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Project SPARK: The Story of Inspiration in Today's Classroom

By Liz deBeer and the NJCTE Executive Board

Most people believe that inspiration is a key component of teaching. For example, Albert Einstein said, "It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge." This quote, and many like it, implies that the teacher should inspire students, but there is no suggestion regarding how teachers should inspire themselves. As with many giving professions, teachers, new and veteran, often feel drained, searching for ways to reinvigorate themselves, so they can continue to teach and inspire others.

The New Jersey Council of Teachers of English (NJCTE) executive board is concerned about this too. As a Washington Post reporter reflected, "It's no secret that most teachers today feel demoralized — poll after survey tells us so, and it's no wonder, given that they feel school reformers have put targets on their backs with teacher evaluation systems they feel are unfair and support for programs that they believe belittle their profession" (Strauss).

NJCTE executive board has responded by creating SPARK: Sharing Passion And Re-Kindling Knowledge, which involves a year-long focus on inspiration. The board will offer small cluster groups around the state and focus its annual journal on SPARK. The conferences and clusters will involve NJCTE board members and other experts sharing passion and re-kindling knowledge.

One way they are hoping to SPARK New Jersey English educators is based on the ideas of Larry Smith, editor of *Smith Magazine*, who invited readers to write "six-word stories." Smith noted in his TEDx Talk, "Everyone has a story; we know this. But we have to remember to ask." He invited his readers to send in "six-word memoirs," and credits Ernest Hemingway with the genesis of this project. Smith's success has brought the "six-word memoir" to congregations, correctional centers, and many other places – as well as the classroom. He noted "the constraint fueled creativity" and helped "start the conversation."

NJCTE is hoping to "start the conversation" with Language Arts Teachers, by asking them to take minimalism and focus to a new intensity, by submitting six-word "sparks" that illuminate their professional lives. These six-word sparks of teacher inspiration will be used in up-coming workshops.

Members of NJCTE executive board offered some six-word sparks of their own. Here are some generated from the summer board meeting:

"Students suddenly unafraid to be honest."

"That moment when students get it."

"Working with colleagues toward shared goals."

"Imagination becomes opportunity and sparks accomplishment."

"Sharing, caring, daring: make a difference."

“Every story a possibility for voice.”

“When a student asks a question.”

“Watching students discover love of reading.”

“Students and teachers united in learning.”

“Boys and girls: people responding passionately.”

“Smoldering ideas heat generated before ignition!”

“Exploration, Respect, Humor, Discovery: AHA Moments.”

“Encountering and sharing new familiar world.”

“Seeing the dedication on NJCTE board!”

Six words: we want yours too! What inspires you to teach? To learn? To care? To keep going? What was a most influential moment in your teaching career? Or what book or character most inspires your teaching? In Smith’s TEDx, he concludes with the six-words of George Takei, of Star Trek and Twitter fame: “Share your story, change the world.” Please submit your six-word entry to njctefocus@gmail.com and include your full name. Take the challenge and share your six-word story with NJCTE and other teachers. Together, members of the New Jersey Council of Teachers of English can help each other remain inspired.

Works Cited

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