

To Mrs. Russell

Jason Wrench

4rowing up, I was the child everyone dreaded to have show up in his classroom. I was unruly, talkative and slow. As early as kindergarten the teachers decided I was too slow to keep up with the other children, so I was placed with other slow learners.

Throughout my elementary career I was anything but the ideal pupil. I was a troublemaker. In the second grade, pupils who misbehaved were forced to wear a red block of wood with a gigantic sad face painted on it. A pupil wearing the block could talk to no one but the teacher. I think I still have a rope chafe from where the rope holding the block bit into the back of my neck almost daily.

My grades were poor. If I was lucky, I got the occasional C. The best my parents hoped for was that one day I would actually be allowed to

graduate high school, or at least get a GED and go to work at some fast-food restaurant.

In the third grade, my teacher truly disliked me. After my grandfather visited one day, he demanded that I be removed from the teacher's classroom because of the spiteful and mean-spirited way she related to me.

When I was in the fourth grade, the "resource" classroom (a euphemistic term used for a classroom of slower pupils) was taken away because the school needed the space for "normal" pupils. After searching throughout the entire building, the administration decided that our class was to be held in a janitor's storeroom.

Throughout my entire elementary career I was constantly being told by teachers and administrators that I was stupid, slow and just not good enough to be with the other pupils. To say that my self-esteem was shot would be putting it nicely. I felt dumb, bad and useless. I felt that God had made a mistake.

Being forced to wear the red "sad-face" block symbolized that I had made a mistake; and it caused me to become introverted and unaware of life's joys. Being told I wasn't good enough to have a classroom, but that there was a lovely janitor's storeroom where I could learn made me think that I was only as good as the trash that inhabited my classroom. Constantly being told that there was no hope for me and that I might as well not even try had killed the spirit of a once bright and eager child.

At the beginning of my sixth grade year, I was given the opportunity to join the school orchestra. The only problem was that if I joined the orchestra I would not be able to be in "resource" any longer. My parents and the school administrators hashed it out and I was allowed to join the orchestra. I joined the mainstream of the school for the first time.

My homeroom teacher that year was a gentle woman of about forty-five. She welcomed me into her class on the first day of school with a big smile.

The sixth graders were located in portable classrooms the school district used in overload situations. Before this, all of my classes had been in what they called "open concept" classrooms—no walls or doors between connecting classrooms. In these classrooms, students could see and hear everything going on in the classes around them. This always made it extremely hard for me to focus; and since I was a poor student anyway, I had always been placed in the back of the room near the other classrooms. For the first time now, I was in a classroom where I could see and hear only *my* teacher and focus on what *she* was saying, without all the distractions that previously had been around me.

My homeroom teacher was Mrs. Russell. She was a first-year teacher at my school, though she had been teaching for years elsewhere. She was friendly and had a genuine desire to teach. She was negative only when she had to discipline a child.

Mrs. Russell decided at the beginning of the year that every student in the room was to have a specific job within the classroom. I was quickly assigned to be the desk monitor. I think I got this particular job because my desk was the most horrendous mess anyone could ever imagine.

My job was simple. After school each day I would check everyone's desk and make sure it was clean. If it was, I would put a blue piece of paper on it. A pupil collecting five blue strips would get candy from Mrs. Russell. If the desk was dirty, the pupil would receive a yellow strip of paper and be forced to give up all blue strips. A pupil receiving two yellows would be held after school in detention.

Actually, I was the one who came up with the entire idea. Mrs. Russell continued to use this system for checking desks until the day she retired in May 1997.

For the first time in my life I had a passion about something. I loved the power that being desk monitor gave me. I never once abused the power because I knew that Mrs. Russell had instilled trust in me to be just and fair. Over and over she would compliment me on doing a great job.

She also would say things like, "You're going to grow up and be something pretty special." Or, "You can do anything you want in life, Jason, as long as you put your mind to it."

Mrs. Russell was the first teacher who had ever been nice to me. She showed me that I was a per-

son—a good person, despite what the "sad face" block had said. She told me that I was smart; I just had to apply myself and do the work. She taught me that I was worthy of living as a human being. Many people talk about the one teacher who changed their lives; mine would definitely be Mrs. Russell.

That year my grades went from C's and D's to A's and B's. This dramatic change came simply because one teacher loved and cared enough to take the time to work with me and show me how much she cared. As a wise person once said about school children, "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care!"

At the end of my sixth grade year Mrs. Russell encouraged me to apply to the honors junior high school. I discussed it with my parents and we decided that I should try to apply. I filled out the paperwork and acquired the proper recommendations, but figured I had no chance of making it.

About a month later, my principal announced over the loudspeaker that anyone who had applied to a magnet school needed to come to the main office. All of the students who had applied to the honors junior high milled around the room. Some leered at me, wondering what the "dummy" was doing there.

Since my last name starts with a "W," I was the last one to get the letter of acceptance or rejection. I took a huge breath and gulped as I slowly read the letter. *I was in!*

I leaped for joy and told everyone I saw. I had gone from being one of the dumb "resource" kids to being in an honors junior high school. A number of students who had previously stuck their noses in the air when I walked by, thinking of me as the "dummy," didn't make it into the school. I had finally come around in my academic life. Not only did I go to the honors junior high, but I also went to the honors high school.

My road to academic and intellectual maturity has been a tough one. I often wonder how many kids like myself are left on the side of the academic road, how many never meet their Mrs. Russell and therefore never achieve their potential. I also wonder where I would be if I had not had a teacher who showed me she cared.

Currently I am working on my master's degree. I also teach public speaking at the university level. Mrs. Russell has inspired me to be the kind of teacher she was for me. I hope I will always recognize a diamond in the rough. I hope I will never ignore a student, thinking that he or she is just not smart enough. I hope I will boost students' self-esteem, not destroy it. Mrs. Russell is a very hard act to follow as a teacher, but is a wonderful role model.

I'll never forget the day I went back to my old elementary school for Mrs. Russell's retirement party. I hadn't stepped foot in that building since I left. I had kept in touch with Mrs. Russell, though. When I graduated from high school, she and her

husband sent me a graduation present. When I had a brief stint as a radio talk show host for a Christian radio station, Mrs. Russell was my biggest fan.

Walking into that school brought a flood of emotions upon me. I looked at the door that led to the janitor's closet where I had spent much of the fourth grade. I saw the old classrooms and felt the torment that went along with those rooms. But then there was Mrs. Russell, the woman to whom I had come to say "Thank you." Even now as I write, I still have huge tears swell in my eyes as I think about her generosity and loving spirit.

I gave her a small teddy bear (the school's mascot) with a huge bouquet of balloons from my family. (My dad had wanted to build a monument in her honor, but that would have been going a little overboard, right?) I also gave her a copy of a paper I had written about her in college which dealt with an event or person who changed your life.

It often amazes me how God knows when we need someone the most, and miraculously places them in our lives at those times. Without Mrs. Russell in my life, who knows where I would have gone and what I would have done?

When I got my undergraduate degree, I dedicated my thesis (just as I will for my master's thesis and my doctoral dissertation) to "Mrs. Russell—Without you this never would have happened."



Jason Wrench is President of Road Speakers International, his self-initiated speaking and writing firm. He received training from Florence Littauer and is now a Certified Personality Plus Trainer. He is currently working on his Master's degree at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, and plans to pursue a doctoral program.

Web site: <http://www.members.aol.com/ttujay/page>
E-mail: TTUJAY@aol.com