

My First Day of Teaching— Inside a State Prison

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Every pair of eyes was on me as I dumped my teaching tools on the desk. I looked around the room at the broken tables and chairs that the students were hunkered around. Many had their books and papers in their laps due to lack of table space. My desk had no drawers and all the legs were different heights.

THIS WAS IT—TODAY WAS THE BIG day! The much anticipated (at least by me) day was finally here. My first day of teaching felons inside an all-male state prison. I was standing in the parking lot of that prison, gazing toward the entrance, deep in trancelike reflection. I couldn't help but contemplate the long winding journey I had traveled to lead me to this moment. Those twisted hoops I had been required to jump through: the special training, the intensive background checks, enough paperwork to choke the entire prison population. I had to wonder to myself—would it turn out to be worth it, or would this process turn out to be a waste of my time?

It all began two months before with a teaching interview at Marion Technical College (MTC). Things went very well, and I graduated to the second round of interviews, which required a teach test. For those of you who don't teach, a teach test is where you (the wanna-be teacher) demonstrate your teaching abilities for an actual audience. Arguably, ten to fifteen minutes can't tell you everything about a teacher's abilities; it is too brief a period to really strut your stuff. However, I usually perform well in such situations, and I was hoping to close the deal.

This particular teach test was open to the general MTC public. In addition to the members of the second-round interviewing panel, the room was populated by a dozen or so walk-ons. Among these walk-ons were other teachers, students, bored employees, as well as other candidates who were applying for the same job—no pressure. One striking woman sitting in the back row appeared to be keenly interested in my test, intently observing every move and gesture I made.

After my teach test concluded, I packed up my personal belongings. As it was the end of the day, the finalists were summoned fifteen minutes later, one-by-one, into a room to meet with the interview panel and receive the news of the final selection. The panel spokesperson started her canned speech with "Dr. Davison, we want to thank you for interviewing with us here at MTC, but . . ." At that point, as she droned on and on, I shut out everything she was saying. My wandering eyes shifted to the back of the room. There she was, the woman who had been at my teach test earlier in the day. Come to think of it, she had similarly been sitting in as an observer during my first round of interviews. What gives?

But here I was—too old, too proud, too mean—to call it quits permanently. I was a former hotshot teacher who had chaired business programs for more than one college. I had my own successful consulting business. I had captained programs with million-dollar budgets and hundreds of employees. I was overqualified to teach here, but I was desperate to keep my hand (and my mind) in the teaching game, even if only as a part-time adjunct teacher. The job would barely pay for my gas money, but it was better than letting my mind rot away in retirement land. I loved teaching and would do it for free. I didn't need the money. I needed the work.

As I was walking out the door—head held high—the back-row woman projected a tentative smile and waved my way. I stopped, and she hastened in my direction. I observed a business card in her left hand as she gave me her right hand for a quick no-nonsense handshake. "Hello, sir, my name is Mrs. Smith

(not her real name). I have a teaching offer I would like to discuss with you.” She paused dramatically. “Are you interested in a little talk?” I instinctively liked this woman, but my long history of negotiating told me to keep my poker face intact as I responded. “What have you got in mind . . .?” I (also) intentionally paused for effect. “Boss!”

THAT HAD BEEN TWO MONTHS BEFORE, almost to the day. My first impression of Mrs. Smith was right on the money. She was fair, tough, and a no-nonsense boss. I liked her—a lot. When I told her I would be glad to work for her, her response was: “Good!” She smiled warmly at me. “Oh, and by the way, the job is teaching inside a prison.” According to her business card, she was the person in charge of providing college coursework to incarcerated students at two prisons and hiring the staff to accomplish this.

Subsequently, I was referred to the prison training facility for special training. I viewed videos about do’s and don’ts; videos about how to interact (and not interact) with the prisoners; videos about what penalties one would receive for breaking any of the many rules. And a tiny amount of paperwork needed to be wrapped up as well: forms for background checks; forms about my work history; forms about my life from cradle to . . . you get the picture.

SO NOW I STOOD MOTIONLESS BESIDE MY OLD beat-up Jeep. This felt like my first date with my lovely wife. That had been forty-two years before. Exactly like back then—I had a nervous stomach. I was in the parking lot of the Marion Correctional Institute (MCI), two hundred yards from the prison entrance. All I could think about was the same thing I

had worried about on that first date: I hope I hadn’t overdressed. After almost fifty years in the work force, my idea of dressing down was dress pants, dress shirt, sports jacket, and a tie. This is one old dog that isn’t good at learning new tricks.

It felt like a powerful life moment. I thought about the multitude of fearful and shocking stories, and the pressure from my family and loved ones to not do what I was about to do. I saw the worry in my wife’s eyes whenever the topic came up. I spent many sleepless nights thinking about it. As I took that first step toward the prison entrance, hauling two of the see-through plastic containers I had been issued, all that debris washed from my mind, and my feet moved me forward to the main entrance of the facility.

The remainder of the entry process became a blur. Sign in; show my picture ID badge; answer a million questions; empty my pockets; remove my sports coat; shoes, and belt; walk through a metal detector; get wanded by a grim-faced corrections officer who looked like an NFL lineman; watch my teaching tools be fed through an x-ray machine on a moving treadmill; wait for the heavy metal door to be buzzed open; wait as another grim-faced CO checked my badge again and buzzed open another heavy metal door. Finally—I was on the “inside.”

I was pointed in the direction of the education facility and walked through a hallway bustling with felons in faded blue denim outfits. Most of the prisoners were looking my way with probing looks. I smiled and wished everyone I saw a “Good morning” in a loud boisterous voice. I stopped myself . . . maybe I was overreacting a little. From that point on, I just nodded my head at each prisoner that I passed. I spied an old

wooden sign that said EDUCATION over an open door. The doorway led to a dark, concrete stairway heading upwards. Shouldering my heavy see-through containers crammed full of books and teaching tools, with an audible sigh I began the long trek. Pausing to take a break and catch my wind, I looked up and spotted a dull yellowish flash of light above me. When I arrived at the top, I was greeted by yet another CO and another sign-in sheet. He gave my badge a cursory glance, had me sign my name into a dirty worn ledger, and mumbled “room eight.”

When I entered the door to my classroom, the incarcerated students were already lounging in their seats waiting for me. Once I shut the door behind me, it was me and forty felons. I was provided with a “man-down” button, which looked like a garage door opener. I had been assured that if I pushed the button, help would come running.

Every pair of eyes was on me as I dumped my teaching tools on the desk. I looked around the room at the broken tables and chairs that the students were hunkered around. Many had their books and papers in their laps due to lack of table space. My desk had no drawers and all the legs were different heights. Behind this desk was a blackboard. *You have got to be kidding me*, I thought to myself. I had brought dry erasers and whiteboard markers. What I had hoped for was a computer projector. The chalkboard tray held one piece of broken white chalk and one piece of broken yellow chalk. I peered around for an eraser, but only saw a questionable looking dry rag hanging on a hook beside the broken and chipped blackboard. I muttered to myself, *Man-up Tom, work with what you got, quit whining, it won’t change a thing*.

I turned my back to the room and perceived

voices murmuring as I strode briskly to the blackboard. I snatched up the piece of broken yellow chalk and wrote my name in big bold yellow letters. I spun around to face my class and strolled across a white line painted on the scarred wooden floor with the words NO INMATES ALLOWED PAST THIS POINT! I strode halfway into the depths of the blue-clad men who would be my students for the next sixteen weeks. “Good morning, gentlemen,” I barked and gave them my best teacher smile. I heard a few soft mumbles. I repeated even louder: “Gentlemen, I didn’t travel sixty-eight miles, leaving my home at 4 A.M. to get here to teach you folks this morning and get a lame response like that. You can do better.” I took a deep breath and paused for effect. “So let’s try it again . . . GOOD MORNING GENTLEMEN!” I received a loud boisterous good morning in return. I heard a few chuckles around the room.

My facial expression didn’t change, but inside I was smiling. Just what I had assumed—this was just like every other class I’d ever been in front of. I began striding back and forth across the entire length of the tiny crowded classroom. As I marched, I made direct eye contact with every student and held it for a brief moment. “Gentlemen, when you become a teacher, the first thing they teach you is to establish credibility with your students.” I looked slowly around the room. “All those fancy words mean is that I need to prove to you folks that I am qualified to teach the subject matter at hand.” I walked over to the “no inmate” line and planted my feet directly on it. “So, gentlemen, I am going to stand right here on this line and introduce myself to you.” I had their attention now. “When I am finished, our first order of business will be for each of

you to stand up here—right here,” I pointed to the line, “and take your turn introducing yourselves to me and the entire class.” I saw row after row of smiles. “After introductions, the second item on our agenda is to establish the class rules.” I stopped and pointed behind my desk. “I will write these rules of behavior on the whiteboard . . . er, excuse me, gentlemen . . . I mean the blackboard.” I had their attention now. “We will all discuss and agree to these rules,” I stated firmly. From the back row, a voice shouted out, “My rule will be no homework!” The class erupted into chuckles. “Who said that?” I asked in a calm voice. “Inmate 308187, sir!” came the response. The entire class became eerily silent, waiting on the outcome of our exchange. “I didn’t ask you for a number. I asked you for your name.” A hesitant voice, “My name?” I saw puzzled looks throughout the room. “Yes, I want your name.” A brief silence and then, “My name is Jeremy Jones, sir.” I answered him with a smile. “Well, Mr. Jones, when we start to write our class rules, I want you to be the class scribe. The class can determine however many rules we need. But I insist on including two rules: one, we will treat everyone in this class with respect; and two and most important, never forget that learning is supposed to be fun. Can you live with those rules, Mr. Jones?” I heard the lighter tone in his response. “Yes, sir, I sure can!”

An hour later—introductions completed, my jacket removed, the sleeves of my dress shirt rolled up, and my tie loosened—the class atmosphere was relaxed and energetic. Mr. Jones was standing at the blackboard well beyond the line with a happy smile on his face. He was reciting the list of class rules that he had just written on the blackboard.

AFTER SIXTEEN WEEKS TOGETHER THE students of that first class began calling me Dr. D. That nickname stuck and is employed today by nearly everyone in the prison system and beyond.

That first day of teaching was almost four years ago. This teaching gig doesn’t pay very well. In fact, worst wages I’ve ever made as a teacher. It is also—without a doubt—the single most rewarding job I have held in my entire life. During these past four years I’ve come to several realizations, or what I call my personal truths:

1. Anyone can make a mistake. These men made mistakes and they’re incarcerated for it. I agree with that. But, just because they’re in prison doesn’t mean they quit being part of the human race.

2. I’m a strong believer in second chances—redemption. *But for the grace of God go I*, says it all.

3. Although I have witnessed horrors in this prison and despite the odds stacked against these men, I have also witnessed much potential for greatness.

4. Finally, I have learned more in a single day teaching incarcerated students than I have in twenty years of teaching so called “traditional” students.

Since I have been working in prisons, I have felt compelled to keep a journal. I constantly write short stories and poetry about the things I have witnessed and about my experiences with my incarcerated students. Sometimes it feels like I experience “life moments” almost daily. There is much that is good in this world, and I want to end with these words by Fyodor Dostoevsky: “A society should be judged not by how it treats its outstanding citizens but by how it treats its criminals.” ❖