

DIEGO lived in a shelter for homeless women and their children. “I have been put into the lives of my students for a special reason,” I reminded myself. “It is my job to create a home in the classroom, to generate joy, to give love, and to work hard.”

The students, giddy with excitement, threw a birthday party for Diego. We spent two days with mini-lessons in Writer’s Workshop, creating detailed and delightful cards. As each child read their personal message to Diego, I saw the Principles of Learning, heard the elements of Balanced Literacy, and felt the essentials of character development practiced and internalized. I watched twelve children with varying degrees of social, emotional, academic, and physical handicaps celebrate each other. After reading his card, one of my students, Gabriel, asked, “Can I speak from my head and my heart now, Mrs. Kenner?”

“Absolutely, Gabriel! Go for it!”

Gabriel was a magnificent boy, as close to an angel as I had. He had a rare blood disorder and needed to be absent several days a month to have whole body transfusions. He never complained. He was gentle and an enthusiastic participant. Gabriel and Diego formed an immediate bond. “Well, Diego,” Gabriel said with conviction, “I want you to know if you ever need anything, anything at all, you can always count on me.”

I learned as much from my students as they learned from me. They reinforced my desire to push for understanding and held the most important roles in strengthening my skills as a lifelong learner. For the next twenty-seven years, the rewards I found in teaching Special Ed—small moments loaded with power and inspiration—prepared me for the life I lived, as resilience, tolerance, empathy, faith in the unknown, maintaining a sense of humor

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(for sure) and a sense of community all paved a clear path that merged my life inside the classroom with my life outside it. I was on a perpetual search for hope, for optimism, for assurance in a world often filled with fear and uncertainty. By witnessing how the students and their families made difficult decisions through hardships and limitations, challenges and setbacks, grace was revealed.