AP Drama

BY MARLENE CARTER

Dorsey High School offers an advanced placement (AP) course that the College Board knows nothing about. I call it AP Drama. Although Dorsey scores low on most AP exams, we get high marks on this one. Every year in May, there is high drama as we prepare for the AP exams. This year was typical.

The Day of the AP English Exam

7:00 A.M.

I am on my way out the door to buy doughnuts for students taking this morning’s AP test when I receive a call from Ashley, our soon-to-be salutatorian.

“Mrs. Carter,” Ashley begins, “my mother says we don’t have the money for the AP test.”

I gasp. “Do you qualify for the fee waiver?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Come to the test anyway,” I say. “Bring as much money with you as you can.”

7:35 A.M.

Shaylah arrives to pay for her exam. “Mrs. Carter, I don’t have all the money,” she says.

“How much do you have?” I ask.

“Forty dollars.”

I take a deep breath. The test costs $70 for students who do not qualify for the fee waiver.

“Some of the teachers said they would donate to help students who can’t pay,” I say, writing a note and attaching it to a large envelope. “Walk around and ask a few teachers. Every donation we can get will help.” She leaves on her mission, and I pray for a miracle.

“You didn’t sign up?” I ask. [Johnny] is reportedly the best calculus student in the school, but he has not signed up to take the AP calculus test, which will be given in three days.

7:45 A.M.

Johnny arrives to finish his registration. “Mrs. Carter, when is the test going to be over?”

“12:30,” I say.

He frowns. “I have to go to work.”

I put my pen down and look him in the eye. “Do not worry about your job. You can’t be thinking about getting to work while you’re taking the test. All right?”

“All right.”

“Yeah,” says Jose jokingly. “Don’t think about how you’re gonna lose your job.” I glare at him.

Johnny asks, “How do I sign up to take the AP calculus test?”

“You didn’t sign up?” I ask. He is reportedly the best calculus student in the school, but he has not signed up to take the AP calculus test, which will be given in three days. “Johnny, why didn’t you sign up five weeks ago?”

“I never got the sign-up list.”

I calm myself down. I don’t want to upset him before this test. “I can’t make any promises, but we will try to order you a test.”

8:00 A.M.

I am standing in the library, collecting the last of the money before the exam begins. This last-minute money collection is what takes the AP Drama to its height. The deadline for payment was Friday, but, as usual, several students have missed the deadline. As the test is ready to begin, I have five students who have either partial payments or no payments at all. I contemplate writing a check for $235, then remember that my own son has been begging me for another pair of tennis shoes; I have three sons who are always growing out of shoes, pants, and everything else.

Then the miracle happens. A number of teachers give $5 each; the teacher next door gives $25; and the librarian gives $20. On top of this, our angel, Mr. Talt, who has been teaching at Dorsey since I was a student here 30 years ago, writes a check for $140! With not a minute to spare, we have enough to pay for almost all the exams. My share will be only $30.

8:05 A.M.

Just when we think the drama is over, there is a new complication. Kamal, one of the five students who did not have his money, has left the library. He didn’t know about the donations and assumed that he would not be allowed to take the test.

I go to one of his friends who is also taking the exam. “Gaby, where is Kamal?”

“He left.”

“Where did he go?”

She pauses, biting her lip. “I’m not supposed to tell.”

“Gaby, where is he?” I persist. “I have the money to pay for his test.” I am trying to keep my voice low, but I am not successful. Several students are looking at us.

She hesitates, then decides to betray the confidence. “He left school with Ju-Ju.”

“He left campus! Do you know where he’s going?”

“No.”

“Do you have his pager number?” Now, as we all know that students are not allowed to carry pagers to school, I am putting Gaby on the spot again.

“I don’t know his number.”

“Who does?” We ask another of his close friends, but apparently no one knows his “new” pager number.

8:10 A.M.

I leave to wander the campus in search of Kamal. I am hoping that some adult prevented him from leaving. I go first to tardy sweep where 80 students are standing in lines being harangued by a vice principal who tells them...
why they will never be able to hold jobs if they don't learn to come to school on time.

Then I go to the football coach who is also a history teacher. He has not seen Kamal since yesterday, but he gives me my next lead when I ask about Ju-Ju.

"I need to find Ju-Ju," I say. "Do you know his real name?"

"Ju-Ju. Yeah, that's Raymond Johnson."

"I need to know if Raymond has a pager."

"I know who you can ask," the coach says and shouts out to his history students, "What's Ju-Ju's sister's name?" I write down the response. "And what's his wife's name?" I write down her name too: Emma. I decide that the "wife" will probably know more.

"Does anyone know where Emma is this period?" I ask the class.

"She's in Ms. Nathan's class," someone responds. So I walk across campus to Emma's class.

8:20 A.M.

"Emma, I'm looking for Kamal. We think he's with Raymond. Do you know where Raymond is?"

"He's in first period, I guess." Smart answer from a loyal girlfriend.

"I don't think so, Emma. I think he left campus. I need Kamal to take his AP test today. Do you have Raymond's pager number?"

"He don't have a pager. But I could look in the parking lot to see if his car is there."

So we walk to the parking lot. She looks. "He's not here."

8:30 A.M.

Disappointed, I walk Emma back to class (so she won't be caught in the tardy sweep) and return to my classroom. Meanwhile, 35 seniors are taking the AP English literature exam in the library. Kamal, soon to be a freshman at the University of California, Berkeley, is riding around the streets of Los Angeles with Ju-Ju.

The drama is over—for today. Tomorrow, we give the AP Spanish language exam to 31 students, and I hear that we have yet to locate a sufficient number of tape recorders. I am expecting high marks in AP Drama again tomorrow.

Marlene Carter has taught English in Los Angeles for 24 years. She is an associate director of the UCLA Writing Project and a regional professional development coordinator for the California Writing Project.