

# 'Don't Let 'Em See You're Afraid,' Writer Told by School Official

Staff writer George N. Allen has just emerged from two months as a teacher in one of the city's "difficult" schools—John Marshall Junior High in Brooklyn. The school's principal committed suicide early this year after acts of violence in the school building and on the school grounds. Mr. Allen was assigned to obtain a teacher's job at the school, JHS 210, to learn first-hand the experiences of a teacher there, the attitudes and aptitudes of the students, the day-by-day problems of classroom instruction. School authorities, fellow teachers and students knew nothing of his true identity. From what Mr. Allen experienced himself and from what he learned from other teachers and supervisors there, he has written a series of articles the first of which appears today.

By **GEORGE N. ALLEN,**

World-Telegram Staff Writer.

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At 12:30 one afternoon early in September, a dozen teachers at John Marshall Junior High School in Brooklyn were relaxing in the classroom where they had just eaten their "paper-bag lunches."

"Well," sighed a veteran instructor, stubbing her cigaret in a metal ashtray, "it's time I started back to my dungeon."

With that, she stood up and walked dispiritedly to the classroom which had obviously become just that for her—a dungeon.



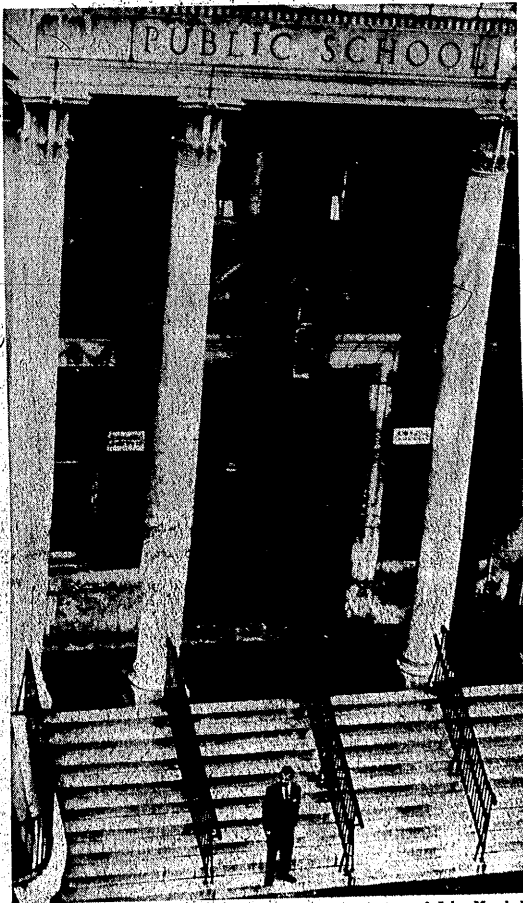
George N. Allen

As a result of my two months as an "undercover teacher" at John Marshall Junior High, I know why teachers call their classrooms dungeons. My "adjustment" class included some of the worst toughs in the school.

### Emotionally Unstable.

Whether the youngsters in my class learned anything is moot. I learned a great deal. Here are some of the things I found from my own observation or in talking with other teachers who shared their experiences with me:

- Many of the students there don't have the emotional stability, the mental capacity or the desire for academic learning. They don't belong there.
- Much of the classroom instruction is a farce, based on a philosophy that aims at "just keeping them quiet."
- There is open defiance in the classrooms. Teachers have been threatened with physical violence by students.
- Decent children are terrorized by hoodlums in classrooms and corridors.
- Because two rapes have been committed at the school, girl students are required to go to the lavatories in pairs.
- Teacher morale is low, beaten down by the



Staff writer George N. Allen stands on the front steps of John Marshall Junior High School in Brooklyn where for two months as an "undercover teacher" he taught one of the toughest classes in the school.

Photo by Stanislas.

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frustration of trying to teach children who can't or won't learn and by endless re-tape required of the teacher by school authorities.

● Administrators in the city school system were so lax that an employment reference I submitted in applying for a teaching job was never checked.

● The training I had undergone to obtain my teaching license left me badly unequipped to deal with the realities of my classroom.

## 'Difficult' School.

John Marshall JHS 210 at Rochester Ave. and Park Pl. in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, is a "difficult" school, one of three schools which have armed policemen on full-time patrol inside the building.

The reasons for the armed guard remain fresh in the memory of the teachers at 210.

Last January a 13-year-old girl was raped by a fellow student at knifepoint in the ground floor vestibule of the school at 11:30 in the morning. Two days later a patrolman assigned to the school was slugged by one of six nonstudents who were loitering in the yard at 3 p.m. Twenty minutes later the school's recreation director was beaten up in the basement recreation room by two boys from another school.

## Capped by Suicide.

And on Jan. 28, Dr. George Goldfarb, principal of JHS 210, committed suicide by plunging from the roof of his apartment house.

All these episodes are a matter of school and police record.

I was assigned to JHS 210 to discover what it's like from the inside. I was to find out if schools like 210 deserved the headlines they received early this year, if the educational system of the world's richest city was guilty of the long roster of failings with which it has been charged, to see for myself whether teachers actually are afraid of some students.

In my two months as a teacher, I found my job to be physically exhausting, emotionally wearing and filled with days of grinding frustration. I was overworked, threatened and frightened.

## He's Wished Luck.

When I first arrived at the school, the administrators told me where my classroom was, handed me a box of class records and wished me luck. Only later, when fellow teachers offered their condolences, did I learn that I was in charge of 30 ninth-graders who had been swept together in what is kiddily termed an "adjustment" class—a euphemism for the worst kids in school.

With IQs ranging from 60 to 90, most of the class members were emotionally unstable, lacked the mental ability to do normal work or had no interest in learning.

One of the first bits of advice I received was this chiller from an assistant principal.

"You must never let them see that you're afraid," he told me on Sept. 4 before school opened. "Even if you are afraid, you have to walk into your classroom and make them think that you are not afraid."

On Sept. 9, I learned what the assistant principal meant. That morning I had to stand up to an insolent 17-year-old—identified by his wearing apparel as a gang member—while my class watched silently to see who would win the battle for supremacy in the classroom. How I coped with this situation will be told in my next article.

## Receives Threat.

On another day, I removed from the classroom a young giant who had taken to sleeping in his seat. When I handed him over to the school's guidance counselor, the boy turned to me and snarled:

"You better watch your step, mister, or I'll hit you."

It wasn't until the next day that I learned I had tangled with what the teachers of JHS 210 described as their prize psychotic, a young savage who was headed, they said, for murder.

## TOMORROW: Cops and Baby Sitters

Staff Writer George N. Allen tells how some teachers view their jobs at John Marshall Junior High School.

ence. But another teacher, attempting to break up a classroom brawl, wasn't so lucky.

The teacher grabbed one of the battlers who promptly heaved him over his shoulder and flung him sprawling in the corridor in front of scores of students who had broken out of their own rooms to watch the excitement. Subsequent inquiry revealed the boy was lectured but not suspended.

During my days at 210 I learned from fellow teachers that there were numerous incidents in which girls students complained that they had been sexually molested by boys students.

Let it be thought that these are isolated incidents, attention should be called to the rigid rule at John Marshall put into effect by school authorities for the protection of 210 students. Section 5 of the school's official regulations deal with leaving the room. It specifies: "Girls must leave in pairs."

This safety measure has not been entirely successful, as this series of articles will disclose.

Teachers at JHS 210 told me candidly that they cannot carry out many of what they regard as the unreal educational theories and policies handed down by administrative superiors who, they say, don't understand the problems of the classroom teacher.

I soon determined that success as a teacher in important rooms at 210 is measured not in terms of ability to impart learning but in terms of ability to maintain discipline.

## Other Wrongs.

There is much more wrong at JHS 210. Too many teachers are assigned to instruct subjects for

sign to them. For example, a gym teacher struggles with classes in art, social studies and English.

I found that the widely publicized suspension order which gives principals the right to oust unruly pupils, is regarded by teachers as largely window dressing. Frequent suspensions, they say, reflect discredit on the school administrators. They were not impressed with the fact that in one month last year 1500 students were suspended from the city's entire system of 900 schools.

Although salary is always a factor in teacher morale, I discovered that it wasn't the primary reason for the low morale at 210.

## Frustration Is Worst.

It's the frustration of trying to teach children who cannot learn or who do not want to learn. Actually, the Board of Education is getting better teachers at 210 than conditions warrant.

I found many teachers return year after year to their demanding job because they are dedicated teachers or have become teachers years ago when teaching conditions were better, now find it too late to change professions.

But I found some teachers who are so busy they give few examinations and don't even bother to record their pupils' achievements in their record books. Still others have second and third jobs which prevent them from devoting their full time and energy to their main occupation.

## Training Inadequate.

One thing was clear to me. Although I had my college degree, my education courses and my license to teach in New York City schools, my training didn't prepare me for the role of school teacher in JHS 210.

I wasn't prepared for students who started vacant y around the classroom one moment then asked to rely the next. I wasn't prepared for students who challenged my authority.

I was worn out at the close of each day because of the endless paper work, the administrative routines and the burden of maintaining a prison atmosphere in the classroom. I soon found out why they call them dungeons.