

Life has a way of taking you down paths it wants you to follow; sometimes even when you are fighting that way the most. Life “nudged” me into teaching at Humphreys County High School for the past two years. Having finished a Masters degree in Southern Studies, I could not ignore the nagging thought, “you understand, now.” I had dug deep into a not so pretty past and explored the lives and history of Southerners. I understood from a historical perspective why Mississippi is the way it is, but I felt compelled to at least consider an option that placed me in the midst of my home state, actively participating in making a change. Teaching was a natural fit for me, but Lord, did I fight it. Sometimes the things I have fought the hardest have ended up having the most impact on me; that is teaching. It is my calling and now fighting for public education is going to be what I do in life.

I am not sure exactly what I thought I was doing when I entered the Mississippi Teachers’ Corp. I knew that I needed to do something more, be something more. More than what, though? I wanted to be involved in the world in some fundamental way. I wanted to make a difference. I had spent six years reading about other people’s adventures and experiences; I wanted my own. I have always harbored this secret desire to be a writer, an academic. I wanted to write a book so that graduate students would sit around a table discussing my perspective and paradigm. But, after finishing the masters and writing the thesis, I knew I had to be active. I wanted to be engaged in life, not just writing about it.

So, I applied for the program and with hesitation I started another master’s degree. I had no idea what teaching was going to be like. My mother and grandmother are both English IV teachers, and I knew from watching my mother that it was tough. But, I had no idea- not really. I somehow landed into the position of teaching seniors at HCHS. I started the first day trembling inside; I was scared to death. But, I had done enough over the summer to prepare for that first week- so I thought. I was only prepared on paper. It is now a blur. Luckily the “teacher gene” came out and I managed to stand before each class of these students, many who were only a few years younger than me, and introduce myself.

My first year being a teacher was full of introductions. I had to get to know my school and community and they had to get used to me. The students nicknamed me the Energizer Bunny. I poured all my time and energy into teaching; I had to. The only way I could maintain control in the classroom was to be organized, prepared, and excited to be there. It was not smooth. I actually got in my car and cried many days that first year. Confronting students, to this day, makes my heart beat fast, my hands shake, and my face turn red. I do not like confrontations, but I deal with them. So my students and I got along; we figured each other out. I proved to them that I cared about their success and would not allow them to sell themselves short.

After the shock wore off around Christmas of my first year, I realized that I loved being a teacher. Even though there were really bad days, I had moments when a student captured the spirit of the lesson and “got it;” that feeling erased the day before. And those are the moments I looked forward to and tried to provide day after day. I also discovered a love of British literature that I never had until I began to teach. I enjoyed reading the background material on poets and monarchs and thinking about how to illustrate to my students that it is relevant. In teaching that first year, I found a

satisfaction with where life had led me; I felt that I was “doing more.” My students helped me to “be more.” We helped each other.

Being a teacher is a funny thing. There have been so many times when I have thought to myself, “I am not teaching these kids anything.” There have been times where I think they hate me and my frustration with my students, the school, and the place take me away from the joy of the profession. And just when I think I have failed, I get some sort of reminder that I am making a difference, even if it is just one student. Last year my seniors published a “senior edition” of The Trailblazer, the school’s newspaper. Many of them wrote about the teachers they would miss the most. I was flipping through when I noticed my name on that page. I was so excited that a student would miss me. Then I looked down the list. By the time I got to the end, I was crying. I already knew I was going to miss so many of those students- my very first students. But that is what teaching is about; they were going to miss me, too.

I keep those students in my heart and now in this portfolio. My second year has been a different experience than that first and a whole lot easier. But there are still good days and bad days. Now I am able to focus on teaching as my profession and think about techniques and methods to help my students learn. I am more aware of the communities’ role in the public school and I am asking more questions about funding and curriculum. I see a bigger picture now; I see where I want to go with public education. I have ideas about change and a desire to understand the system, beyond the classroom.

The Mississippi Teachers’ Corp has been everything from extremely frustrating to life altering. I followed my heart into the program determined to fight for a place that was my home. I was scared and unsure, but ultimately believed this was my path. The negativity that at times abides in Mississippi has never settled with me. I have never bought into the beliefs that just because it has been that way, it should stay that way. So, I stayed in this place- Mississippi. I moved to the delta to spend two years of my life teaching. My experience overall has been positive; I have found my life’s work. I am leaving the delta, but only to find out more- to learn more. I take my students with me and it is with them in mind that I seek a higher degree so that I can come back here someday and make changes that must be made.

“We are the mighty cowboys. It’s wartime on the battle field. We ain’t takin’ no mo’; that blue and white, ya’ll know for real. So, ya’ll better move, get back before we stomp on the floor. Ya’ll better move, get back. Them cowboys straight throwin’ them bows. Straight throwin’ them bows- get back, get back, get back, you just got lassoed. And every day I work till I sweat, my Lord, I can’t take no mo’.”

-Big Al, 2003

Senior Homecoming Chant