

A Word Fitly Spoken

was nervous and wondered if my students could tell. All I really knew about the class I had been assigned was the title: Survivor English. Attempting a look of confidence, I scanned the “survivors” in this tenth-grade class. One young man in the front row sported a black leather jacket, a look of mild contempt on his face. Two girls appeared to have been thrown into chairs at the back of the room, their coats barely reaching the hems of their miniskirts. One student, her hair completely disheveled, chewed gum menacingly, and I had the impression that she was suffering drug burnout. Three young men at the center of the class, apparently close cohorts, giggled and rocked in their chairs. I could detect the faint odor of marijuana.

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This course would certainly represent my biggest teaching challenge yet!

Over the next few weeks, I struggled with the wildest group of teenagers I had ever taught. I confiscated switchblade knives, a host of other illegal items, and trashy literature. Once in a while I was able to teach. Even then, after a reasonably successful lecture, I felt as though I had barely won one skirmish in a major battle. Mostly, though, I felt defeated. Defeated, that is, until God led me to change my views and my techniques.

On that fateful day in the teachers lounge, several of my fellow teachers

were discussing my Survivor English students.

“Did you see Ken today?” asked a teacher I admired. “Pretty stupid kid, huh?” he continued.

“Yeah,” responded another teacher.

“Wouldn’t you just like to shake him? Sometimes I wonder why we even bother.”

“Right,” I thought. Why did I bother?

But then, quite unexpectedly, I had a flashback to a day in the sixth grade when I sat outside the principal’s office. Shaking in my chair, I waited to see a man I neither liked nor understood. I don’t recall why I was summoned to the office, but I do remember that I only

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wanted a little recognition, a little attention. I was not a straight "A" student, and I ached inside for the attention that the high achievers received—day in and day out.

Suddenly I was brought back to the present. The lounge conversation continued, tearing apart just about every student in my special English class. In my mind I saw myself in the same group of low achievers, and I began to ache all over again. How could I possibly redeem these students academically? Socially? Spiritually?

That evening, I wrote down the names of each student in the Survivor English class. Beside each name, I tried to write at least one positive attribute. I could find very little at first, and I nearly gave up in exasperation. Soon, however, I had a list. As I examined the items, I was amazed at the amount of raw potential that stared back at me from the page. Already I was beginning to appreciate even the most unlovable students in that awful class.

Three weeks later, just before mid-quarter reports were to be mailed out, I spent an entire afternoon collecting my students' telephone numbers. The next evening, I settled into a comfortable chair next to the telephone and began dialing my students' homes. I budgeted time for three evenings during the week when I could make contact with each family.

"Hello, Mrs. James? This is Sharon's English teacher at the high school."

"Now what has that dumb kid done?" responded Mrs. James, barely controlling her temper.

"Well, actually I called to tell you how much I appreciate how your daughter participates in our class discussions. She always has something interesting and worthwhile to say."

Pause.

"She—er—what did you say? Hang on a moment. Bill! Get the phone in the other room, will ya? It's Sharon's teacher."

I detected a bit of cursing in the background as the father approached the other phone. Obviously, Sharon's parents did not consider her a star pupil. I repeated the positive comments and concluded the conversation.

Several of the other conversations were similar, the one common point being the parents' shock when they

I found that Survivor English was certainly my biggest teaching challenge yet!

realized I was saying positive things about their child. One parent actually broke in and volunteered to come down to the school to handle the problem. Suddenly he realized that I was complimenting his son and had to backpedal!

I could scarcely believe the change in my classroom during the next few days. Sharon and others like her began to sit up taller in class. Many of the students began to live up to the praise. Discipline problems declined, drug usage appeared to diminish, and just as importantly, lessons began to run more smoothly.

I repeated the telephoning procedure each 10 weeks, following up with short notes reiterating what I had expressed over the phone. I no longer felt as though Survivor English was a survival course for me. My students were, by this time, reading their first complete books, writing simple paragraphs, and becoming

proficient in role playing, an exercise we used to express the value lessons in the high-interest, low-reading-level books we read together.

On the last day of class, I entered the Survivor English classroom and nearly set my lesson plans on top of a large cake that took up half of my desk. Through tears, I read the words, "To Mr. Flinn. We love you!"

I have since practiced the same techniques in Adventist academies with similar results. The rewards, both for the teacher and the student, have been impressive. A few years after I made the transition from public school teaching to an Adventist academy, I encountered one of my Survivor English students at a K-Mart store. Ken was neatly dressed, his hair carefully styled. Beside him stood an attractive young woman. They were a striking couple.

When Ken recognized me, he flew down the aisle and grasped my hand firmly in his. I could hardly believe this was the same young man I had known. Ken enthusiastically told me that he worked for Kaiser Aluminum Company, had recently received a raise, and had been asked to play on the company baseball team. The smiling young woman with him was his fiancée. He related all this with a winning smile.

I had nearly given up on Ken when he was in my class. However, God took over and led him to choose positive social and professional goals. Perhaps my encouragement in Survivor English had helped in this transformation. I vowed to continue to pray for Ken, that he would choose the path that leads to true success in serving God and humanity.

Kind, positive words, I learned, are an investment in the future of souls. If we build the future around young people who love themselves and who subsequently love others, especially God, we build a future that will stretch into eternity. □