

one boy, one book, one principal

A leader is a dealer in hope.
—Napoleon Bonaparte

It's a misty morning in April just before the late bell. I hear the poem of the day on the intercom as I ascend the stairs near the main office. The kids stream by: lanky and awkward in enormous shoes below pencil-thin legs. They are childlike, but cloaked in shiny basketball shorts and transparent confidence. They glance at girls beneath hair that is a little too long. But of course it is, hiding is easier that way.

In a large lobby, I wait at a round table beside a boy in a sweatshirt and baggy pants. He's eyeing the door. A few students check in late and zip to class. He waits, watching his principal, Kevin Richard.

Kevin smiles warmly over his trimmed beard. He calls the young boys "sir" and reaches out to shake their hands as they pass by. He once came to my class of last-chance seniors to read "The Men Who Don't Fit In" by Robert Service. I couldn't seem to reach those boys, hunkered down in our stuffy, decaying portable classroom behind the school, but Kevin did as he unraveled his past: failing in college, fleeing to Alaska, and then growing up in the bitter cold and hard work of the fishing industry. Now he sees a similar young man in Nick, the boy waiting for him this morning, and has taken on his achievement in reading as a personal mission.

Nick's father died six years ago in a car ac-

cident. We hear stories like this so often that sometimes we breeze by a detail like that in a child's history. But imagine again what it means for a young boy growing up all of those years, clinging to the echo of the man he once followed behind. Imagine. I don't know Nick, but hearing this sends me on a journey past all the Lost Boys I've taught: Caleb, who's father died of a heart attack while the two sat watching TV one afternoon; Alan, who could never sit still, so filled with anxiety and prickling energy and loss; dozens of others I've taught who never met their fathers and were obsessed with why. If they dreamed of one, it would be a man like Kevin: slow to anger, absolutely true, a fisherman. He is most at home in a baseball cap grilling burgers in his backyard in June or casting into a stream near his house.

Nick greets Kevin, then saunters into the main office conference room and drops his backpack. At the center of the table are two copies of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. It's a minute or two before RED (Read Every Day) begins. Educational solutions can be so simple at times: the entire school stops for 20 minutes at the start of the day to read. Everyone. All schools struggle with how to carve out time for books, for pleasure reading, which is at the very center of turning kids into readers for life, but too few make the solution happen: Read. Every. Day. Kennett Middle School did, and thousands and thousands of pages later, more kids are choosing to read than ever before.

Kevin noticed Nick as he sat in a classroom one morning. Nick was slumped before an enor-

mous book, eyes darting about, a page flipped, scanned, ignored: pretending for 20 minutes a day. And I've had more than a few administrators whose next move would be a note in my mailbox or a quick directive in the hall: take care of it. Not Kevin. He watched for about five minutes, then invited Nick to join him in the big, comfy chairs in the conference room.

"Nick, is this reading time a pleasure or a punishment for you?" he told me he asked him.

There was a pause, then Nick said, "Punishment. I don't like reading."

Kevin told him there was a book, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, that he had been dying to read. He wondered if Nick would be willing to read it with him. Of course he would. Kevin's warmth and generosity are invitations to good things; kids and teachers know it instantly.

They began reading together two weeks ago: Nick one page, Kevin three. And this is the hard, slow work of a seventh-grade poor reader—easily distracted, a repeated lesson in patience. Nick reads a phrase and stops. "Oh, I have a science project due next week—this made me think of it." Kevin laughs. "Oh, you're a lot like the main character, aren't you?" And then leads him back to the words on the page. In the next 20 minutes, I watch as Kevin listens, questions, shares, and enjoys his time with Nick. He gives Nick a success—perhaps his first in years—with a book at his reading level and pace . . . with patience. It reminds me what it will *really* take to move every child in this country to proficiency in reading.

In a few days, they will finish the book; they're going to celebrate by watching the movie on the big screen in the auditorium at the school. Nick will bring a few friends. Kevin will make time for it.

Now don't imagine for a minute that Kevin is somehow less busy than you are, that emails don't accumulate while he listens to Nick plod through one sentence and then another. Don't imagine that the principal of a middle school in

rural New Hampshire doesn't sigh under the weight of so many kids like Nick, so many lost children needing parental care that is unavailable to them, or cleats for baseball practice when there's no money for heat, or the chance at success when they come from generations of high school dropouts. Kevin has a desk like mine, I notice, as we sit and talk one afternoon: the detritus of trying to make a difference with too little time. There are education journals piled along the side, teacher evaluations due in a few weeks, a full calendar of appointments, home visits, school bus incident reports stamped URGENT! and lunch beside the phone, still uneaten.

Each day we get the same number of minutes to do it all.

We know it can't be done, so we choose. We choose what matters to us. When schools work for kids, it is because a leader like Kevin chooses kids again and again. He leads by doing the work—knowing its enormous challenges—and we follow him. When principals ask me how to motivate teachers, I say work as hard as they do, care as much as they do, drop everything for one kid who needs you, be a teacher. Know how hard it is to make gains with a kid who has all the odds against him. Show us you still believe this is the most important work there is. We'll follow.

Kevin is healing the craving Nick feels for his lost father, if only a little, by being a loving man to this scruffy, unformed boy. Kevin is leaving a mark that will endure: Nick will be more likely to read to his own kids because of the joy found in this book.

All that and Principal, too.

I leave his office determined to work harder.

References

- Kinney, J. (2007). *Diary of a wimpy kid*. New York: Amulet Books.
- Service, R. W. (1916). "The Men Who Don't Fit In": *The spell of the Yukon and other verses*. New York: Barse & Hopkins [Harvard College Library].