

III. Professional Biography

Often, teachers come from a long line of teachers. In my case, I am the first in my family. While my parents were not "official" teachers, my childhood was full of opportunities for learning, provided by my parents. They made sure my sister and I had plenty of books and every summer included a new adventure for our family vacation. I never missed an opportunity to buy piles of books about the places we visited, my mom never batted an eye when I saved up my money as a young girl to buy the 2001 Fascinating Facts volume I had been seeing in the store. I still have it, and still quote interesting facts at odd moments. So, my love for learning started early and was encouraged always. Oh, if I had only had the internet back then...

Like many others, I set up school in my bedroom, complete with a chalkboard, old-timey desk my parents found at a yard sale, and files of papers and blue mimeograph sheets given to me by my teachers. I used every chance I could at school to "practice" my skills when my teachers would let me. I especially loved when Mrs. Mitchell let me use her teacher's edition spiral-bound spelling book to call out spelling words for a student making up a test! I had many fabulous and inspiring teachers along the way. What I loved most each year was to see all the different ways teachers would teach—loud and enthusiastic, quiet and thoughtful, strict and demanding—and I learned from them all. I found something to like about each of them. Sure, I had my favorites; but being a learner meant there was something to be gleaned from each of them. I took note of their creative ideas and tucked them away for my future classes: Mrs. Boose and her necktie turkey, Ms. Morgan's essay about thirty minutes of time, Mrs. Griffin's unit on historical architecture in our tiny town to name a few. One of my former teachers recently commented on one of my Facebook posts about teaching that I was "like a little sponge. You loved learning, and I can tell you love teaching." What a compliment! I still feel like a sponge; I still seek after more and more information about creative ways to teach, better methods, the latest technology, the newest research, ways to help struggling students, how to meet students' non-academic needs, not to mention all the interesting subject material!

However, just loving to learn is not enough; otherwise, I could do that on my own in any profession. The other part of who I am is being able to share with others, and that's what makes this the only career I've ever truly desired. From deep within I know God called me to teach. A few attempted to

persuade me to pursue other opportunities because I was "smart and could do anything." My firm belief was that it was important for teachers to be smart (and creative, driven, and enthusiastic); so I didn't want to waste time reaching my goal. I went into college on this path and never strayed. Learning and sharing are what I am all about, exactly what God made me to be and spend my life doing. Thankfully, I have done more than just teach these past eighteen years...I have learned. Oh, the lessons I have learned. For this application I had to list my awards and recognitions that others have bestowed upon me, but those are few, really, and actually pale in comparison to what I see as my most significant contributions and accomplishments. The only way I know to explain it is in a story, which is usually how I teach. So this story is about Tony: He came to me rough and hard and street-wise. He was stirring up trouble most places he went from day one. I could see he wanted to test his boundaries, flex his muscles, and strike out before being struck at. Slowly, I chipped away at his shell, giving him "important" responsibilities in the class and sending him on errands to the office or other classes. I am not sure he had ever had that chance, at least not in recent years it seemed. He started drawing me pictures of fast cars racing off into a sunset...something I am sure he wished he could do. One day he came into my class and slammed his things down and slumped into his seat. I took a minute to squat down next to Tony. He had gotten into trouble first thing and then he got a detention in music class. He finally revealed that his mother was "back in town" and her boyfriend had pushed him around a bit before school. I just hugged him and told him life is about choices; his choice was how he reacted to the things around him, since he couldn't change his circumstances. A few weeks later, he told me he could not come to our big culture fair that evening because his great-grandmother, whom he lived with, didn't drive. I told him I would pick him up and take him home. On our way back to his house, I stopped at Sonic, breaking all sorts of educator rules, I'm sure. I asked him what he wanted and he said, "What do they have?" He had never been to Sonic! When I read through the menu and hit "slush," his eyes lit up—only the second time I had seen that all year. He ordered a lemon one, which he just held in his lap. He said he was saving it for his grandma. I swallowed hard and fought back the tears and just said, "How thoughtful!" He had his ups and downs the rest of the year, and I wasn't sure what all we actually accomplished until the last day when he signed my yearbook. I still look at what he wrote when I feel like I've lost my way: "Dear Mrs. Crews, To someone who taught me a lot about life." No, Tony, you taught me...

IV. Community Involvement

At school, home, and church, I always strive to lead by example. From keeping the books at my daughter's softball games or participating in fundraisers like Race for the Cure and Relay for Life, I feel it necessary to connect to the community and give back whenever possible. As owner of Petty's Steak and Catfish with my husband, we donate to various fundraisers host many groups in our restaurant. We were able to attend our first Lindale Chamber of Commerce banquet this year. As a member of First Baptist Church, Lindale, I have taught first through fourth grade Sunday school classes over the years and filled in as a substitute. I served as the AWANA T&T girls' club secretary from 2007 until 2012 then switched to working with the youth as a disciple group leader. I started with a group of seventh grade girls and will stay with them until they graduate. From the birth of my first child in 1998 until present, I have loved on little ones in the nursery each month. I have had the privilege of choosing recipients of church scholarships with a committee for the past ten plus years. My biggest job was transitioning from a preK teacher to being the VBS coordinator for four years! I have also helped with the Thanksgiving baskets for families in need. As a K-Kids sponsor for over five years, my club members and I have collected thousands of food and clothing items for the local food pantry and "We Care" thrift shop, visited residents of the nursing home to deliver hand-made Valentine's Cards, been bell ringers for the Salvation Army, made "thanksgiving" cards for every staff member of our school, sent Christmas cards to soldiers away from home over the holidays, mentored 4th and 5th graders during homeroom time, collected hundreds of dollars in change for Haiti after the earthquake and over \$6000 the past three years with our chili cook-off to help certain families in need. Many of the 5th graders who were mentored end up joining K-Kids the next year because of that positive influence and involvement. I was honored, and surprised, this year to receive the Past Lt. Governor's Youth Leadership Award in the Texas-Oklahoma district for my service as K-Kids sponsor. My dear co-worker nominated me this past December for our district's Honor Roll, mentioning my "interaction with our community" as part of her submission. I had asked the local Kiwanis club if they would purchase the novels I wanted to use with my ESL students in summer school. Since these kids especially needed to practice their language skills, I had them write thank you notes and speeches to present at the Kiwanis lunch meeting at the end of school. These kids had never been to a formal meeting, much less a fancy clubhouse. I hope it was something that will stick with those kids!

V. Teaching Philosophy

When I look back on the teaching philosophy I wrote for a college class and the one I turned in with an application, I have to laugh at how naïve I was going into the teaching profession. Sure, it is important to know what you want and expect out of your students before you start; however, I have seen my true philosophy develop over time. Most everything I do stems from my beliefs that teaching is a calling AND a talent, I must teach the whole child, and I am preparing children for the world, not just the next grade. These are the things that I continuously work on in striving to be an outstanding teacher, because a teacher's learning never ends and is never perfected; it is constantly evolving.

I had a student teacher a few years ago who really struggled, with basically everything: classroom management, lesson plans, modifying activities, creative ideas. When I talked with her about why she wanted to be a teacher, she felt very strongly about helping students who struggle because she, too, had struggled through her school years due to her dyslexia. I knew she felt called to teach, but her talents really lay elsewhere. She was great one on one but had no "presence" in front of the group. She enjoyed social studies but feared teaching science. She could follow my lessons but had no idea how to come up with ideas for teaching various skills. I gently explained that I love facts and laws and learning about court cases...but I would be a terrible lawyer! I don't have the talent or personality for it! We all have our niches, and perhaps full classroom teaching was just not hers. I encouraged her not necessarily to give up—because certainly we can all become better at things we struggle with—but to look into teaching-type opportunities, such as tutoring or working with a company like Sylvan. Trying to teach without certain skills is just going to bring frustration, just as certain as teaching without it being your calling is going to wear you down from the stresses and demands it brings.

Secondly, teaching the whole child is more important than teaching a subject. I am sad to say that it took me a few years to learn this one. I started out with the idea that if I was creative, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable about my subject, then all my students would learn! Naïve, yes! Children with stressful home situations don't necessarily come to school ready to learn; they have to be shown how, coaxed into it. Why is school important when you can't get past the toothache, or your mom was roughed up last night by a boyfriend, or CPS comes and threatens to take you away from the only parents you've ever known, no matter how awful they might be? My students have needs far beyond what learning

where China is on map can help them with. I feel it is my responsibility to provide them with as many opportunities as I can in the short time I have them. That is why I started my Christmas choral reading group in my early years. Practices are always during school time because so many can't come in early or stay after. The group is open to any sixth grader; no one gets cut for not being "good enough." I have had students join who are in special education classes and students teachers warn me about because they have "behavior" issues. In all my years, not one has been a problem. They have a chance to participate in something totally different than what goes on in the class; and then they have the chance to "show off" for the pre-K and kindergarten classes and feel important. The Chinese celebration developed from my desire to provide an "experience" some might never have: eating with chopsticks, listening to music from a guchin, reading their fortune from a cookie. Some of my students never leave Lindale or eat in a restaurant, much less travel abroad. How can I bring them the world is the question that drives many of my plans.

Speaking of the world, what good is an education if students aren't prepared for being part of it? Knowing basic math and reading sure take them places, but if that's all they needed, school could end at third grade! What else do they need? My prayer is that my students are learning to LEARN! If they don't know the answer, how do they find it? Where can education take them, and why is it something kids in other parts of the world are willing to walk miles or risk their lives to get? Part of our district mission statement says, "Students will be provided opportunities to acquire essential academic knowledge and skills to equip them to be productive and responsible citizens." Productive and responsible citizens...and I will personally add to that, who are willing to serve others. What a great goal!

I was once voted by my colleagues the "Wild and Wacky" award for being someone who is willing to try new ideas. I am not afraid to say that what I am doing is not working...go to plan B, or X, Y, Z! An outstanding teacher is well prepared so that he/she can wing and go with the flow! A poster I have in my room says, "Change the way you look at things, and the things you look at change." This is a great reminder for my students AND myself, especially when I have those tough students who seem unreachable, unteachable. My rewards in teaching come from seeing the way students take ownership in their learning and make that connection from the classroom to their own lives and the world around them. Sometimes it comes in very small steps, but that is how every journey begins.

VI. Education Issues and Trends

It is easy to get bogged down and distracted by all that is wrong in the world of education. We are bombarded with negative stories about how our students are failing and how we are failing them. Societies problems are getting bigger and what our students face can seem overwhelming. Bullying, poverty, violence, health concerns...these are all issues in our school system. What do our students really need? How can we best help them be successful? In the ebb and flow of educational trends, what's hot one day gets pushed aside when the latest and greatest way to help our student comes out next. There doesn't seem to be a "one size fits all" solution because every student population in every town has different needs. Then, what we see in the news is a deterioration of public perception of teachers. I have seen an increase in the attitude these last few years, by so many, that teachers just don't know what they are doing. I'm not sure this is so predominant in any other professional field. The government doesn't seem to think we can do it. In addition, somewhere along the way a generation developed the idea that children should not be held accountable, only A's are acceptable, and happiness is most important. Parents argue with us that we aren't doing what is best for their children. The minute something is challenging, takes effort, becomes homework, or doesn't meet their "need," we are bad teachers. Somehow we must prepare their child for the STAAR or the next grade or life in general, without actually doing anything overt to prepare them. And that doesn't even touch on the subject of discipline, which is whole other touchy matter. I have discussed with so many colleagues how it seems we are walking on eggshells these days. When did teachers stop being the experts on how to educate children?

Perhaps what people are seeing is our own frustration. We don't feel appreciated, we are overworked and underpaid, and the problems sometimes seem insurmountable. Unfortunately it seems that many in our profession have lost their joy and have forgotten why they became a teacher in the first place. When we realize how much WORK it actually is and that summers off aren't really "off," or we can't seem to devote our time to actually teaching with

all the paperwork and other distractions, it is easy to lose sight of the big picture. The emotional toll teaching takes is often more than we can bear. We have probably all been guilty of letting our stress show, either to the kids or parents or the public. Hundreds are leaving the profession burnt-out and frazzled. What is the public seeing in us? Are we putting our best foot forward? When what I am doing is not working, am I willing to try something different or do I just complain and point the blame elsewhere? Am I the one who needs an attitude adjustment? We have to be willing to look long and hard at ourselves and the impression we are leaving.

While I don't pretend to believe that every teacher is outstanding, I think it is time teachers get back the respect that is so obviously deserved. So where do we begin to pick up the pieces? How do we show the public the great success stories? Well, we do just that! Teachers have to be each other's' cheerleaders; toot our own horns, so to speak! Maybe in general "they" don't believe we are doing a good job because they don't see what a great job so many are doing! Where are all the news stories about what is RIGHT in education? Why not put it out there ourselves? We have social media-savvy educators...let's use what is being used against us for the betterment of our profession! We must be willing to continue to fight for what we know is best for our students and our schools--in the media, with the government, in our communities, and within ourselves. In addition, we have to find ways to get parents on our side. I believe upfront honesty at the beginning of the year is a great start. I let parents and students know right away what I expect from them AND from myself. I lay out my plan; I communicate as often and as clearly as I can. What have I done to form a relationship with them, not just their child? Trust comes with time; I don't think most of them instinctually trust us. We must convince them we are not the enemy and we also have their best interests at heart. And those best interests go back to preparing them to be productive members of society. I must show them that I am the expert and am constantly striving to do my best, as well. What if we all were able to do this? Would the tide turn? Could we shift public sentiment our way again? I believe it is worth a try!

VII. The Teaching Profession

I take my role as a teacher very seriously. I feel I am a teacher wherever I go; therefore, it is important that I exemplify the standards I set in my own classroom for my students. While teachers are human, too, it is important to remember that we are held to a higher standard than others. I am careful to speak positively about parents, other teachers, administrators, and school in general, not just in public but to my colleagues as well. Sure we all have times when we need to “vent” frustrations, but this should be reserved for private conversations with a trusted confidant and used as a springboard for moving forward. Many times over the years I have received emails, comments in passing, and thanks for being positive and uplifting, even when situations get rough. I think we could all stand a little more positivity, and our profession certainly could.

Whenever a student teacher or other future teacher is assigned to my class, I try to give helpful advice that I wish I had received early on in my preparation. Not necessarily the warnings or reasons NOT to be a teacher, but little “tricks” that can make the job less of a job. One of my goals is to develop a workshop, class, or seminar for aspiring teachers that covers all the things that just aren’t or can’t be covered in college. Maybe more teachers would stick with the profession if they felt better equipped and prepared for what lies ahead!

Within my campus, I strive to be a light for my co-workers. Being cheerful in the morning, seeing a need and filling it, taking care of someone else’s duty, and speaking praise go a long way to fostering an atmosphere where people want to be. Just like for my students, I can’t solve everyone’s problems, but I sure don’t have to add to them, either! Teamwork is essential to this job, and I know there are people counting on me. It’s not always enough to just do my job; sometimes I need to help others with theirs. Just like others step in when I need it. A miscommunication recently left my social studies partner’s class uncovered when she had to be out one morning. When I walked by and saw the kids still standing in the hall, I just gathered them up, took them to my class, and included them in my lesson. My pod-mate took my

afternoon duty so I could go straight home at the end of the day when I was terribly sick with a migraine. We must be there for each other and show we are a professional, responsible teammate.

Accountability is a touchy subject. I'm sure we all generally feel that all educators should be held accountable, so long as it doesn't step on our toes! The question is HOW do we really measure the greatness of a teacher? Is there a checklist of attainable goals that when not met, there is a consequence? Yes, we should see progress in our students; yet, WHO is to be the judge of a child's progress? A test isn't really always the best way to show it, which is why it is so hotly debated. I think if we were really honest with ourselves, we would see where we come up short. We often become most defensive about areas that we are most sensitive about and know deep down that we could be trying something different or better. My mentor teacher had to sit me down in my second year to let me know I was being too inflexible with the kids; I needed to loosen up. I thought I had great classroom management skills; but the truth was, they might have been behaving but not out of respect for me and the boundaries I set. I had to work hard to establish a classroom environment where students feel safe to take a risk in their learning and trust me.

One of the greatest compliments I have received from an administrator was on an evaluation a few years ago: "Mrs. Crews has created a cooperative and stimulating learning climate in which students are consistently taking reasonable risks in questioning and responding to the teacher's instruction. She has a positive student-teacher rapport which creates a supportive and interactive learning environment that is conducive to learning for all students." My mentor teacher was willing to hold me accountable, I was willing to change, and my administrator was able to see the result. Isn't that a great model? Does it solve the accountability issue? Not entirely, but it is certainly a start.

VIII. My Message

As a member of the education profession, whether serving as Region VII's teacher of the year or not, I believe it is my responsibility to represent teachers in a positive way. People tend to group all teachers into two basic categories: good or bad. Others will form their opinion of me, and teachers in general, based not just on how they feel I "perform" but also on the way I present myself to the public. What do people think of teachers when they are around me? What do future educators see in me? What message am I relaying?

I believe teachers need to be reminded why we do what we do. I love this quote by Jim Rohn: "If someone is going down the wrong road, he doesn't need motivation to speed him up. What he needs is education to turn him around." It is up to us to show children, and parents, the importance of what we are doing. Maybe we will accomplish more if we remember these wise words by William Butler Yeats: "Education is not filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire." I hope to light sparks that start a fire within my students to know more, do more, and go beyond where they thought they could go! I hope to inspire a love of learning and a desire to be a life-long learner. I pray that what I do makes a difference somehow, with future educators, my students, their families, in my community and thereby, the world.

Lofty goals? Yes, but a poem my seventh grade English teacher had us memorize (gasp!) still sticks with me to this day. The last stanza is this:

"There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done, There are thousands to prophesy failure;

There are thousands to point out to you, one by one, The dangers that wait to assail you.

But just buckle in with a bit of a grin, Just take off your coat and go to it;

Just start to sing as you tackle the thing, That 'cannot be done,' and you'll do it."

--"It Couldn't Be Done" by Edgar A. Guest