and talked about how prepared they felt for college and life.

These were the three best days of my career. We drove over 650 miles, visited four campuses, and broke bread with nearly 30 alumni. Over three days we were able to see our harvest.

Teaching is more like farming than many of the other careers it gets compared to. Lincoln is a massive farm with nearly 1,500 seeds in the ground. Some have nutrient rich soil. Others are in shallow, sandy dirt and require more attention. At Lincoln 80% of our seeds live in poverty. That just means they need more fertilizer, more careful watering, and more attention from us, the farmers.

Too often when we talk about students in poverty, my students, we approach them from a deficit--we awfulize students in poverty--we talk about them as if they are incapable of learning.

They aren't inferior, they're poor.

They are literate, but the ways in which they are literate aren't measurable

by our assessments. There's an academic vocabulary gap, not an intelligence gap. With love and support they're capable of reaching the same highs as all other students. My students are worth the investment that I make in them as their teacher, and they are worth the investment we ought to make in them as a society.

We know this.



About Teacher of the Year

Since 1963, the Washington State Teacher of the Year program has selected one outstanding educator annually to serve as the Washington State Teacher of the Year. The teacher of the Year is selected from a slate of up to ten regional candidates representing Washington's nine Educational Service Districts and Tribal Schools. In 1963, 1970, 2007, and 2013 the state program garnered national attention when Elmon Ousley of Bellevue School District, Johnnie T. Dennis of Walla Walla School District, Andera Peterson of Granite Falls School District, and Jeff Carbonneau of Zillah School District respectively, were each selected as the National Teacher of the Year.

The State Teacher of the Year is selected by a statewide committee through written applications and a series of panel interviews.

Candidates are reviewed based on the following criteria:

- Professional biography
- Community involvement
- Philosophy of teaching
- Responsiveness to education issues and trends
- Commitment to strengthening the teaching profession
- His or her proposed Teacher of the Year platform

