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If you can read this, thank a teacher -- and keep your hands off their benefits

Renée Schafer Horton | Feb. 24, 2011 NCR Today

There are few things in my life about which I am honestly proud.

It isn?t that I?ve lived a terrible life full of mayhem and horror, although I?ve had my share of selfishness and sin. It is simply that I?m pretty ordinary. I?ve not saved lives or jumped buildings in a single bound or given up my very comfortable bed to go live among the poor. I am not, as I?ve pointed out elsewhere [1], a saint.

But I have accomplished one or two tasks in my life where I said, ?I did that well.? One of those was teaching our children to ride bikes without ever using training wheels.

Another was teaching high school for five months -- three as a student teacher responsible for four class sections, and two as a certified teacher with three sections of English Language Learners and two of that difficult-but-delightful species we call freshmen.

To those who?ve never taught, five months probably seems like nothing. But that?s because they?ve never done the job. So please let me explain.

Five months in the average classroom for a teacher who has taught fewer than five years means things like this:

- 12 hour days and no weekends off due to planning lessons and grading.
- Losing sleep because you?re worried about the 14-year-old who confided she?d been gang-raped the prior year and the 15-year-old who gives you a very creepy vibe.
- Going without lunch because you notice the two immigrants from Vietnam huddled in a dark corner of the patio so you spend your lunch teaching them how to stand their ground in the cafeteria line and how to ask for the right food -- all through miming since the students neither speak nor understand English.

In other words, it means giving up your life because you are called Teacher. Or, in the parlance of Catholicism, laying down your life for a friend.

The aforementioned scenarios are not made-up; they happened at my school, with my students. Teaching was the most difficult thing I?ve done except for childbirth. And I am not unusual. Any teacher will tell you that the first five years are hell, the next five are purgatory and then, if you make it, you get to heaven about year 10.

Unless, of course, the principal fires you for challenging his leadership or RIFs [2] you due to budget cuts or reassigns you to a new subject matter that requires total revamping of your lesson plans -- instead of only revamping one-third of them each year.

If those things don?t happen, you get to the job many people view as ?cushy? -- long days for nine months of the year but weekends relatively free and then (can you hear the chorus of angels?), six glorious weeks of

summer vacation.

That vacation is when you relax, take required continuing education classes and work on next year?s lessons out in your backyard instead of at a desk with a student saying, ?Miss, can you help me?? or ?Teacher, will you show me again??

Studies show that half of new teachers quit within the first five years [3] due to the combination of stress, lack of respect and low pay. They feel guilty when they do so because they know just how much their students need them, not simply to learn reading, writing and critical thinking, but to be heard, loved and parented.

Fewer and fewer children seem to receive much parenting any more; they come to school desperate for far more than any book or lesson plan can offer. And teachers every day across this country give those things -- for the most part without any complaint and definitely with no recognition.

Yet, whenever a budget crisis comes, states look to cut education and the cries about ?bad teachers? become an anthem.

I admit I used to think similarly. I covered the education beat as a reporter and I saw the abuses of the system, including union presidents who defended ineffective teachers when they should have been fighting to fire them. It was easy to think that was the norm because -- surprise! -- I had never actually been responsible for a classroom.

Once I actually *did* the job of a teacher and was observing teachers daily, I saw that the vast majority are stellar at their jobs and sacrifice daily in a career few of us have the patience, creativity or tenacity to endure.

They accept low pay and near-constant blame for societal ills because they like kids, they like the creativity of teaching, and, yes, they like the benefits. They may be paid less than the manager at McDonalds [4], but they know a pension is waiting at retirement. Not a bad deal if they can hang on for 30 years.

But now folks are jumping on the union-busting bandwagon started in Wisconsin [5] and it?s getting on my last nerve.

So let me offer a challenge: You teacher-bashers can get rid of teacher pensions to balance your budgets if you are also willing to get your butt in a classroom to help teach your kids to read, write, think, and stand strong in the lunch line.

Until then, please sit down and wait to speak until you?re called upon.

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