

A Lasting Impact

Matt Skillen

I am a teacher, and I tell stories. This is my disclaimer. I share this disclaimer with the hope that the following story is meaningful to those who read it.

You see, at the onset of each school year, there is a great deal English teachers must do. Being that there are a number of standards, objectives, and benchmarks to be met with only 180 school days in the traditional academic year, there is only so much time that can be devoted to those things that do not fit in the answer bubbles of a standardized test. However, it is these things, these details, these personal connections that illustrate the career of a teacher.

During the 2007 Flint Hills Writing Project, I was assigned the task of sharing a story from my experience in the classroom. At the time, I had taught seventh and eighth English for four years and I thought I had little to share from my perspective. The very idea that I had a single story to share from my professional past seemed unbelievable to me. Then, as though I had walked into an unsuspecting, oncoming, bus, it hit me. If I took a moment to look beyond grades, lesson planning, and Adequate Yearly Progress, there were several stories I could share based on the amazing people I had encountered throughout the early part of my career. And, that is when I remembered Jason.

Jason was a young man who entered my classroom as a seventh grader without much direction. He had his own trouble in school and I thought I might be able to make an impact in his life by simply offering my time to him. In the end, however, it was clear that Jason had made an impact on my life as well. Jason's story, shared in detail below, is true. His name has been changed, but every detail provided beyond this change is presented just as it happened not too long ago. And, like most stories that are set within a school year, Jason's begins on the ever-memorable first day.

The tardy bell rang for my ninth hour to take their seats; it was the last hour of the first day of school and I was absolutely exhausted, but I could see the end was near. Jason, a rather tall boy with a visible negative attitude, took his seat like everyone

else, but it was obvious that he was in a very bad mood.

I greeted the class quickly and went through my usual speech about respect and honesty and tried my best to communicate to the students that ninth hour, the common study hall time at our school, was intended for quiet studying and reading. Jason made it evident almost immediately that he was neither going to work on homework or read quietly.

"Jason, did you hear what I said?" I began as I approached his desk. "You are to work on homework or read quietly until the end of school. Do you under--?"

"Yeah, I heard ya'!" He blurted. "I heard, I heard, but I ain't doin' nothin' today." He shrugged his shoulders and said defiantly, "No homework. No book."

At that, I offered to help him find a book, but a twenty or thirty minute battle ensued, and in the end, I lost. A few more weeks passed and each day ended with a war of wills between Jason and me. Sometimes he would retreat to another classroom for re-teaching. Other days he would just sit stoic in the back of my classroom; arms crossed, chair propped back against the wall. "What is it?" I asked myself. "What key would unlock this kid?" Then, I looked down at his feet. He was wearing what looked like hunting boots. They were a faded leather pair with camouflage panels. So, he was a hunter, eh?

That night I cleaned out every single hunting magazine I had in storage; I finally had a use for them. The following day I waited for ninth hour so that I could approach Jason with a cease-fire agreement.

Once he arrived and took his seat, I began class in the usual way and waited for things to calm down before I approached my adversary. At the appropriate time, I walked to the back of the room with a magazine in hand. "Jason, I noticed you wore your hunting boots again today." I began.

"Yeah." He said.

"Well, I am a bit of a hunter myself, and, you know, I love reading this magazine. Would you like to take a look at it?"

"Umm . . ." He really did not know how to respond now that I was not nagging at him. "Yeah, I guess." He reached for the magazine, but, just before he could grab it, I thought I would test my luck.

Pulling the dated periodical just out of reach I said, "Tell you what, while reading this magazine you could do me a big favor. Could you summarize this article on turkey hunting for me? You don't have to write anything, just come talk to me about it when you are finished."

"Sure." He said and began reading.

After about twenty minutes I looked up from the stack of papers I was grading to see Jason standing at my desk. "Can I help you Jason?"

“Yeah, I would like to talk to you about this article.” He said looking down at his feet. “I really liked it.”

For the remaining fifteen minutes we talked about the different aspects of wild turkey hunting discussed in the article. With great enthusiasm Jason described a personal account one of the authors had written about. Up until this point I had never seen Jason say so much in one setting. It was obvious to me he was very passionate about the outdoors and hunting in particular.

Our conversation eventually meandered on to our own hunting sagas. He told me about the first and only time he had ever been out on a “real” hunting trip. His uncle was an avid hunter who had recently invited Jason on a dove hunt. Jason said that there was a lot of shooting, but not too many doves in the bag at the end of the day (which is quite typical of a dove hunt).

“So, that is the *only* time you have ever been hunting?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he began. “My uncle is moving out of state. I don’t really know anyone else who hunts. Well, except you, Mr. Skillen.”

The bell rang signaling the end of the day. Jason left quickly after returning my magazine. “Thanks, Mr. Skillen. I really liked reading your magazine.” He said as he ran out the door to the busses.

After our conversation I looked up Jason’s grades. He wasn’t failing any classes, yet. A lingering “D” in math and another in science immediately caught my attention. He also had several behavior referrals already logged in the system. He apparently loved to speak his mind when he was frustrated and Saturday detentions were not serious enough to force Jason to change his ways.

Over the next few months during ninth hour, when Jason was not in the principal’s office or in another room to make up missing assignments, he would read quietly in the back of my room from the stack of *American Hunter* that now resided in a basket near his desk. Sometimes he would talk with me; sometimes he wouldn’t. It really didn’t bother me. He was quiet and non-confrontational.

Later, during Fall conferences, Jason’s mom and dad, two of the most honest and hard-working people I have ever met, came to my table and asked if I could help Jason in science and math. They commented on how much he enjoyed being in my class and that if anyone could motivate him to do better in those subjects, I could. I spoke with Jason’s parents for a half an hour or more and we devised a plan to help Jason along.

“From here on out” I began during a short meeting with Jason on the following Monday, “you will need to bring a math or science assignment with you to study hall. If you do, and we can go over your work together, I will let you have the rest of the time in class to read whatever you want.” Jason did not like this idea as much, but he was willing to give it a shot. Before he began working, I wanted

to enhance the deal. "Oh, and one more thing," I added. "If you can stay out of trouble for the rest of the semester I will take you on a wild turkey hunt. Maybe *you* can write the next article."

That statement took Jason by surprise, and it made an impact. He worked hard in his classes and tried desperately to stay out of trouble with his teachers. Dealing with his recurring anger was tough, but he managed to raise his two lowest grades to solid a solid "C" in both math and science by the time the Spring Turkey Season opened and we made plans to hunt a section of property near my uncle's farm. Everything seemed to come together, but tragedy soon clouded our plans.

Jason returned to school one week before our outing and reported that he had been grounded for the next month for using foul language at home. I thought the penalty was rather harsh, but his parents knew best. Those plans to chase turkeys were washed out, but he remained focused on his grades for the final month of school.

Summer came and went and I had all but forgot about the failed hunting trip, but much to my delight, that very next school year Jason was one of the 8th graders who walked through my classroom door mid August. I almost failed to recognize him. It is one of the most interesting transitions in a young man's life. The time between 7th and 8th grade changes him, he becomes a young adult, it seems, almost overnight. Jason had left my ninth hour study hall his 7th grade year as a boy trying desperately to find his way. He returned as an eighth grade English student as a young man, ready to work hard and make serious strides in his schooling.

"Hello, sir." He said in a much lower voice than I remember.

"Well... Hello Jason!" I said as we shook hands. "It is nice to see you again."

"Mr. Skillen..." He began, a bit unsure. "I would like to try and go turkey hunting with you again this year if that would be okay."

"Jason, if you can come to school, work hard, and stay out of trouble. I believe that can be arranged."

He was a different person that year. He worked hard and complied with his teachers. It was as though he transformed completely from one year to the next and we were all very proud of him. The principal did not see him in his office anymore, he turned in almost all of his assignments, he was pleasant and kind to others, and, as rumor had it, he even found a girlfriend. Jason's parents were very pleased to hear he was doing so well in class, and they thanked all of his teachers for helping Jason along. The transformation in Jason was unexplainable, but it was rewarding too. It is difficult to say what impacted Jason so deeply that he became almost a dream student. However, it is very easy to say that he made a lasting im-

pression on each of his teachers—giving us all hope for the next student who, like Jason, would enter our school in search of his or her direction.

Later that year we did go turkey hunting and I had the pleasure of sharing a pastime with a young man who made an impact in my life as a teacher.

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