A Defining Moment

By Mary Cook, NBCT

The events of the last year have caused me to reflect on my life experiences and realize that a few moment’s defined my future. During my senior year in high school a teacher approached me and asked if I would be interested in working with elementary age students a couple hours every afternoon. Being the lazy high school student I was, I immediately thought this sounded like an easy way to get out of a boring elective class. This teacher’s helper position eventually became a defining event in my life.

 I had three students that I worked with. For a variety of reasons all were struggling learners. All boys, full of energy and not very interested in school. We plodded through the assigned curriculum the supervising teacher had provided.

Well to be truthful they all did not make progress. One boy in particular struggled to read. Thomas was eight years old and he and I became good friends. I tried everything in my 17 year old arsenal to help him but made no progress that I could identify. It was incredibly frustrating for me but it was unbearable for him. He was so angry so embarrassed. He hated school and pretty much had stopped trying altogether. It was heart breaking to watch him struggle. At this point, I knew I was going to college to pursue teaching but his struggle cemented my desire to work with special needs populations.

With 20 plus years of teaching special needs populations under by belt, I am truly able to comprehend how significant his struggle was. I don’t know why my teacher asked me to work with these students. I certainly wasn’t the smartest student or had the best grades. But she saw something in me that I could not yet see. I did not help that child. He helped me. I see this same struggle daily at my school. Often it is with English language learners or it is simply a struggle against the disadvantages poverty has so generously supplied.

This experience lead me to begin a student lead mentoring programs at my middle school. If mentoring helped me maybe it could help one of my struggling learners. I read, I researched, and I wrote a proposal and presented it to my principal and he agreed to support my project. I worked with the administrators at a neighboring high school and developed parameters that would be beneficial for both high school mentors and middle school mentees. I collaborated with a senior advisor in recruiting and training high school seniors that had shown an interest in becoming future educators. Then came the hard stuff, the logistics. Scheduling, coordinating and transporting the seniors to the middle school and working with the middle school teachers to identify mentees. Finally the program was off and running.

This is not to say there were no bumps in the road. Just about the time I felt the program was gaining steam I had a health crisis and was off work for several weeks, mentors transferred schools and were no longer able to participate, cars broke down leaving high school students temporary without transportation and one of my most vocal supporters retired midyear. Through all this the program grew and developed. It certainly is not where I want it to be but there is unimaginable potential for growth. A seed only beginning to sprout.

 I have just concluded my first year and I am pretty confident that I learned more than any of my students. I ended this year exhausted but excited about what the future holds. My mentoring program was not a huge success but this experience taught me so much about what I want this program to become and how to get it there. It taught me that I am not a vessel alone traveling in a singular direction but rather a portion of an intricate machine that will only perform with all of its parts in perfect harmony.

So often classroom teachers sit quietly on the sidelines and allow administrators, state and district policies to solve problems that we see firsthand in our classrooms. This approach does not work. Teachers are the agents of real change. As a classroom teacher I was able to identify an area of need and create a support network to remediate the problem. The time has come for teachers to take the reins in problem solving and not sit idly by waiting for help to arrive. Identify a problem in your classroom, school or district. Work with colleagues and district leadership to developing a plan of action. Enact you plan and then learn from your mistakes and successes. If you’re interested in seeing real change this is what it’s going to take.

**Link to Every One Reads web site-**

<http://every1reads.jefferson.kyschools.us/>

**Lassiter Middle School web page**

<http://schools.jefferson.kyschools.us/Middle/Lassiter>

