

Carey F. Applegate

Carpe Diem in the Mississippi Delta

High school teaching in the Mississippi Delta has made life “one tremendous adventure” for Carey F. Applegate. She describes the irresistible call of the classroom and her journey to teaching via an alternative certification program.

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hite-water rafting through rapids in Alaska’s Denali National Park, riding shotgun in a big rig through the Colorado Rockies in an icy winter storm, dancing in the mud and rain at a Jimmy Buffett concert in Chicago’s Tinley Park, watching dynamic street performers in Hamburg, leaning over Niagara Falls to feel the mist hitting my face as I stood in Canada for the first time, building houses with Habitat for Humanity, writing grants for a community center in North St. Louis City. . . . Of all my adventures during the past few years, teaching English to high school juniors and seniors in the Mississippi Delta has been the wildest, most fulfilling ride yet. I have fallen in love with my students’ incredible energy, their unconquerable spirit, and their drive to succeed.

The Call to Teach

I found my calling in college by volunteering in other people’s classrooms. As a sophomore, I spent time every week in a local teacher’s classroom, tutoring special needs students; when I was home from school, I would visit my mother’s third-grade class and become a storyteller for her children. I thrived in education classes during my last two years of school. However, upon graduation with a bachelor’s degree in English from Illinois State University in 1999, I

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deliberately chose to enter fundraising, which had the potential to be a much more lucrative career than my family’s traditional profession of teaching. After working in nonprofit development for two years, I began to grow restless and dissatisfied. When a former classmate of mine was killed in the terrorist attacks on New York City, I had an epiphany: our time in this world is finite and precious. I decided that I would rather be underpaid and love how I spent my time than live another moment lying to myself about how personally satisfying my job was. I knew that I could not ignore the call to teach any longer.

I began the process of seeking an alternative route to certification by determining *my* requirements for a program. While many inner-city opportunities existed, even in nearby Chicago, I felt more drawn to rural America. Having been raised by liberal parents who had emphasized friendship and respect between people of all races, I had often felt the desire to be a part of the continuing movement toward true equality. I viewed education as the key to reaching socioeconomic and political freedom, and I wanted to be a part of promoting that ultimate tool for equality. The history and culture of Mississippi especially attracted me, as I had been raised on stories about Freedom Riders and passive resistance. I knew that Mississippi was the home not only to civil rights activists but also to great writers and musicians. As a musician and a lover of great literature, I was attracted to those aspects of Mississippi’s personality. The combination—being a part of Mississippi’s continuing social revolution through education and being a part of a creative, thriving community—appealed to me, and I imme-

diately applied to several alternative-route certification programs that served the Mississippi Delta.

My journey into teaching began in March 2002 with a phone call from Germain McConnell, the program coordinator for the Mississippi Teacher Corps (MTC), the leading alternative-route certification program in the state of Mississippi. Germain was calling to personally accept my application into MTC's graduating class of 2004. In only two months, I would be making my way to the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), where I would join twenty-four new corps members selected from a national pool of applicants and begin taking graduate classes to prepare me for the challenges I would face in the classroom. In August, I would have my own classroom and students. If life were a series of "snapshot" moments, that first phone call with Germain would be in my scrapbook forever.

The next two months were frenzied—giving notice at work, taking the Praxis tests needed for emergency certification, packing my belongings to store until I moved into my new community in July, and making contact with friends and family from whom I would be separated for an indefinite amount of time. On May 28, 2002, I began my ten-hour drive to Oxford, Mississippi, having never been in Mississippi before.

The Training Grounds

MTC has an amazing summer institute for its new teachers. The twenty-five Teacher Corps members are enrolled in three graduate courses (Foundations of Secondary Education, Classroom Practices, and Multicultural Field Experiences) as a sort of "teaching boot camp." For the first four weeks of summer, my days began at Oxford High School, where I student taught during our first summer session from 8:00 a.m. until noon; after lunch on the Square, my classmates and I gathered on the Ole Miss campus for a general education class in which we learned to apply what we discussed in class to our real-life experiences with our students.

During the second month of our summer session, we worked with a group of veteran teachers to develop effective lesson plans and teaching styles, and we observed and participated in each other's lessons and began to hone our skills. Weeks of practice teaching helped to increase my confidence in

front of a classroom and pushed me to assess the level of student engagement with my lessons. Later, when I led my own students through literature, I found myself changing the reference points that I used in lessons and scaffolding more with language and the context of the literature we studied. I learned in those first eight weeks of classes to become flexible in my approach to students, to have an honest respect for their perspectives and abilities, and to encourage them to reach beyond their comfort zones.

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At the end of the summer session, I packed my belongings and moved two hours southeast, into the heart of the Delta, to the small town of Indianola (population 12,000). Three new MTC members were assigned to Indianola, joining three veteran MTC teachers there and eight MTC classmates in the surrounding area. While the MTC coordinator would be only a phone call away and ongoing encouragement would be in place via feedback from an MTC observer, the MTC teachers would become my family and support system.

Exactly one week after the second summer session ended, I walked into my own classroom for the first time. One week later, my students entered the classroom, and teaching became so much more meaningful than I could have ever dreamed it would be.

Enter the Students

Delta teens face many challenges. My students—ranging in age from fifteen to twenty—have an average reading level of sixth grade. Approximately one-fourth of the girls in Delta high schools are pregnant or have had a child or children. The physical and sexual abuse rates in the Delta are quietly astronomical. Most of the students work one or two jobs outside of school to earn extra money. Many live in the old "shanty towns," the shacks on the black side of the town. Indianola, like many of the towns in the Delta, remains divided into black and white by the train tracks that divide it; the two high schools are known as the "white" school (private) and the "black" school (public). In my high school, for example, approximately 99.5 percent of the 630 students who

comprise the student body are African American. Despite all of this, the kids come to school, are involved in extracurricular activities, work, parent, and dream of giving their children the lives that they deserve.

We work together in class to develop the skills they will need to succeed in college and in the global community. Many of my students struggle with the grammatical skills necessary to compose strong essays and, while many of them can read an article or a story aloud, nearly all of them have difficulty understanding what they have just read. As those people involved with reading education know, fluency is more than simply the ability to sound out the words on a page; students must be able to comprehend. Unfortunately, this is nearly impossible for students reading on the sixth-, seventh-, or eighth-grade reading levels when reading a textbook written at or above the eleventh-grade level. For those students reading at the second-grade level, the task of understanding the texts provided by the school proves to be formidable at best, unachievable at worst.

My first experience with assigning a significant reading passage for homework was disastrous. We had just finished *A Raisin in the Sun*, and that had gone so well that I decided to jump into Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* with my students. After giving them author notes and reading the first few pages

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aloud with them, I naively assigned them the first twenty-five pages of text to read for homework. They returned to class the following day, frustrated, with reports that the book was "boring" and that they didn't understand what was happening in the story. In

turn, I became discouraged by what I perceived to be their lack of interest and effort; at that point, I still didn't appreciate the utter futility of what I had asked them to do. We went back and forth like this for a few days, and then we began reading a significant amount of the text aloud in class and discussing it as we went, which helped with comprehension.

Unfortunately, few of my students were able to get to the point where they could enjoy *Cuckoo's Nest* during our time studying it. Through this experience and a workshop about balanced literacy, I became interested in adolescent literacy. However, it

wasn't until I began researching literacy in depth as part of a fall course at Ole Miss that I began to understand the complexity of effective reading. Since I believed—and still do—that reading helps to put people into the best possible position to succeed, I decided to focus my efforts on developing my students' reading ability.

Years of being pushed to "read" materials they did not comprehend had left the students with bitter feelings. In order to help combat their dislike for reading, I began to build a classroom library with books of all reading levels available for them to read for pleasure. My home church mailed six large boxes of books to use in my classroom and the funds to purchase additional books and supplies for a listening center to help students hear good reading. We began to have silent reading time at the beginning of each class period, during which students would have control of the materials they read. They gave five-minute book talks and shared new books that the other students might enjoy. In addition, I chose to "spontaneously" share passages from my own favorite books, which helped to spark interest in some of the reading materials in the class. Word slowly spread throughout the student body, and students from other classes came by to rummage through the classroom library in search of a book to borrow. Now, I have students who stay after class to tell me about a new book they've read, and even some of my most reluctant readers have requested that I hold books for them to read when they are returned. One of the students pulled me aside the other day to tell me excitedly, "This is the first book I've ever finished! I'm going to read another one after this." We are slowly, but surely, building a community of readers, which will positively impact not only my students but also the generations that follow them.

Carpe Diem! or Sucking the Marrow from Life

Statistically, it is estimated that by the time they are twenty-five years of age (only one year younger than I), approximately one-fourth of African American males will be either dead or in jail. Many of my female students will stay in the Delta and raise their children in the same poverty in which they are currently living. Some of the students who enter my classroom each day struggle to meet even the

basic human physiological needs of feeding hunger and seeking bodily comfort. They understand what it means to live in the moment; some of them have never experienced anything *but* living in the moment. Nevertheless, they move forward, hoping to achieve in a way that will propel them and their children to higher levels of success.

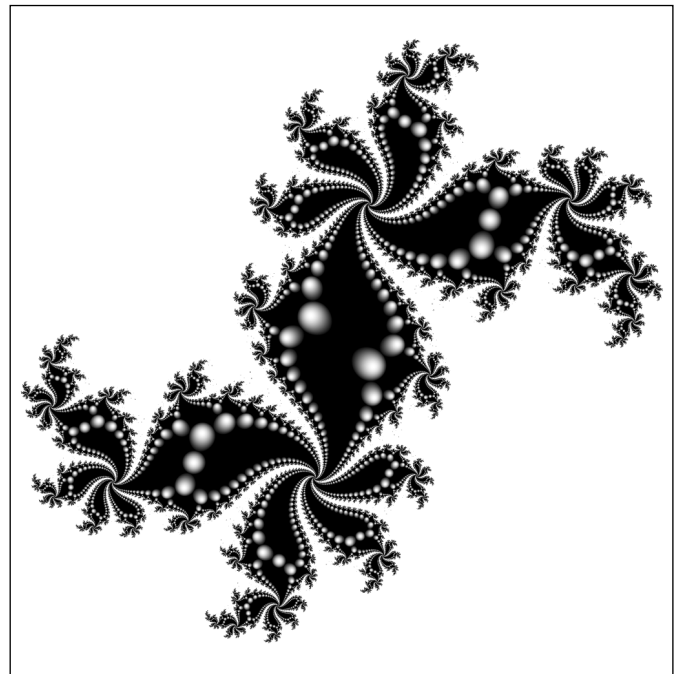
My students are some of the most generous people I have ever known. They offer advice to new teachers in need of a quick reality check (“Ms. Applegate, don’t leave your car unlocked. People will steal the seats out of your car if you let them.”); they provide humor and a new perspective on education and life (*Crunk* is one of my favorite additions to my vocabulary; it means wild and crazy. For example, “We got crunk up in fifth period today.”); and they open doors into their personal lives and welcome even the lightest-skinned white girl into their communities, churches, and homes.

Last week, I received a gift from my students. Two female students were in my room for remediation, making up work from days missed due to illness. I overheard one of them telling a homeroom student that I was the reason she came to school; the other chimed in with, “I would have dropped out by now if I didn’t have Ms. Applegate here.” I never would have dreamed that I had made that big of an impact on any student, much less two, and if I hadn’t followed my dreams and started this adventure, I would have never met these amazing children. If I could give advice to anybody considering becoming a teacher, my advice would be to follow your dream and to encourage, nag, and push your students to follow theirs. As a novice teacher, I still have a lot to learn from my mentors, my professors, and my students. I’m not a perfect teacher—but what a rush to be a part of something so big and so meaningful!

Over the next year or two, I have more adventures planned. Backpacking through Europe during the summer of 2004 after I graduate with my master’s degree from the University of Missis-

sippi, exploring the Appalachian Trail with the throng of hikers who make the trek annually, and singing folk music in a public arena are all on my list of things to do. However, I don’t have to seek new experiences in the same ways as I did before I became a teacher because my life has become one tremendous adventure.

It has been almost a full year since I moved from the comforts of home to rural Mississippi. I have laughed and cried so much more than I would have ever imagined possible. I’ve watched my students bicker about their teenaged lives, and I’ve listened to them come together to form tremendous bonds. They scream, they yell, they cry, and they live every moment with passion. Every day my students teach me, reminding me to follow Thoreau in his journey to suck the marrow out of life, to live and learn from the moments that life presents to us.



Fractal image courtesy of Web site at <http://www.mbfractals.com>.

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