

# EDUCATION WEEK

Education Week

November 24, 1993

## **Close Your Eyes Or Else**

By Elena DeVos Binder

My academic career began when I was 2 years old at a progressive, expensive nursery school where I chose a "Mary Had a Little Lamb" decal to identify my coat cubby. I loved school; yet even then I worried about how little room there was for a difference of opinion. When it came to compulsory naps, for instance, my teachers would not allow me to rest with my eyes open. To make public my protest against their discriminatory policy, I lay on my back, eyes closed, but with my legs straight up in the air. Mahatma Gandhi goes to nursery school.

Finally, to avert my bad influence on the other children, the teachers moved my cot into the bathroom, out of sight. When my mother came early to pick me up one afternoon, she found me there. She demanded that I be allowed back with the other children and wondered aloud why she worked an extra job to pay my tuition at a school designed to foster independent thought.

Flash ahead, through 20 years of teaching all grade levels and a doctorate in education. Had I collected "Mary Had a Little Lamb" decals from all the schools at which I attended or taught, I could be a shepherd now. All I had wanted was to teach, but it was not to unfold that way. Differences of opinion interfered.

A shy student in my 7th-grade honors English class was acting increasingly distraught: He was easily startled; he cried for no apparent reason; he drew horrible monster figures, engraving them deep in the paper. His pale white forearms were covered with cigarette-burn marks and dark bruises.

In California, any professional who works with children and harbors the slightest suspicion that a child is being abused must report those suspicions. The safety of the child is foremost. That's the idea on paper.

I reported the family to the department of social services. However, the student's father was a professor at the University of California. This fact--according to the district psychologist, the school psychologist, and the principal--gave him what amounted to diplomatic immunity in our conservative, well-heeled district.

All three administrators chastised me for breaking the code of silence, assuring me that such parents do not abuse children. No one directly mentioned the boy. He wasn't in their line of vision as they focused their sights on me. "Close your eyes," they admonished me.

After I voiced my dissent, they angrily advised me to make other plans for the coming September. I was given the choice to keep quiet and survive--or move on. Although I had the tenure to fight them, I did not have the stomach--or perhaps the moral fortitude at that age--for it. I was reminded too much of the past.

As a child, I, too, had a prestigious professor father. Never once did any teacher ask why I was constantly black and blue, or why an honors student socialized with juvenile delinquents, or why I cried at my desk. The intervening years had done little to remedy the system's inability to help abused children.

Disheartened and sickened, I returned to school for my Ed.D. to teach adults. It would have to be better in higher education, I told myself. And it was, especially because there were no defenseless children to be harmed. Other cracks in the foundation exist, though.

For one, teaching at the university level is ridiculously competitive. It is not unusual for 600 people to apply for a non-tenure-track, one-year position. Often, only the short-listed hear back. The prevailing attitude? If you don't like it, step aside. Many's the time I did not get an interview, which didn't bother me much at first. After all, I had my dues to pay.

Finally, I was hired into my first part-time position. The woman who previously held it had just checked herself into a psychiatric hospital, an omen I ignored. Admittedly, I climbed into higher education on her back, but I had arrived.

I taught four undergraduate and graduate writing courses in three different departments, as well as directed the university's writing clinic. By putting in my time on the adjunct rock pile, I hoped to create a tenured position.

Then a colleague from another college asked me to teach a business-communications course there. Another part-time job didn't interest me, but he smoothly assured me that if I taught part time for one year I could then "transition" to a real job. I realize now I should have suspected someone who used a noun for a verb.

Convinced like the mistress who believes that her married boyfriend will someday leave his wife, I became a "freeway professor." For a year, I left one school at 6:30 P.M. to dash to the other where I taught until 10 P.M. I received accolade evaluations from students and administrators. Consequently, when a full-time position did open, I applied, thinking I stood an excellent chance--until I received a "thanks but no thanks" form letter addressed to Mister DeVos. (Had my ex-husband applied, too?)

What happened? I had taught similar business seminars across the country; moreover, my doctoral program at Harvard was specifically about teaching communications skills to businesspeople. That didn't guarantee a job, but I thought I would get interviewed. The committee, though, had not even read my materials well enough to learn my gender.

Later, the dean confided that the other candidates lacked my qualifications and experience but had "seniority." Out of 503 applicants, 16 were part-timers with an average of 11 years' service at the school. They were the only ones who made the short list--despite applicants' qualifications and despite federal regulations requiring all teaching jobs to be nationally advertised.

So I returned to teaching my four courses at the other university for \$1,200 a course, four quarters a year. That totals \$19,200 pretax dollars, with no health insurance and no pension. My counterpart colleagues on the core faculty earned over \$43,000 for teaching two courses a quarter, three quarters a year, with pension and health benefits. There I was, working twice as much for half the pay.

My story is not extraordinary, not any different from all the other adjunct faculty members across our land, piecing together their livings at several schools.

We are the frayed white-collar workers, holding our hats in our aging hands. Where is the Cesar Chavez for the seasonal laborers of academia?

As a devoted urbanite, I make it harder on myself, it's true. I would consider a job in a rural area, but I admit, I've rarely applied for one. It puts my family at too much economic risk. Seriously, I'd be safer selling hamburgers.

I've heard that to get a McDonald's franchise, applicants must put up \$250,000 collateral and be willing to move to the next demographically consummate town chosen by the firm's researchers. The average wait is seven years. Here the employer removes most of the risk if the people are willing to make a commitment, too. Not so in education.

A friend of mine from Harvard is on the tenure-track express at Cornell. This is her fourth year there; she hopes to land tenure soon, as do all the other aspirants stacked up like planes above La Guardia. Yet her husband can't find employment in Ithaca, N.Y. Such offerings at the Altar of Academe go beyond my husband's and my economic sensibilities.

Ultimately, though, it came to sacrifices beyond money. The chairman in the graduate psychology department ordered me to revise my written evaluation of a student who easily deserved to fail. A bad grade would "alienate the students," he phrased it. They all were aspiring therapists, "so why would they need to write, anyway?" he asked me. Why, indeed?

Would I lower my standards to satisfy the tuition-paying client? Would I close my eyes? I knew the answer.

I left formal education and devoted myself to my consulting business where I train corporate executives in communications skills. Their biggest requirement of me is to wear a business suit rather than casual professorial attire; they trust me to do the right thing in the classroom. No one has asked me to compromise my values. It's short-term, highly paid educational intervention, without the long-term relationships formed with students. That's what I miss.

Sometimes, I recall with a pang those special students who came into my life over my 20 years as a classroom teacher. I remember Brady, who learned to say no to the kids who bullied him in journalism class, and Elizabeth, who found comfort knowing her teacher had survived being a dark-spirited poet in junior high, too. Too, there was Lynda, who wrote about her experiences as a Vietnam nurse and eventually published her stories. They, like many others, made a connection with me--and therefore stay forever in my heart. They taught me that I had made a difference in their lives, that I had shown and shared with them the beauty and exhilaration of our minds and spirits--the real stuff of education.

I do wish either the system had been different, or that I didn't take it all so seriously. I just never learned how to close my eyes--though, Lord knows, people have tried to teach me.

---

Elena DeVos Binder, a California writer and consultant, formerly taught on the faculties of Antioch University, the California School of Professional Psychology, the Laboratory School at California State University at Los Angeles, Harvard University, Hillel Academy, the Oakland Public Schools, the San Marino Unified School District, Santa Monica College, Southwestern University School of Law, and the University of California at Los Angeles.