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Bett Canning

Heading back to the classroom after a wildly fun and all too brief seventeen years at home with my kids, I found myself teaching reading and language arts to a group of five delightful seventh-graders (and no, delightful seventh-graders is not an oxymoron!). The principal designed this position in hopes that the dynamics of a small class setting would encourage and challenge these energetic but struggling students.

As I sat that summer and prepared for my first venture back into the crazy, wonderful world of teaching, I pondered ways to provide the kind of classroom atmosphere where each person felt valued and in turn valued those around them. How could I structure the classroom so students would take time to think, to see connections, and to listen with open minds? They needed to understand their responsibility to take what they learn in school and use it to make decisions for themselves so that they would grow into confident young men and women.

Listening to several teaching seminars that I had purchased on cassette tapes (yes, cassette tapes!), I was struck by a simple but powerful idea. Students needed to be noticed by someone in a positive way. I had a feeling that my group of students may have experienced frustration, at times, being in a large group. It would be easy for them to not participate and to blend into the woodwork, or to act up and get noticed for the wrong reasons. How could I acknowledge their efforts, encourage their participation, and build their self-esteem? Enter the Keenagers!

Who? Well, let me explain. There exists a group of men and women at our parish known as the Keenagers. They are active, energetic and over the age of fifty-five! What better way to reach my goal than to partner my students with these wonderful surrogate grandparents who would see them with beautiful, accepting, admiring eyes? So I went to the coordinator of this group and asked her if she would talk to them about my idea at their next meeting and see (fingers crossed) if anyone would be interested. I only needed five, so I was hopeful! Five brave souls agreed to meet with me to discuss the possibility of the program which eventually became known as Reading Buddies.

We met in September and together devised a basic structure to get us started, knowing we could adjust as necessary. They decided they could meet with us once every other week for forty-five minutes. They would read along in a novel with us and we would have a class discussion when they came. To be sure, they were a little nervous at what they were committing themselves to, but were willing to give it a shot. Little did I know what a gold mine I had found!

The Reading Buddies were like the wind to a kite for the students. They took off! They felt comfortable and empowered meeting with their Reading Buddies. They learned the importance of listening to multiple viewpoints. They considered other ways of looking at a situation that they hadn't noticed themselves. They heard firsthand historical knowledge. They learned how to respectfully agree to disagree. Their Reading Buddies saw them as intelligent, amazing kids and it was nice. And, as I'm sure you can relate to, even though I was the teacher in that classroom, I learned far more than my students from these remarkable people.

If it is true that we are remembered for what we give, not for what we take, then my Reading Buddies will always be a part of these children's lives. The experiences we

have and the people we meet contribute to who we are. These students had the amazing opportunity to have the Reading Buddies in their lives. I, for one, have been changed by them.