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The Myers Experience

Inspiration creates a mindset to strive for, goals to complete, and a finished product worthy of praise. For most of my educational career, I have been more heavily influenced by my peers than by the man or woman standing in front of the classroom. That changed, however, when I was introduced to my inspirational seventh grade teacher. Ms. Tammy Myers pulled me out of the slums of primary school classes. From the very beginning, I knew that year would be a time of reflection. Ms. Myers let the class know that seventh grade was going to be very different from sixth. Every sixth grader was in a double block of ELA and spent most of the time trying to figure out how to switch the hormones into working brain cells. A new mindset, however, would be discovered through writing in seventh grade English; Ms. Myers made it clear that we would read, speak, and specifically write our way into discovery about how we can inspire others, as well as ourselves.

Ms. Myers began every class the same way: she would talk to us. As she stood in front of the class, she would pull one index card from the pile that had the name of every kid in the class. Ms. Myers asked us how our day was going; what classes did we have before hers? Were we doing anything exciting this weekend? She never jumped into teaching us with a PowerPoint or handout and always showed us that the only thing to keep the conversation flowing in the class would be us, her students. Before she asked us to respond to her questions, she asked us to write them down in our daily journal. This repetitive mode of beginning the class made sure we reflected on our thoughts. It was very possible that we could accidentally be made a fool of if we did not think about our responses first. Her methods were essential in teaching the cause and

effect of our thoughts and actions. However, Ms. Myers' simple compassion throughout the class initiated the trust that would help us all grow together as a class; however, the work she assigned was the spark that would help us grow individually.

Throughout the year, she worked with us to identify ourselves in each of the stories we read and essays we wrote. To relay the compassion she showed us every day, Ms. Myers had an entire unit built around the concept of treating others the way students wanted to be treated. She wanted to foster a compassionate environment that slowly added compassion to our personalities. One of Ms. Myers' main goals was to help us develop the concept of 'self.' She wanted to create units that continuously asked her students: "Who are you?" For example, one of our assignments was to read Ray Bradbury's "All Summer in a Day." The short story takes place in a classroom on Mars and results in a student not seeing the sun, which only comes out every seven years, because her classmates lock her in a closet. The tone of the story is melancholy and surrounds the theme of bullying. In the discussions that followed, Ms. Myers asked us to identify ourselves as a character from the story. Were we the child who put the girl in the closet? Did we see ourselves in the girl who was locked away? Maybe the worst of all, were we a bystander? And finally, did we like the character we identify with? These questions were essential to a group of seventh graders who just wanted to fit in. Ms. Myers followed the reading of the assignment with writing a compare and contrast essay about a character in the story and ourselves. If there was a character that we did not connect with, Ms. Myers wanted us to explain why and how we were different. On the other hand, if there were qualities in a character we connected with, we were to write about why those positive characteristics were essential to our identity. Directly locating ourselves within the story helped with our inevitable identity crisis.

Ms. Myers gave us the opportunity and inspiration to change the path we were going down through writing.

Ms. Myers' approachable teaching style reminded me, and my fellow peers, that everything in life is a process. She preached real-life advice to break down our goals into tiny steps and to celebrate each goal we completed. As her students, we thought that was easier said than done; however, Ms. Myers helped us remain strong by completing every assignment and every step with us. If she asked us to write a reflection on a film we watched, she did it with us; when we were assigned to research and create a community-based project, she helped us develop our presentation and still managed to have her own trifold right next to ours. There was never a moment when she didn't enforce the community environment she implemented and advocated for. It is important, especially in a middle school, for a teacher to remain constant in the students' malleable lives. Middle school is a time of unrelenting change and it was essential that Ms. Myers enforced what she taught throughout the year. Because Ms. Myers held to her teaching philosophy to focus around the students, she was able to keep my attention on topics she felt were essential to her class.

Constant change is not typically sought after in an adolescent life; however, it is ever-present. Growing up, I searched for groups or adjectives that would accept and describe me. Many adolescents go through this similar feeling in attempting to place themselves into society and to feel accepted by their peers. Some young people would be willing to do or say anything in order to belong and not to stand out from the crowd. Personally, sixth grade was the year in which I decided I wanted to be a sheep, but I tried to be an alpha-sheep without taking any responsibility for my actions. I wanted to be the mastermind behind many operations but in the public eye of none. In terms of my education, the only teachers I had were ones who wanted to

simply make sure none of their students were injured, which resulted in no true connections being made. Ms. Myers was right; seventh grade would give me a run for my money.

Day after day, Ms. Myers challenged my preconceived ideas of sympathy, empathy, and individuality. She made it known to me, as well as the rest of my peers, that we were going to work with her to figure out how we fit into our own individual roles in society. I did not realize how important this method would be to my growing personality. Her method, however, seemed to be more of a reflection of her than of the standards she had to teach. Everything Ms. Myers had us complete had a purpose. She wanted us to know that how and what we thought, said, and especially what we wrote was going to be read and understood as important. As a class, we wrote for purpose, a concept that was directed around Ms. Myers' prompts and classroom management. Her prompts always called for a self-reflection; however, no matter what the topic, we had to relate our response to a piece of literature. This way, when she randomly called on us to answer, we could either respond with our personal response or the literature response. Our self-reflected responses in class transformed into my personal life. Prior to that moment, I had been writing in a journal for the past few years. After taking a class with Ms. Myers and understanding the importance of personal reflection, I wrote in more detail. This way, when looking back at my writing, I could see the vital differences, or similarities, in my character. Ms. Myers helped us to grow, but allowed us to grow at our own pace in our writing. She helped our class work through our unique transition from the awkward puberty phase to the ever confusing "still awkward but a little more established" young adult phase of life.

Life is filled with tiny moments that morph our body and minds into a more manageable mess. There is such a thing as a perfect moment, but not a perfect life. Throughout my seventh grade year, Ms. Myers put together a plethora of perfect moments that made me start to

understand how my life could be affected by literature and especially by writing. She made sure every question or writing prompt she assigned had a meaning which would help her class discover their own meaning in life. Ms. Myers assured us that our reflections were important and, at the very least, we were important. This was simply a gateway to understanding our identity and our place in the world. Middle school is filled with struggle, heartbreak, confusion, and the most important thing one can give to a person who is struggling: purpose. My seventh grade ELA teacher gave us exactly that. She provided us with the tools needed to discover our identities through writing.

