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Erika Robinson

Red Bank Regional High School

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Shifting Sands

by Erika Robinson

I have been teaching now for more than 26 years, and this year will be my last. It is a career I fell into rather than sought after, and it is also an accident of circumstance that will cause me to depart in June. The circumstances of my leaving the profession are worthy of a few words here, and I will share them. Mostly, though, I'd like to tell about the time in the middle, as that has been what has been golden for me.

In the early years, my students were overwhelmingly Black and Latino. I myself was one of perhaps three Black teachers in the entire school. At the beginning of every school year, when word of my background had spread, a brave student would raise their hand and ask, "Miss, why are you here?" I could, they reasoned, be "making bank" on Wall Street, or arguing before the Supreme Court, or finding a cure for cancer. After all, I had graduated from Harvard, what they believed to be the best school in the world.

"I am the best," I would agree. Then I would wait a beat before delivering my punchline: "Isn't the best what you deserve? That's why I am here."

Invariably, year after year, I would watch the tension in their faces recede, their spines straighten, their gum hit the inside of the trashcan, and the learning begin. I have loved that annual epiphany. It has been the thing that has kept me there all these years.

My Harvard education came up again in a different context, when AP Language and Composition was added to my teaching schedule. It was some rarified air I found in that classroom, to be sure, never more so than on that first Back to School Night, when a sea of white parents stared at me during my presentation, their arms folded and their jaws locked; until that is, one of their number spoke what they had all been wondering, and asked me what my qualifications were to teach this class. My single word answer sufficed, of course, but the taste of that night is still bitter in my mouth, as my polled colleagues assure me that was this never a question they have been asked.

I went on to develop a program where I prepared academically and psychologically Black, Latino, and poor white students who had never been in honors courses before for the rigors of AP work. I recruited them, I taught them American Literature their sophomore year, I worked with them for two months in the summer, and then welcomed them, along with their white classmates, into AP Language and Composition during their Junior year. At first it was a culture shock for everyone, but I assured the students that these were my seats in my room, and that everyone in those seats had earned their place. The numbers swelled from 25 students that first year to 88 the final year I taught the course. It was a beautiful model that my supervisor thanked me for developing, as he passed it off as his own and got a principal's job elsewhere as a result. I don't mind. I love that years of classes of traditionally underserved students felt confident enough after taking my class to sign up for more AP courses. I love that these courses on their transcripts allowed them entrée to schools that never would have considered them otherwise. I love that real integration went on in my classroom, and not just the kind in the halls and the sports fields.

But I am leaving. Last year, after returning from a leave for back surgery, I had a gun pointed at me by a police officer during a lockdown drill. He said he was “just kidding,” but I was terrified. It is, of course, a sign of the times. Students though, have changed also. Parents complain that I have posters of the President of the United States and Toni Morrison on my walls alongside posters of Twain and Dickinson and Poe. They want to know why there are “so many Black people up there.” White students object to reading works by writers of color, and are supported by their parents in their objections. Black students sit mute, afraid to voice their opinions. These are strange times in which we are living and teaching. I know my experience is not unique to me. I have loved the classroom, the chance to watch students learn the power of words to help them find ways to live their lives victoriously. I hope the tide will turn, that schools will no longer be armed fortresses, that students will welcome the exchange of ideas, that they will feel empowered to remake the world using literature as a guidepost. Time will tell. I am off to write and consult, watching what develops from a safer shore.

Erika Robinson, raised in East Harlem, New York City, has an A.B. from Harvard University, and an M. Div. from The Episcopal Divinity School. She served as Coordinator of Minority Recruitment at Saint Paul’s School in Concord, New Hampshire, and as Assistant Dean of Admissions at Princeton and Columbia Universities. A teacher of English for nearly 27 years at Red Bank Regional High School, New Jersey, Robinson will be retiring in the spring to consult with students needing assistance with college applications and other writing tasks. Her website is www.erikarobinson.org. The proud mother of a recent Columbia University graduate, Robinson is also an intuitive card reader who shares her gift at Earth Spirit New Age Center in Red Bank, New Jersey.