Hear Our Voices: Students from 1969 to 1999

BY JUDY BEBELAAR

Over the years, more than 4,000 faces have looked up at me expectantly on the first day of high school. I keep in touch with some of these students, and I wonder about many. But every so often I’ll get a letter or a phone call, or someone will say, in a waiting room, or at a tollbooth, “Do you remember me, Ms. B?” So I keep all the letters, and treasure the chance meetings.

On January 4, 1970, the San Francisco Examiner’s California Living magazine published poems and essays from my students at Opportunity High, a public school in San Francisco for students who weren’t doing well at other, larger high schools, but in whom we teachers saw the spark of promise. I had asked them to write about their hopes, fears and dreams for the future.

Those students were special. But teachers will tell you that every group of kids has a distinct personality—each classroom, each year, each decade. Students in 1969 were less starry-eyed than those in the early ‘60s. There’s a note of despair mixed with hope in the pieces they wrote.

This year, I asked my students at San Francisco’s International Studies Academy, a small public high school with an international focus, for the same answers. Children of the ‘90s, with their big shirts, low-slung baggy pants and hats defiantly askew, show a tougher exterior, which sometimes masks fear and often expresses a deeper disillusionment than in earlier decades.

But adolescents in all the years I’ve taught share the same concerns that Bobby Lew writes of. Will they find love? Will they find meaning in life? What will the world be like for their children? Many are concerned with justice, with peace and making the world a better place. That idealism, which I try to tap, is one reason I still enjoy teaching. Only a classroom teacher knows how impassioned students can get about what’s “right” and what’s “wrong.”

What differentiates my students now from those 30 years ago is that the focus of the fear of violence has shifted from a war far removed to the home. Too many young people have died in their own neighborhoods and cities, in their own schools. Now, in every class where I ask the question, “How many of you know someone close to you who has died?” almost everyone raises a hand. Many of the deaths are the result of violence. And then there are many, like Sovan, who have come with memories of terror in places like her native Cambodia. Students from El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, from Croatia and Bosnia, all have stories they need to tell.

Following is a sample of the 1969 pieces, and two by 1999 students.

1969
A Vision of the Future
In an empty mind I sat
gazing at a thought.
Within a moment it came.
A vision of the future:
To be able to walk down
the street without being
hassled because your
features are different;
To see the sun in Los
Angeles and breathe its
air without the aid of an
apparatus, to begin an
era when there will be no
production of war
materials.
One day a black child
will not have to ask, “If
God is my friend, why is
He white?” The day will
come when housing projects will not be an
eyesore to our country, and freedom will be its
driving force, not money.
I awoke from my dream with this theory: A
thought is the foundation. Destroy the
foundation; lose the structure (reality). We the
American people, have always built our future
on dreams. I hope my dream will be a part of a
new America.

—Joe Cousart, Opportunity High

Joe Cousart became a clinical psychologist and
administrator for mental health services.

Stop Hating, Stop Fearing
Another year comin’ up, time to make some of
those—uh—resolutions. I hope this is a nice
year.

New year
New hopes
I hope the war ends
(doesn’t that sound futile)
I hope we stop hating
I hope I stop hearing
I hope
I hope

What a barren land. Such empty thoughts. What
I thought about what I hoped for it meant
nothing.

When I thought about what I had done I smiled.
For at least the thought were written down.

—Sal Salazar, Opportunity High

A Light to Show the Way
To the New Year:
Give me hope where there’s despair.
Give me the feeling that should be there.
Show me my purpose for being here on earth.
Give me a chance to prove my worth.
I ask for a light to show me the way.

—Nathaniel Harrington, Opportunity High

After spending five years in a state prison (where
he taught others to read and tried to fight the
racism he found there), Nate became a lawyer, a
judge, then Director of Prisoner Legal
Services for San Francisco’s City Jail, where he
created a library and brought in writers.
Tragically, Nate died in an accident two years ago,
at age 44. His piece, “A Light to Show the Way,”
was read at his memorial, attended by hundreds.

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1999
Shattered Hopes
Hopes, dreams, wishes: most of them never come true. Hopes are things you want but you don't get. I know because I had so many hopes and dreams for my future. I hoped that racism really would come to a final end. I hoped that all the hatred of one race or religion or ethnic group or gang for another would end. I hoped that all the violence would halt and never begin, ever again! Those are hopes: they won't come true. They might, but I really doubt it.

I hope that I will live a happy, peaceful, non-thug life. I hope that one day I will find someone that I care for enough to die for. That almost came true; the only problem was that she didn't care for me the same way. I know other people have hopes like these, but these may all be shattered hopes.
—Bobby Lew, International Studies Academy

Right Now the Year is Changing
Right now the year is changing,
Right now in Cambodia there's fighting.
Right now in the United States a girl is missing
For no reason.

Right now men are shooting guns
When they are drunk.
Right now a young girl is having a baby
And puts it in a box by a garbage can.
Right now an eleven year old
Girl is missing from home.
Right now a homeless woman is being killed
On the streets at night.
Right now the year is changing.

—Sovan Pott, International Studies Academy

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