

*Tribute to a Teacher:
One parent profiles a success story.*

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The final moments of the school year in a downtown Toronto public school; in all classrooms but one, children are joyfully preparing to go home for the summer. In Room 202, the Grade sixes are begging to stay. Both boys and girls are weeping; a boy cries, "I want to stay in this class where we get to feel like human beings!" The most macho boy in the class, staring at the floor so his tears don't show, is holding his "Enormous Effort Award", an award the teacher has given each child, citing areas of hardest work and improvement during the year. This boy's award is for "Developing a conscience."

One of those emotional children was my daughter, who had had such a stimulating school year she didn't want it to end. When the class was turned into a Grade 4/5, my son followed his sister into Room 202. He and his friends regarded the teacher with trepidation; she had warned them that she would be strict and very demanding. "But I'm fair," she told them. "And I always listen."

She was, and she does. In only a few months, she once again turned Room 202 into a humming, purposeful workplace. One boy, previously such a behaviour problem that he was regularly sent home, became a class leader, emulated by the others. Silent, self-deprecating girls started to talk, though softly. And my nine-year old son, whose world revolved around X-men cards and baseball, began to lecture me about Premier Rae's cuts to the education budget, about what Nelson Mandela's election would mean to children in South Africa. This boy who hated bookwork sat down to his homework without pressure or complaint. "I have to do this properly," he told me. "She expects it."

She is Marie Lardino, the kind of teacher - gifted, committed, born to the job - parents pray their children will meet each year. Though she is not the first wonderful teacher my children have had in their journey through the school system, and I hope she is not the last, she is the most articulate, willing to speak out about her work and the education system that both helps and hampers her. When she arrived in my children's life, I marveled at her magic, and then I began to wonder how she did it. What makes a good teacher good?

Marie is so small that when she stands in a group of her Grade fives, or even with some of her Grade fours, it is impossible to see anything but the sleek black top of her head. Of Spanish-Italian heritage, with a quicksilver temperament, she is famous for her flashing black eyes; famous, because so many children have been pierced by those eyes in praise or anger. In her sunny classroom she presides over twenty-seven children from perhaps ten different ethnic backgrounds. Most are from working-class families, and many, from all socio-economic levels, are from single parent homes. One has been in Canada only a few weeks and understands no English; another is developmentally handicapped and functions at a Grade two level. The rest range academically somewhere between Grades three and five, while the keenest Grade fives are ready for Grade six work and beyond.

A boy silently hands her a drawing given to him by two giggling children, giggling no longer when the Lardino eyes turn in their direction. It depicts a stick figure labeled with the boy's name, stuck with knives and lying in a pool of blood. Marie summons the artists. "Why would you draw something like this?" she asks heatedly. "Is this violence good for us or bad for us? Is it helping us or hurting us? Does an image like this respect other people or show disrespect for them?" The two boys hang their heads.

Marie's teaching plan is more ambitious and far-reaching than most: she wants to save the world, starting with Room 202. She espouses a pedagogical system called "Global Education", which invites children to feel and understand their connectedness to the whole planet - "the global web" - and to their own futures. Anything less, Marie thinks, and we are doomed.

The foundation of her method is respect for each child. Her classroom is a democracy of learning, where individual rights are respected but do not overpower the good of the group, and where everyone has a chance to participate and succeed. She calls her style of teaching "the humane approach: learning as partnership." Her respect for the children is manifested in several ways: she listens to them carefully, with as much attention as she can muster in a crowded classroom; she structures their workday carefully, with as much regularity as is possible in the tumult of a school; most of all she expects a great deal of each one. She expects the students to respect themselves, her, each other, their work; she expects them to take their responsibilities seriously and to concentrate and produce. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, some of these children find a pair of eyes registering their efforts and regressions; a pair of ears listening to their triumphs and excuses.

"Children need two types of skills," says Marie, talking to me as she monitors activity. "'First order skills' are extrinsic skills like math, reading, writing - what parents send their kids to school for. Then there's 'second order skills' - critical analytic thinking, cooperation, sharing, understanding different races; the idea of a democracy as a place which means all these things. These are intrinsic skills which you live and feel, a value system that is part of your life." The uniqueness of a teacher like Marie is the ability to champion not one but both sets of skills.

Some teachers do not agree that instilling a value system is part of their job, though the Board of Education encourages them to do so. They have enough on their plates, they say, trying to get through the curriculum while dealing with the modern child. Marie and the Global Educators feel that because children are often not taught at home how to live as ethical, compassionate citizens, they should be taught at school.

"When the experts talk about violence in our society today," she says, "like anti-Semitism in Germany, have you noticed that they never ask what is taught, or not taught, in schools? Do they ask if children are being taught racial tolerance in school, or is racism itself tolerated or even encouraged? Racial hatred comes from ignorance, yet the great dictators were educated men. Hitler was an educated man." She spits out the words. "He knew the basics."

She insists that she doesn't teach the children what to think, only how to think. "They don't

know my opinion on individual issues. What I do is set up a structure for looking at the world, asking questions, for them to work out their own values. I teach them to evaluate. Critical thinking."

The Grade fours are sitting on the carpet, absorbed in a lesson about rounding off and decimal places. Marie holds up an advertisement from a Toronto newspaper. It reads "Only \$599.99!" She takes them through the computation that this is only one cent away from \$600, but she doesn't proceed immediately to more rounding off. She gives them a lesson in her favourite subject, critical thinking.

"Why do they print it as \$599.99, and not \$600, even though the numbers are only one cent apart?" she asks. Hands shoot up; these children are getting used to critical thinking.

"To make you think it's cheaper!" calls one.

"To make you think it's cheaper," she repeats. "Exactly. They want you to think it's cheaper than it is. They want you to think it only costs..." She waits, until they finally understand; it sounds and looks like \$500, but it is actually much more.

"Now you're really thinking," she tells them with satisfaction. Their assignment is to find sale prices in the paper and list them, and then to round them off.

"If you find a number that's already rounded off, I'll shop there, for their honesty," she says. "But I don't think you'll find one."

Throughout her unhappy childhood in Uruguay, Marie wanted to be a teacher. Her parents divorced when she was two, and she was shunted between relatives, educated at first in a private Catholic school that she hated. She went on a hunger strike to force her parents to send her to public school. Brought to Canada at age twelve, she found herself alienated, without a word of English, in a suburban Toronto high school. One day, in an art program, the teacher asked the class to draw two straight lines; he criticized Marie's for not being as good as the others. Leaving her locker full, she walked out of the school for good. "I was the perfect candidate for the street and drugs," she says. "That's why I believe you can get out of that cycle."

When the end of an early marriage left her a single mother at twenty, she pulled her life together and found a place in university, where one professor took an interest in her and changed her life. Marie's eyes fill with tears as she speaks about Professor Wendy Rolph, head of the Spanish department at the University of Toronto. "She told me I was good, intelligent, that I was worth it. She made me feel like a person. She was everything to me."

During her practicum sessions at the end of teacher's college, she learned from one woman everything she did not want to do and be as a teacher. "She mistreated children, especially those whose parents were divorced. So rigid! I was leading the children in an art activity and she asked what the objective of art was. I replied, 'To express the language of the soul' and she kicked me out of her classroom." Fortunately, Marie found inspiring teachers as mentors. From the moment she first walked into Room 202 five years ago, she loved teaching and knew exactly what she wanted to do.

Recently remarried, with a new baby, her first child a dancer at a performing arts high school, Marie is more settled now than she has ever been. Despite her personal happiness,

she is in despair about the current state of education. It was a shock for her, first of all, to discover the low regard in which teachers are held by society; she and her colleagues are constantly stereotyped in the media, she thinks, as lazy whiners. "The media are killing us, destroying the very fabric of education," she told me. "Conflict sells; they only print the worst stories. We are demoralized by their negativity. All of us feel that."

Worse is the fact that, in the ongoing battle of educational theories, teachers are in the front lines, facing the sometimes contrary and unrealistic expectations of both their employers: the parents and the School Board. The Board, hit with cutbacks, is struggling to anticipate the future and rethink a troubled system; parents, sceptical about theories they don't understand, are panicking about the holes in their children's education and calling for 'back to basics' - a return to a regulated environment focusing on academic achievement, tests and discipline. Marie is afraid that concern about the current failures of the educational system is leading to a reactionary backlash, instead of moving forward to a better system for all. As usual, she expresses her thoughts with intensity.

"I understand the parents' desire to see 'back to basics'. Kids do need math, spelling, science, and those things were neglected for awhile. But some parents want to impose a limited vision of education taken from their own years at school twenty or thirty years ago, in a unilingual, unicultural society with women in the kitchen. That world is gone; you have to provide the basics in the context of today's world." She talks about the children in her classes, from all cultural and economic backgrounds, who come to school hungry, cold, exhausted, hostile, hyperactive, self-destructive; children suffering from the effects of absent parents, hours of violent television, the shock of immigration, racism. "Sitting in rows memorizing is not the answer. I think this," she says, turning to her classroom, "is the answer. There is a happy medium between authoritarianism and chaos." The children around us are involved in their independent activities, consulting each other before coming to Marie. "These children are on task. They're learning." They are setting their own goals, evaluating their own efforts, and helping each other.

Most of Marie's students were born in 1984; they'll be seventeen in the year 2001. Marie may never know how successful she has been in preparing them to function successfully in the society of the future. Immediately, however, it is possible to witness the effects of her work on self-esteem, another vital part of the Global Education platform. In my visits to the classroom I have watched one example, in a boy I'll call Chas. Chas is Chinese, distinguished by his voluminous pant legs and his pudding bowl haircut. He had given up on school and had joined, or was about to join, a street gang. Last year, at the age of eight, he wrote "Chinatown Gangs", decorated with pictures of knives and guns. In his story, when a member of a gang falls in love, his fellow gang members shoot him in the legs and kill the woman.

Chas was pointed out to Marie as a troublemaker. She began immediately with him, as she does with every child, "to find the one thing that's special, to play it up and emphasize it until it becomes apparent not only to me but to the whole class." What was that special thing about Chas? She grins. "His great knowledge of the street," she replies. "His 'street wisdom' was used in negative ways; now it's positive. He has become the respected class expert in

children's rights. When we discuss issues he can pick out injustices much more quickly than the others." Watching Chas in class, only two months after Marie's arrival, was to see a child bloom under the eyes of an adult who affirms him. "There are so many children starving for love and validation - to hear how unique they are, how much they have to contribute," Marie tells me, unaware that she is repeating her own beloved teacher's affirmation of her.

Recently, after a schoolyard altercation, Chas wrote this:

"People say things that they don't realize that it hurts so much. It hurt but the pain is not outside it inside. I tell him to stop. He gave me a hard push. Why. Because I was different. Yes I was different from others but I was a human after all. the end."

Recently, Marie has been plagued with migraine headaches and other "stress-related symptoms". There is no doubt that her interactive method takes a toll, physically and emotionally; not many could spend their working day at her level of intensity. Though good teachers differ in the ways they find to connect to and inspire the young people entrusted to them for a year or two, they all share one vital thing: a positive, generous, loving regard for children. Marie puts it this way: "Every class is a gifted class. There's a little seed in each student. You just have to look into their eyes; it's there."

Once a week, Marie and her children do 'circle', in which they all sit on the rug and discuss important issues. In many classrooms the talk is of personal things: my favourite place, what I did on my summer vacation. In Marie's circle the topics tend to be political. Today's is "What does racism mean to you?" Her rainbow of students is anxious to speak.

"Sometimes when the senior kids see me they say, 'Hey, Paki!' It makes me sad."

"No matter what colour you are or where you're from, we're all the same inside."

"People judge other people who are not like they are; they think they're not good enough to be Canadian."

"Wow," Marie says softly. "These are excellent things you're saying."

"People should be treated the way you like to be treated."

"I'm sticking up for white people too. Bob Rae sent out a message for jobs, they weren't for white people, only for black people. That's not fair." It is the Pakistani child speaking.

"Maybe everybody has a little bit of racism in them, black people too."

"Do you know what a stereotype is?" she asks.

"When you don't know someone and you say something about them."

"Thinking that everybody from a culture is the same."

"This class is fantastic," she says. "Is that a stereotype?"

"No!" They shout at her. "It's the truth!"

She smiles broadly. The lesson continues.