

## MY YEAR AS A TEACHER

*Too Many Bad Apples for Teacher Discipline problems steal valuable learning time*

Series: MY YEAR AS A TEACHER. **Chapter 3** / Discipline

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"LOOK, MRS. Sachar, a knife," Kevin said. I heard a pop and a whoosh, and when I spun around from my place at the blackboard, I saw a piece of metal glistening. It was the midst of my second class of that Tuesday morning, and things had been going well, for a change. I was teaching a lesson on fractions, and the kids, for the most part, were catching on. I had never expected this.

"Bring me that knife, now," I said, trying to sound calm. "No, Mrs. Sachar, I don't think so. Look what this knife can do."

All eyes were on Kevin.

Again. Pop. Whoosh. The handle of the cartridge was black and the blade that sprang from it looked no more than five inches. But it looked sharp.

I ordered one of the girls at the back of the room to find a security guard, a dean or an assistant principal. "Kevin, do you want the security guard to take the knife away or do you want to give it to me? I say bring it to me now." I was staring at him with rage in my face and my voice. "Now!"

"And what if I don't?" he said.

"Bring it to me now!"

He stood in the aisle three seats from the front of the room and didn't budge. He held the blade straight in the air, his hand clenched in a fist around the cartridge, his legs planted squarely on the wooden floor.

There were 24 other students in class 8-7 that day, but they meant nothing at that moment. It was only me and Kevin sandwiched into the vast space of confrontation that can destroy a new teacher. Who would win?

No security guard was showing up, no assistant principal and no dean.

The room was silent for a few seconds.

"Just give it to her," one of the boys said, laughing. "She's not so bad."

Kevin dropped his head. He looked sad and a little confused. The boy who had told him to hand it over was one of the slowest kids in the class, but one of the best liked, the class athlete. His orders meant something.

"Thank you for giving it to me," I said, even though Kevin hadn't left his third-row stance. He pushed the blade into the cartridge.

He finally walked slowly to the front of the room and handed me the weapon.

"Thank you," I said. "Now, go back to your seat and begin the lesson."

I put the weapon into my bag and rummaged around for a piece of chalk. I tried to write on the board, but couldn't. My hand was trembling.

I thought I should give a lecture about school safety and weapons, anything to show that I was in charge and unfazed. But I couldn't fake it. I was devastated and terrified and praying the class would end.

The bell rang, and the students filed out. Kevin approached my desk.

"I have nothing to say to you," I said. "Get away from me."

"But it's not a knife," he said. "It's a letter opener."

"I don't care what the hell it is," I said. "Get to class."

As soon as he was out of the room, I tried the weapon myself. It was a letter opener.

Still, it was the sort of episode I had most feared before I took my job as an eighth-grade math teacher at Walt Whitman Intermediate School in Flatbush, Brooklyn.

And it was the sort of episode I was sure I'd never confront.

THE STATISTICS citywide are ominous - 1,854 kids caught with weapons in school last year, 183 robberies, 1,346 assaults and 105 drug seizures. In junior highs alone, 54 teachers were assaulted in the first four months of the 1988-1989 school year. But I had decided years ago that students pulled knives and weapons because they felt threatened or bored. Kids wouldn't need weapons in my class, I thought, because I'd give them productive ways to show off - like solving problems on the board. As for excitement, I'd be the star attraction.

It didn't work out that way. After the letter-opener episode came the brass knuckles episode. And after that came the plastic-dart gun episode, in which 11 blue and red dart guns went off in my room one afternoon. We also had the stink bomb episode and the pencil duel, not to mention a few fistfights.

I lived in fear that the next episode would involve a gun with bullets, that someone would be seriously hurt. Later in the year, a gun did go off in a classroom in my school, and a girl whose coat was grazed came an inch away from death, the principal told the teachers.

The unpredictability of all this classroom craziness made me frantic, as did the unknown timing of the "runs," when students suddenly broke into a highway of hysteria in the narrow corridors or inside a darkly lit stairwell. In a takeoff on "Colors," a movie about warring street gangs, students wearing red bandanas would pit themselves against students wearing blue bandanas, and the careening kids would knock over anything or anyone not moving as fast as they were. Twice, I got knocked over and my books and pens went flying into the mess.

Intruders also made their way into the school, and one day in the spring, several older boys from outside the school assaulted a teacher during class. The teacher did not return for the rest of the year, and when he came back this year, he was assaulted again, though not seriously injured. Another teacher told me of being assaulted while on cafeteria duty a few years ago, disabling her for weeks.

BUT FIGHTS and weapons and runs were the smallest part of the discipline problem. The real impediment to teaching came from events much more petty and seemingly insignificant - a boy who wouldn't sit down, a girl who demanded a bathroom pass, a student who insisted on combing her friend's hair in class. Of the five classes I taught, one, 8-12, posed such discipline problems that I dreaded it. In particular, I dreaded four girls who were rougher and tougher than any other students I taught.

One of the students, Carol, showed no interest in the academic part of school. It was the play she loved. She was consistent in her stubbornness. While others in her class were constantly angling for changes in seat assignments, she sat every day in the fourth seat in the first row, by the window - the better to stand up and yell

to passers-by on the street below. But the yelling was a mild weapon compared to her hairbrush.

"Will you do mine today?" Tamara asked Carol one morning, a clue that I was going to have to battle the hairbrush yet again.

Tamara, one of the brightest kids in the class, had come to detest me from the early weeks. Five weeks into the fall term, I had confiscated her umbrella as she was preparing to hit one of the boys in the groin. When I called her mother to complain about Tamara's rude behavior, her mother promised to give Tamara a whipping, despite my pleas for more humane discipline. The next day, Tamara said, "Thanks for ruining my life, Mrs. Sachar."

Tamara and Carol had an on-again, off-again relationship that had more to do with me than I would have liked. When I was able to interest Carol in working on the lesson - and that happened once in a while - Tamara couldn't get her hair done. But on the days when both of them thought me the devil, the beauty salon in the first row was open for business.

I went over to Carol before class started and tried kindness. "Sweetheart, could you help me out today and put the beauty supplies away?" I asked.

"Oh, Mrs. Sachar, please," Carol whined. "Just for a few minutes. Tamara needs new braids."

This was the hardest tactic to confront - begging. I was always afraid that if I gave in to it - whether for hair-braiding privileges or bathroom passes - it would come back to haunt me the next day. But if I turned angry or stern, I'd have a fight on my hands that I'd probably lose. I never knew which approach to take.

"Carol, don't start this with me again," I said. "Just put the brush and the mirror and the makeup away, and save it for after school."

"Oh, Mrs. Sachar, it's no problem. We won't talk, I promise." It was tempting to give in because if she really didn't talk, I could teach more. And if I took the hairbrush away, she'd definitely talk. The dilemmas of discipline drove me nuts, and I wondered how others had figured it out.

"Carol, put it away." She didn't, and the time was passing. I started the class with a simple problem. But no sooner had one girl started to answer than the aroma of the grease wafted up to me, and I saw the hairbrush moving in gentle strokes on Tamara's hair. "Carol," I said, hoping she'd respond to one final gentle reminder.

"What?" she said sweetly, continuing to brush.

"You know what," I said, turning to the board.

"Well, if she's going to do Tamara's hair, I'm going to do mine," another girl said under her breath. She pulled a hairbrush out of her knapsack. I was losing control. I could feel the class falling out of my hands. One of the boys put on his headphones. Now, in addition to the giggles of teenage girls, I had music pumping. I pulled out my marking book and threatened to give zeros to anyone without a notebook open. The teacher trainer, a reading specialist who was available to coach new teachers, had told me this was sometimes a good approach to take with a tough class.

The boy with the music didn't hear what I was saying, so his headphones stayed on. And the hairbrushes stayed out. A few students sat up straighter, but they weren't the ones causing the trouble. The noise level did not subside.

I said it again. "Who wants a zero? I'm giving zeros now."

I felt awkward. It wasn't my style to give zeros. But the problem was, in that class, I didn't have a style. I was somebody different every day, trying desperately to find an approach that would work.

I went to the back of the room and opened the door. "Is there an assistant principal out here?" I asked. My supervisor, an assistant principal named Vikki Kowalski, came to the door of her office, which was across the hall.

"Miss Kowalski," I said, loud enough for all the students to hear, "I think we have a problem in here today." She walked across the hall and into my room. I heard knapsacks hurriedly being zipped as the contraband was stuffed away and notebooks were finally pulled out. In three minutes, my classroom was in perfect order. I still felt beaten, because I'd had to turn to someone else. But it was better than 23 more minutes of chaos.

IT WASN'T always possible to find an assistant principal to rescue me from a bad scene.

Seventh period, Dec. 21, I was on my own with 8-12, that most difficult of difficult classes. The lesson had started smoothly. There was the usual din of whispering and love notes passing back and forth.

"Holy, mother - - -," one student yelled out. "What's that smell?"

"Oh, gross," another moaned. I smelled nothing.

Two boys in the back of the room jumped up, pinched their noses and ran to the windows. It was a frigid day, but they opened the windows high, without my permission, and began yelling into the empty street.

"Air it out, air it out," one boy yelled.

The smell, whatever it was, was making its way to the other side of the room.

"Who did it?" Carol yelled out.

"Yeah, who did it?" Tamara said.

Two girls put their heads on their hands. One other boy stayed in his seat. The rest of the kids were running around the room like their clothes were on fire.

"If you want to act like lunatics, get out of the room," I yelled into the hysteria. Six students bolted for the door, threw it open and ran down the hall.

It was a lame plea for control, and I knew it. But I didn't know what to say. The odor that had finally made it to the front of the room was not dissipating. It seemed to be getting more intense.

The librarian knocked loudly at the door. I let her in. "What is going on in here?" she boomed. She had two of my students by the collar and was trying to herd them back into my classroom. "Get in there," she yelled at the boys.

"Whoever wants to proceed with the lesson, move to the front of the room," I said, and four students came forward. The rest of the students were still running around. I had no idea what to do to quiet the room. Yet again, I was begging for the bell to ring.

And, when it did, my favorite student told me what had gone on. "Don't you know what a stink bomb is, Mrs. Sachar?" he said. "It was Jerry's." I wondered how he knew. But that's always the way it was; the kids always knew what I didn't.

AS MY struggles mounted with that tough class, I was relieved to hear that other teachers, too, had hard times. And when I found unspoken evidence of a teacher's

troubles, I felt vindicated. Soon after the stink bomb episode, I found a stack of seven papers stapled together in the teachers' lounge. A student had written 1,000 times, "I will respect the teacher." Another teacher told me he had kids write, "I will always obey Mr. - - - - -."

In March, one teacher literally threw a child out of the room, and when the kid, tears streaming down his face, knocked to be readmitted, the teacher slammed the door in his face. In April, I heard of a class in which one student, in front of the teacher, pulled down another boy's pants. And on the second-to-last day of school, a teacher sent two boys to the seventh-grade dean because they'd erased his chalkboard in the middle of class and started dancing on the desks.

With 8-12, I faced it all - students cheating on tests right in front of me; girls passing love notes to boys or gossip notes to each other; students pleading for no homework, then failing to do the little I assigned. One day in the middle of the year, I tried having a heart-to-heart talk with the class. We agreed on changes. I would give homework only three times a week, and they would show up for class on time and behave for the 43 minutes they were there. I lived up to my end of the bargain; they renege on theirs.

I started to ask the more experienced teachers what they did to control the students in their worst classes.

Some said I should call parents, so I tried that for the first few months of school; every night, I was calling five or 10 homes, which was not a testament to my diligence but to my failure to control the classes. That approach only worked sporadically - typically, the kid would behave for a day or so and then revert to bad habits by the end of the week. And it often put me in difficult situations. I'd suggest to a parent that his child not hang out with Carol or Tamara and then Carol or Tamara would confront me. "Why you telling people I'm bad, Mrs. Sachar?" Carol asked me one day. "That's not nice."

Other teachers told me to use the dean system. Each grade has a dean who is supposed to mete out discipline, contact parents, even suspend students. But the dean for the eighth grade wouldn't review a case unless it was written up on the proper blue card, and I often didn't have a blue card with me. Because I taught in 10 rooms, I occasionally didn't have adequate supplies - like blue cards - on hand.

Midway through the year, I befriended the seventh-grade dean, who seemed to have an excellent rapport with even the roughest kids in the school. He willingly took my most difficult students and required them to sit in his office during class. But I felt too guilty to call him as often as I needed him because he usually had his hands full with the seventh-graders.

EARLY ON, I figured one way to turn things around was to make my classes more fun. So, one day I came to 8-12 with a plan to play math baseball.

I was excited, and so were the kids. Even one boy who didn't know basic arithmetic and who had already told me twice that I didn't know how to teach, seemed invigorated.

I'd bought small candy prizes for the winning team and written simple math problems I was sure the kids could do. I'd even found a stopwatch so I could set a limit on a student's time at bat. For a change, I had the whole period mapped out in

my mind. I felt prepared.

But, after assigning each kid to one of two teams, I saw that things weren't going as planned.

"What's this?" I said after I turned around from drawing a scoreboard on the chalkboard. On one side of the room were four kids, and, on the other, 22. I was certain the kids had misunderstood my directions. "The ones on the left and the twos on the right," I repeated.

But no one moved.

One of the girls spoke first. "I don't want to be on that team," she whined. "I'm staying here."

Then came another of the girls. "I want to be on this team."

The smartest kid in the class sat quietly by the quietest kid in the class. They had all the smarts on their team, but not enough players.

I wanted to call the whole thing off, but decided to give the kids a second chance. I again numbered them into two teams, and they divided up more equally that time. I explained the rules of the game: A team gets to bat until it makes three outs. An out comes when the batter gets the wrong answer. Each kid gets to pick a single, double, triple or homer. The higher the number of bases, the harder the problem. I told the kids to make up names for their teams. They didn't. I called the "ones" up first. They put the slowest kid in the class to bat.

"I'll take a triple," he said.

"Okay, great. How much is 23 times 14?" I asked, starting the stopwatch. I gave him a piece of chalk to work the problem at the board.

"I can't do that," he said. I told him to try, but no luck. One out.

The next player came up to bat. Another out. Then a third player. He got on base with a single, but his teammates didn't seem to care. Two students on the team were arguing, another was drawing pictures. Three boys were reading Marvel comics. Two other kids were playing cards.

"Aren't you guys going to cheer for your teammate?" I asked. A paper airplane dove through the air, then took a tailspin onto the floor.

"This is stupid," one boy said, after he bombed on his turn at bat. That gave the first team three outs.

We'd only been playing math baseball for 18 minutes, and there were 25 more minutes to go. I didn't know what I'd done wrong.

I told the other team to come to bat, but they just took up the comic books, playing cards and radios from their friends on the other team. No one cared about math baseball.

"Okay, forget it," I yelled. "Just forget it." I didn't know what I was going to say next, but I was livid. "I came in here ready for all of us to have fun, and you kids blew it. You blow it every day. Can't you ever sit still? Can't you ever try to do it right?"

"Take down your homework assignment," I said. "And sit quietly until the bell rings." At least I could always count on that. The bell would ring, eventually, and the class would end.