

Kevin Butler - An excerpt from *Lights, Cameras, TEACH!*

How I got here.

Ever since third grade, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I had the best third-grade teacher one can imagine. Her class wasn't only fun; it was captivating. Everything we did in her class was an experience. Almost 30 years later, I can still put myself back into my third-grade classroom. She was a dynamic storyteller. I remember her reading Mr. Popper's Penguins to the class as if it were yesterday. I loved the class aquarium, the salamander tank, and when we hatched chickens and ducks. She taught us songs to remember the continents and oceans, and chants to remember our multiplication tables.

What I remember most, though, was that her class wasn't easy. It was the 1980s, long before "rigor" was an educational catchword. I remember rewriting papers more than once because my handwriting was messy. I remember her calling my home because I was misbehaving (she caught me selling candy in the cafeteria during lunch). I remember she cared. She loved her job, and she loved her students. She was honest, and we trusted her. I still keep in touch with her today.

Minus a brief phase of wanting to be an architect in sixth grade (I was obsessed with Lego), I was determined to get through school so I could be a teacher. Growing up, I made my friends play school (I don't know how I had any friends). I pretended my house was a school building. I would make my friends listen to my lessons, take tests, give them homework, beg my mother to be the cafeteria server, and my father to be the principal.

I loved school (in retrospect, probably more for the social aspect than the learning), but school was just a place I enjoyed going to. I grew up in the suburbs of New York, out on Long Island. I grew up middle-class, in a middle-class neighborhood. During my senior year of high school, I only applied to two colleges — the University of North Carolina and a local private liberal arts college (to appease my parents). I got accepted to both schools. To make a long story short, being an only child, my mother didn't want me to

go away to college, so she bargained with me. If I stayed home and went to the local liberal arts college (which, I must say, had an excellent teaching program), I got a new car. Yeah, I chose the car.

During my final semester, I went back and student-taught at my former elementary school. My third-grade teacher had retired, but I student-taught with my second-grade teacher (who was a close runner-up for "best teacher ever"). I remember sitting in a student-teaching seminar each week and hearing everyone talking about their weekly adventures in the classroom. I was determined to be the first student to land a teaching job. At this time in New York, jobs were hard to obtain. Budget cuts meant hiring freezes. The market was saturated with applicants. I was mailing out (dating myself) resumes like crazy. I interviewed at several schools, mostly for sub positions, but in early December, I was called to interview at a school on the eastern end of Long Island. I had never heard of the town before, but after some research, I found out that it was a growing suburb that was going to need teachers.

The assistant principal conducted the interview. It was probably one of the best job interviews I've ever had. Not because of my performance, but because of hers. She was (and still is) so kind. She was only a few years older than me, and we connected instantly. After checking my references, she called and offered me a job. I eagerly accepted it. The job was for a leave-replacement. Unfortunately, the teacher I was taking over for was in a terrible car accident on her way home from school. I taught her fourth graders for the rest of the school year. Thankfully, before school was over, I was offered a full-time tenure-track position to teach fourth grade in the fall of 2003 at another elementary school in the same district. I was 22 years old.

That first year, I was closer in age to my students than most of the other teachers I worked with at school. Those kids are in their mid-twenties now, and I still keep in touch with many of them today. But I owe those kids an apology. I had no idea what I was doing. I can only imagine what parents thought of me when they met me. I was 22 but looked 15. I thought I was going to change the world but was just lucky everyone made it to June alive. Years later, I learned, the principal put the PTA president's child in my class, for lack of a better word, as a spy. They wanted someone who would give honest feedback on my class. It wasn't the student that was the spy (and I use spy very

dramatically here) but rather the mother, who, as the PTA president, was always at school. A few years later, I taught her second son. Today, her oldest son, Steven, is a New York City police officer, and her second son, Kevin, is finishing up medical school. Seventeen years later, I still get a Christmas card from their parents every year.

Even though that first year was a huge learning experience with many bumps along the way, my class did earn high scores on their state testing. Every child in my class, according to the State of New York, met or exceeded grade-level academic standards in math and reading. At this time, NCLB (No Child Left Behind) was enacted, so test scores were important to the district office. High test scores meant more state-aid. With those good test scores, I quickly earned the respect of my principal and central office. After several years of begging to teach fifth grade, my principal let me move up with one of my all-time favorite group of kids. He was leaving his position as principal to accept a job as superintendent at a neighboring school district, so, in my mind, it was his going-away gift to me. That year that I looped up several fourth-graders to fifth grade. To date, my first year in fifth grade is probably my favorite. It wasn't because the kids were extra smart or well behaved, but it was because of the deep relationships I had with them.

Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would leave that job in New York. I pretty much assumed I would die in that classroom. But, as life would have it, I was thrown a curveball. In the early spring of 2014, I was contacted by a startup charter school in Los Angeles (a city where I spent my summer vacations). I was offered a unique position to join their faculty as both a consultant and a founding teacher. The school was expanding from K-4 to K-5. Five years prior, my mother had died of cancer.

In 2003, days after I accepted my first full-time teaching job, my parents put my childhood home on the market and moved south to North Carolina. They designed and had their dream home built. In the fall of 2008, my parents told me my mother was diagnosed with cancer. The six months between October of 2008 and April of 2009 were the worst time of my life. Watching a parent die is something I wouldn't wish on anyone.

A week before spring break 2009 (when I was already planning to head down to North Carolina), my father called and said I probably should try to get there sooner. Thinking my classroom couldn't survive without me, I told him I couldn't take any additional time off from work but would be there next week. That same evening, I was chaperoning our spring dance, and I told my principal about the conversation I had with my dad. She looked at me and pretty much kicked me out of the building. She told me I needed to get in my car and go see my mother. She reminded me my class would be fine without me and would be there when I returned.

I left the next morning. When I arrived at my parents' house, my mother was not well. We were able to talk, and we talked about a lot of things. I'm grateful for that because so many people do not get to have those final conversations with loved ones who have passed. Her last words to me were to live my dreams because life is too short. The next day, my mother became incoherent. Three long weeks later, my mother died. I come from a tiny family, and it was my colleagues, students, and their families that got me through those terrible weeks. The comfort of seeing my students and their families at my mother's funeral meant more to me than I can ever express in words. I was out of work for about five weeks. I couldn't wait to get back in the classroom.

As terrible as that time in my life was, it changed my life. I would never have accepted that job in California if I didn't have that talk with my mother (and receive the thumbs up from my father). Most people thought I was absolutely crazy. I didn't tell many people about my plan to move to California until every i was dotted and t was crossed.

One day in the school parking lot, I remember someone joking with me one day when I was filling my car with boxes. They asked me if I was planning on quitting. I laughed and continued putting those boxes in my car for the next two weeks until my classroom was bare. I wound up moving more classroom supplies to California than I did personal items.

I also owned a house in NY. I signed a contract with the startup school at the very end of May of 2014. On the first of June, my house was listed on the real estate market. Within a week, I had an offer for the full asking price. That was the "Oh, Lord" moment. I hadn't told my school anything, and only two colleagues (whom I needed as

references) knew this was happening. I also had a stipulation in my contract with the startup school that said that if my school in New York didn't grant me a one-year leave-of-absence, I would be able to back out of the deal. I was not keeping this a secret to be shady. Instead, I was nervous—well, probably, more scared than nervous. . . I was terrified!

That week, I sent an email to my principal and superintendent asking to have a meeting. Within minutes, I got a response asking what was going on and if we could meet now. I walked downstairs to the principal's office. I loved my principal; he was and still is a role model. He was a fantastic leader, and I knew telling him would not be easy. I walked in. He looked right at me and asked, "Are you leaving?" He was only taking a guess, but he was right. I explained it all, and to make a long story short, he gave me his full support. He expedited my request for a leave of absence, and on the following Tuesday, the Board of Education graciously approved my leave of absence.

I must emphasize how crazy people thought I was. I was leaving a tenured job at an excellent school, making a competitive salary. In over a decade, I had earned enough respect from the administration to be able to run my classroom how I thought was best. I was our building's union representative, an executive member of our schools PTO, and sat on our school district PLC board. I loved my students and their families. If I had stayed, the next school year, I would have had an entire class of siblings of former students (which would have been pretty cool). But the stars had aligned. I jumped. As my principal had explained to me before, I had my success. It was time to venture into the world and try something new.

I told my class three days before the last day of school (once my leave of absence was approved). I have a special award ceremony for my students at the end-of-the-year feast. After handing out the awards, I jumped on top of a desk and began to recite a speech I had carefully memorized the night before, which would explain everything. I don't think I got past the first sentence before the tears starting streaming.

Well, that one-year leave of absence turned into two years. And while I learned a lot during my two years at the startup school, it honestly wasn't a fit. I was planning on going back to New York but fell in love with the southern California lifestyle. It's literally

75 degrees and sunny every day. I interviewed all over the county of Los Angeles, but couldn't find a school I liked. I was picky. I was offered a few jobs, but I just didn't feel that any of the places were really right for me. Somehow I was able to find something wrong with each school I interviewed at. Some were too traditional, others too progressive. I just wanted to find a school that I could settle down at.

At the last minute (it was April, and I was ready to throw the towel in and return to New York), I was asked to interview at this small, independent school. It was only a ten-minute drive from my home, which made it appealing, but it was a fourth-grade position and, as silly as it now seems, I didn't want to teach fourth grade; I loved everything about fifth grade. I also never imagined teaching at an independent private school.

The director of the school persuaded me to come in anyway. As I entered the campus, it was love at first sight. I was interviewed by the school's founder, who at the time was 90 years old. He also started the school as a one-room schoolhouse almost 60 years ago. The school now lays across a sprawling campus that stretches over five beautiful acres. He asked me the best questions related to kids and learning. I was then interviewed by his daughter, who is the head of school, and got a tour of the campus. I was introduced to kids, staff members, and teachers. I met the other fifth-grade teacher. Without question, I knew I wanted to work with her.

The head of school somehow knew I had been interviewing all around Los Angeles and was aware I had been offered a few jobs (several of which I turned down). She called me on a Saturday afternoon and wanted to know what she could do to get me to commit to her school. At that point, the posted position was now for fifth grade. I reminded her I was looking for a place to settle down. I needed a school that would understand my sometimes unconventional and unique approach to teaching. I told her that, rather than me giving a demonstration lesson at her school, I would like for her and the hiring team to observe me teaching my current students. I wanted them to see me in my natural habitat to understand better how I interacted with my students, as well as to experience my true classroom setting. She agreed, and the rest is history.

I am in my fourth year at that school, and in addition to teaching fifth-grade math, reading, and social studies, I am the director of curriculum and instruction. I get to teach

students and collaborate with teachers, act as an educational coach, review and write curriculum, and manage and deliver professional development.

In addition to teaching full-time, I present my Creating the Experience workshop at schools and conferences. I love working with teachers and speaking at conferences across the United States. Most recently, I started a blog and podcast, both titled Lights, Cameras, TEACH! Find me on social media @thekevinjbutler