

Tara's Letter to Families

“There’s a secret that real writers know that wannabe writers don’t, and the secret is this: It’s not the writing part that’s hard. What’s hard is the sitting down to write. What keeps us from sitting down is Resistance.” ~ Steven Pressfield, *The War of Art*

A real-life
classroom
story that
grounds our
philosophy

There’s a secret that real teachers know that wannabe teachers don’t, and the secret is this: all kids want to learn. Really, they do. Every single one of them.

When I find myself feeling down about how hard education can be, I come back to this one reality: that even teenagers, or maybe, *especially* teenagers, are innately curious beings. It just doesn’t always look like that.

A few years ago, I taught a teenager in Boston who we will call Bob). Bob was big, tall, and didn’t speak a lot. He had already been held back more than once so he was years older than the rest of his peers.

In the fall of 2021, Bob ended up in an elective course I was teaching called “Spoken Word and Creative Conversations.” On the first day of the class, Bob showed up late with his AirPods in, his music pumping from the cell phone that he wasn’t supposed to have. He sat down in the back row where I had asked students not to sit. We were all still required to wear masks then, and his mask was hovering around his chin. I was already in the swing of the lesson so I let Bob be, motioning for him to raise his mask over his nose. He didn’t.

To begin the first class, I gave students a lively preview of the course. My enthusiasm was, let’s just say, exponentially more than the combined enthusiasm elsewhere in the room. For a high school teacher, that’s not a rare discrepancy, so I was feeling fine. I thanked the students for choosing this elective.

“Ah, I didn’t choose this class. They just put it on my schedule,” one student chuckled. I felt my heart deflate.

“Same here,” another student added from the other side of the room. Several other students chimed in with the same. This was the most energy they’d shown all class.

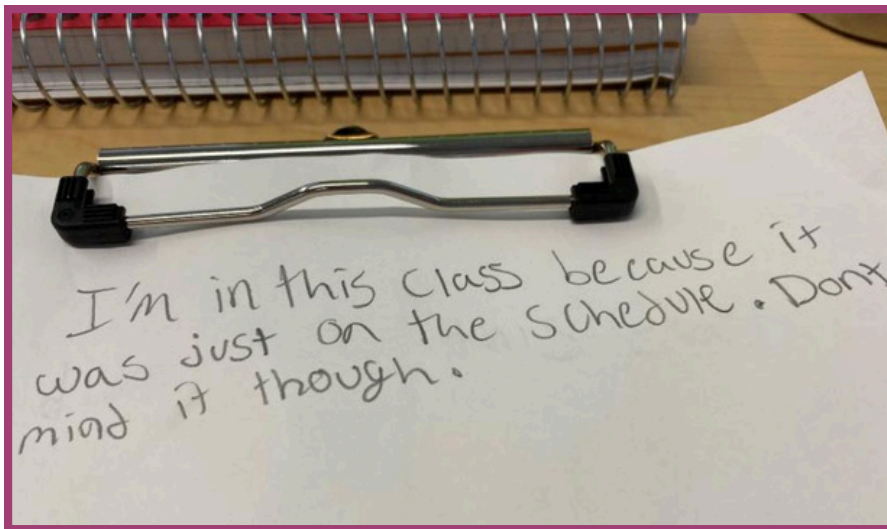
“How many of you did choose this class?” I asked, embarrassed. A few kids raised their hands. (Yay?)

“Well, that’s interesting,” I said, “Well, I’m so glad you’re all here!”

When class was over, I reviewed the short questionnaires that the students had filled out. Most of the students had completed the online version but Bob didn’t have his Chromebook so he wrote his on paper.

One of the questions I had asked students was, “Why did you choose to take this class?” I had anticipated answers like, “I love to write poetry,” or “I thought it sounded fun.” I know, how silly of me, especially since this wasn’t my first rodeo with teenagers. But teachers are innately hopeful and optimistic creatures.

This was Bob’s answer.



Don’t mind it though. My deflated heart inflated again, like the scene in *The Grinch*. I felt a flood of life, of energy, of “Hells YES!!!”

Lest I paint an inaccurate picture, however, let me give you the summary of how Bob’s year went. He missed a lot of class. He never put his phone away when I asked him to. We fought about where he sat, how he behaved, and words he used. (He called me a few colorful things—once a phrase that rhymes with “pucking pitch” when I asked him to refrain from cursing in class. I appreciated the perfect example of irony.)

In the end, Bob failed my class, as well as others, and didn't promote to the next grade. A friend told me that this year, Bob squeezed a line of hand sanitizer onto a school desk then lit it on fire. I pray for Bob. When I asked about him recently, I heard that he had transferred to a school that is more flexible than traditional public school. I was happy to hear that.

I still have hope for Bob because even Bob wanted to learn. I saw proof on that paper on the first day of school.

So what keeps Bob from learning? That is Resistance.



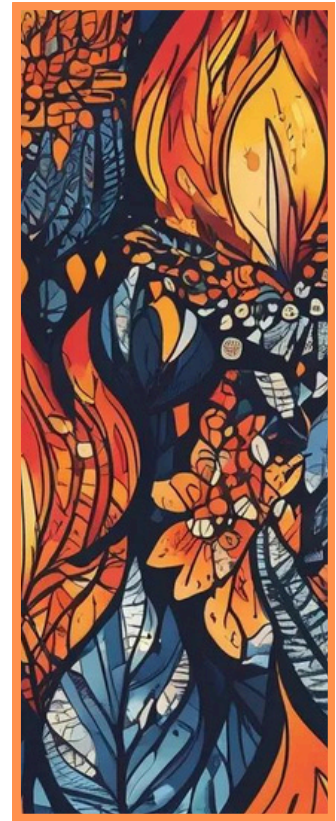
Students, especially our middle and high school kids, will always have Resistance to learning. Learning can be hard. Teenagers have raging hormones. The world is complicated; you know, all the things.

But at their most innate core, students want to learn.

As part of Wildewood's Roots Program, we help students identify the Resistance to learning. What is getting in the way of their success? Why is that Resistance putting up such a fight? The answers don't always come easily, but they exist, and we can find them.

The most encouraging part of this story is that if you are reading this right now, it means that there are incredible forces already pushing back against that Resistance. For the sake of balanced juxtaposition, let's call those forces Persistence. These are the forces that fight the Resistance—the people, places, experiences, actions, reactions, etc.—that support a student's natural inclination to want to learn. Whatever led you to this page are forces of great Persistence. The Roots program is another such force.

PERSISTENCE





In his memoir, *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah writes: “People love to say, ‘Give a man a fish, and he’ll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he’ll eat for a lifetime.’ What they don’t say is, ‘And it would be nice if you gave him a fishing rod.’ That’s the part of the analogy that’s missing.”

Right now, many schools are trying to *give* kids the fish and even *teach* them to fish. However, through no fault of their own, they have neither the time nor the resources to ensure nourishment for each student. Many students go home at the end of the day hungry, both literally and figuratively.

As former public school teachers, we know classroom teachers are superheroes. They face their own Resistance—overcrowded classrooms, underfunded schools, and societal issues galore, just to name a few. We are here to help not only our students, but their teachers, too. It takes a village and Roots is so happy to be part of that village. It’s a village where we set out to teach students to fish *and* give them the fishing rods. Or better yet, should we teach them how to *make* fishing rods!?! Let’s talk about that for a minute.

The world is always changing, perhaps faster now than ever before. The fishes’ oceans are more dirty and too warm; the fishes’ entire ecosystem is changing. Students can’t fish where they once could, and we are fighting over the waters. And yet, the tools and methods we can use to fish—*and* to clean and cool the water, fix the ecosystems, and make peace, for that matter—are also changing *and* ever more abundant.

In our program, we recognize that while the world changes, so do we. We can choose to grow or shrink with those changes: to Resist or Persist. And you don’t need to have taught thousands of students to know that our kids *want* to Persist. But do we, the village, give them the tools to do it? What if our kids find new tools before we do? What if they are the ones making the new tools before we even know how they did it?

The rate at which our world changes *requires* that we teach the roots of learning. For instance, we must talk about things like *purpose* and *integrity* as we accept Artificial Intelligence into our lives and our classrooms. We must talk about things like *attention* and *stamina* as our phones become appendages to our bodies. We must teach kids that *creativity* and *community* will inspire the solutions we need to persist peacefully as a human race. At a time when schools have to fight to teach *compassion*, *empathy*, and *acceptance* (an irony and a conversation for another day), Roots can be a space where those values are fundamental.

What if every child entered high school or college with the same curiosity, creativity, and confidence they showed when they learned to talk, walk, play, or ask questions? What if our villages helped kids find and nurture their passions? What if we asked them in the very same hour, “How can you improve?” and “Why was that so brilliant?” and they had answers to both questions? At Wildewood, we know it’s possible. Now let’s grow!