Teacher Motivated by a Sense of Mission

BY ART PETERSON

“I never learned the language of power. I have a master’s degree in the language of love.”

These words were at the center of a poem written and shared by Marcus Mason at the Project Outreach Summer Institute, a National Writing Project gathering held at the University of California, Berkeley, in August. Mason, a teacher-consultant with the Southern Nevada Writing Project (SNWP) and a member of that site’s Project Outreach team, explains: “I was listening to groups at the institute articulate their own legitimate interests and grievances, and someone said ‘You’ve got to understand the language of power.’ And I got to thinking, I’ve read my Machiavelli, and power doesn’t always work that well. Love works.”

To understand the roots of this sentiment, one needs to understand a bit more about Marcus Mason. Mason is not one of those teachers who made the decision to go into education because he enjoys reading books and likes being around kids. Not to say Mason does not possess these qualities, but for him they weren’t motivations of the first order. Rather, Mason, who is also a Pentecostal preacher, became a teacher because he was “called to teach.”

This calling came when Mason was a senior in high school, a little late to do much about the 1.7 grade point average with which he was saddled. Although this less-than-stellar academic performance eliminated him from the competition for a scholarship at the private college on which he had set his sites, the setback was to prove a benefit both to Mason and to the National Writing Project.
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The University of Nevada, Las Vegas, had the good sense to admit him to the university in spite of his below-middling academic record. At the university, he became a student in the English 100 class of writing project teacher Tracy Church-Guzzio, where he had his first experience with the writing process and began for the first time to sense the power of writing. He went on to earn his teaching credentials, all the while working as a school janitor.

"I had a huge advantage in my education classes," Mason says. "I was hanging around teachers and classrooms where I observed what was going on. I was at the top of my class, because every day I was able to bring to my classes the real-world school experience I was picking up on the job."

Upon graduation, Mason gave up his janitor's job and—taking a pay cut—began teaching. He taught for three years at an upper-middle-class school before eventually landing a job at H.P. Fitzgerald Elementary School. Fitzgerald is a predominantly African American school on the Historic Westside of Las Vegas. It's a neighborhood, says Mason, where few outsiders go "unless they are scouting for basketball players or entertainers."

Working at H.P. Fitzgerald, he caught the attention of Southern Nevada Writing Project Director Rosemary Holmes-Gull. Holmes-Gull says, "Marcus was born and bred in Las Vegas. When we interviewed him, we saw he had a passion for the kids in his neighborhood. He was constantly on the phone to parents and was always visiting their homes."

Invited to join the SWNP Summer Institute, Mason jumped at the chance. "I never dreamed myself a good writer," he said. "I figured I'd be in English classes the rest of my life." The summer institute wasn't exactly an English class, but it did lend Mason to a new understanding of the nature and importance of writing both for him and for his students.

While in the institute, he wrote an 1-search paper that focused on some personal issues. He and his father, also a Pentecostal preacher, had not been on the best of terms. Mason wanted to explore this relationship by reflecting on himself. "What makes me act, what makes me smile and upsets me, what calms me." He explored all these matters and read many articles, which increased his understanding of these issues, which he then examined in the context of his relationship with his father. Because the content of the writing was so important to him, Mason saw the necessity to get it right. "I knew I had to write in complete sentences," he says. Mason credits his wife, Beverly, a technical writer, with helping him in this and other aspects of his writing.

"When I finished this piece," Mason says, "I asked my father to read it." The result was a dramatic change in the relationship between father and son. "Now my father is my best friend."

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Further, Mason came away from the summer institute and from his writing with a better understanding of what his students need to succeed as writers. They need, he found, to write about what matters to them. Mason has begun the semester by throwing out this writing prompt to his fifth-graders: "How many of you have ever had a whoopin'?" For all of them, this was a topic that mattered. They wrote with passion.

Building on what matters to students, he uses the work of artists with whom his students are familiar, like DMX and Tupac Shakur. Once, after sharing with the class a celebrity profile interview with DMX in which the artist describes how he overcame difficult circumstances, Mason asked his students, "How is your life similar to that of DMX? How is it different?" One student, Amy, wrote of her five months living with her mother in a women's shelter. "From then on, I saw Amy differently. This is something I needed to know, and I wouldn't have known it if I hadn't given students a chance to write seriously about their life situations."

But Mason recognizes that school writing needs to be much more than a vehicle for personal reflection and self-discovery. He wants to help his students use writing as a route to a better life. He quotes Shakur's book, The Rose That Grew from Concrete (Simon & Schuster, 1999): "You'd be amazed to see a rose grow in a concrete jungle."

Mason's primary literacy vehicle for promoting this growth is across-the-curriculum writing. "My students are writing all the time. Sometimes, I even think I'm tricking them into writing."

Writing in his class can be something of a production. When the kids are doing their inchworm experiments, converting inches to centimeters, as well as many other hands-on activities that lead to writing, they are dressed in the scrubs Mason has obtained from a local hospital. "I want to simulate real work," Mason says, "to make students understand that they are doing the work of real scientists."

In his efforts to help his students grow like roses from the concrete, Mason has taken his inspiration from Booker T. Washington. "I was working in another school before I came to Fitzgerald, and the custodian brought me a book he had bought for 25 cents at a garage sale, a first edition of Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery. He said he thought I'd like it. I only had a vague idea of who Washington was, but as soon as I read the first pages, I said to myself, this is the man I'd like to be. Here is a man who spent his entire life helping his people achieve respect. In the process, he uplifted an entire nation."

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, National Writing Project co-director and director of Project Outreach, describes the effect Mason had on his colleagues at the Project Outreach Summer Institute, "We all learned a lot from him. He taught us what it's like for a teacher to be centered in a community. Marcus brings to his teaching a sense of mission that springs from his religion. When a teacher can convey that fervor—whether or not its source is religious—he can go a long way towards convincing young people that what is going on in the classroom is important."

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