

Just Give Me a Chance

BY RICHARD MANN

The dugout bench and I were on a first name basis. I was a regular customer, and I had no expectations of any change that day. After all, the season was nearly over. The only unusual change for the game would be the substitute coach. Our coach had to be out of town and didn't expect to get back to town in time. The substitute was a friend of his.

When I arrived at the baseball field, I headed directly for the bench. As the runt of our third- and fourth-grade team, I would wait there until I was summoned to go in and play right field for the last inning. Right field was where all the no-good players had to play. The only reason I got to play at all was a league regulation requiring that all team members be allowed to play in every game. The regulation did not say how much each person had to play.

Just after I had settled in, the substitute coach came over and told me to warm up at second base. I quickly informed him that he must have me mixed up with someone else. I didn't play second base. After he had explained that things were going to be different today, I hustled to this new position. Beginning with the infield, the sub began giving us fielding practice by hitting a ball to each position. I easily snagged mine. Then, he began hitting to the outfield. He called out to center field and hit a high hopper over my head. I knew it was for the center fielder, but I leapt up anyway and snagged the ball in the tip of my glove. I was elated. Then, I saw that our real coach had arrived.

As I ran off the field for the usual pregame pep talk, I tried to avoid the coach. I wasn't sure he'd be happy with me at second base.

Just as I was going by him though, he stopped me. "Why didn't you tell me you could play second base?" he asked. Shame came over his face when I innocently responded. "I didn't know; you never gave me a chance."

I should have remembered that lesson. Now I felt ashamed. I could have reached her sooner. Geoksha, was an ordinary looking girl: five foot two, soft face, medium build. She smiled often and spoke softly. She had, though, a far away look: remote, disinterested.

Indeed, before long Geoksha began to show all the signs of one who wasn't going to make it through my tough class. She was tardy constantly, and required trips to the principal for excessive tardies accomplished little. Even when she wasn't tardy, she spent much of her time and mine sleeping. Perhaps a few more trips to the principal could have cured that. But, why bother?

I had seen her type before. Sweet kids who could just never quite get it together. She would sit there and, when awake, just stare. She never asked questions during class, she never volunteered an answer, and she rarely turned work in on time. She just didn't care, so why should I? There were plenty of other students who cherished my attention. Why shouldn't I give it to them?

Still, she was one of my students, and I needed to try to reach her. I graciously gave her more time to make up assignments. I let a few tardies slip by. Occasionally, I would even let her grab a nap. What more could I do? Eventually, I all but wrote her off. One more tardy or absence and she would fail anyway; system policy dictated that. It was

out of my hands. I had tried, but she apparently didn't want help.

One day, two weeks before final exams, I decided it was time to do at least one poetry writing assignment. I remembered a quick-write my wife had used in her class. I had just a few minutes left in the period, and the poetry writing would be a good time killer. I placed a transparency with a portrait of an overcast Grand Canyon on the overhead to act as a tone setter for the students' poetry. Then I told them they had about seven minutes to complete a poem. There were the customary moans and groans, but soon the students got busy writing.

The period ended and soon I found myself enjoying a few quiet minutes of my planning period in the lounge. I rather halfheartedly decided to glance through the poems the students had just completed. Most were just what you would expect: dismal attempts to satisfy a teacher's last-minute notions. One, though, grabbed my attention:

Lost and Unknown
by Geoksha Brown

*The grass is dry, the sky is gray
It seems as if it's a very gloomy day
Left alone in this mysterious world,
No diamonds and no pearls.
It seems like I'm lost and left alone,
Knowing not where to go.*

*I'm trapped in this maze
Can't find my way out,
So I guess I'll just wander about.
Some day I'll find it,
I know I will.
In a world lost and unknown.*

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I read the poem two or three times, each time glancing up to check the name: Geokessa Brown. It wasn't perfect—there were some rhythm, grammar and spelling flaws—but the sincerity and depth of her feelings were clear. At first, I was shocked. Then I was angry. Why in the world did she wait until now to show her bent for poetry? She could have been writing all along...

That thought hung on me: just as I could have been a second baseman, Geokessa could have been a writer. She could have been writing all along. Only, I didn't give her a chance. I had neglected the poetry. I had pushed off the extra writing assignments because I wouldn't have time to grade them. I had neglected what really mattered—the students.

I determined that day that my English classes would be different. Every student would be seen as a challenge to be met. Students like Geokessa would be sought out, not just left to chance. Writing, whether prose or poetry, formal or informal, would not just be time filler assignments, but significant writing in which the student could shine. Every student would be given the chance that Geokessa nearly missed.

Geokessa didn't miss that chance though. In fact, she gloried in it. I went to her about a week later and asked if I could use her poem as an example in the writing project I was going to be involved in. Her positive response was nearly inaudible as she signed the permission form, but her smile wasn't.

Geokessa left that summer to study nursing in Hawaii, but the lesson she retaught me remains strong. Students entering my class for the first time know that something is going to be different. The straight, sterile rows



of desks are missing, replaced by those in a horseshoe design. Portraits by Ansel Adams and Norman Rockwell grace the walls. Student writings fill the wall-size display board, and numerous posters declare the room a writing and learning zone.

That first day of class always begins with a literate life history—a written recollection of each student's background as a reader and writer. The students, shy at first, openly share their experiences and compare similarities before the class period ends. The history, one of many ideas and methods I gleaned from the West Tennessee Writing Project experience, then provides the material for other writing experiences to come.

Each week the students face new writing challenges. Some are formal; many, informal. Some are prose; some, poetry.

Some are based on literature; most, on personal experience. Some are to be shared with writing response peers; others, kept deeply personal.

The goals are simple: each student will have the opportunity to learn and to shine in my classroom, and each student will be encouraged to develop a love for writing. I have learned through Geokessa and others since her that if I provide the opportunity and encouragement, the students will usually handle the rest.

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