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How Mrs. Grady Transformed Olly Neal

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

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IF you want to understand how great teachers transform lives, listen to the story of Olly Neal.

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Olly Neal

On the Ground

Nicholas D. Kristof

A recent study showed how a great elementary schoolteacher can raise the lifetime earnings of a single class by $700,000. After I wrote about the study, skeptics of school reform wrote me to say: sure, a great teacher can make a difference in the right setting, but not with troubled, surly kids in a high-poverty environment. If you think that, or if you scoff at the statistics, then listen to Neal.

In the late 1950s, Olly Neal was a poor black kid with an attitude. He was one of 13 brothers and sisters in a house with no electricity, and his father was a farmer with a second-grade education. Neal attended a small school for black children — this was in the segregated South — and was always mouthing off. He remembers reducing his English teacher, Mildred Grady, to tears.

“I was not a nice kid,” he recalls. “I had a reputation. I was the only one who made her cry.”

Neal adds: “She would have had good reason to say, ‘this boy is incorrigible.’ ”

A regular shoplifter back then, Neal was caught stealing from the store where he worked part time. He seemed headed for a life in trouble.

Carolyn F. Blakely, then a new teacher at the school (who retired last year as the dean of the Honors College that now bears her name at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff), remembers Neal as an at-risk kid prone to challenge authority. At the time, even teachers in the school called students “Mr.” or “Miss,” but Neal disrupted class by addressing her impertinently as “Carolyn.”

To deal with kids like him, Blakely told me, “I’d go home and stand in front of the mirror and practice being mean.”

One day in 1957, in the fall of his senior year, Neal cut Blakely’s class and wandered in the library, set up by Grady, the English teacher whom he had tormented. Neal wasn’t a reader, but he spotted a book with a risqué cover of a sexy woman.

Called “The Treasure of Pleasant Valley,” it was by Frank Yerby, a black author, and it looked appealing. Neal says he thought of checking it out, but he didn’t want word to get out to any of his classmates that he was reading a novel. That would have been humiliating.

“So I stole it.”

Neal tucked the book under his jacket and took it home — and loved it. After finishing the book, he sneaked it back into the library. And there, on the shelf, he noticed another novel by Yerby. He stole that one as well.

This book was also terrific. And, to Neal’s surprise, when he returned it to the shelf after finishing it, he found yet another by Yerby.

Four times this happened, and he caught the book bug. “Reading got to be a thing I liked,” he says. His trajectory changed, and he later graduated to harder novels, including those by Albert Camus, and he turned to newspapers and magazines as well. He went to college and later to law school.

In 1991, Neal was appointed the first black district prosecuting attorney in Arkansas. A few years later, he became a judge, and then an appellate court judge.

But there's more.

At a high school reunion, Grady stunned Neal by confiding to him that she had spotted him stealing that first book. Her impulse was to confront him, but then, in a flash of understanding, she realized his embarrassment at being seen checking out a book.

So Grady kept quiet. The next Saturday, she told him, she drove 70 miles to Memphis to search the bookshops for another novel by Yerby. Finally, she found one, bought it and put it on the library bookshelf.

Twice more, Grady told Neal, she spent her Saturdays trekking to Memphis to buy books by Yerby — all in hopes of turning around a rude adolescent who had made her cry. She paid for the books out of her own pocket.

How can one measure Grady's impact? Not only in Neal, but in the lives of those around him. His daughter, Karama, earned a doctorate in genetics, taught bioethics at Emory University, and now runs a community development program in Arkansas.

The big-hearted Grady, now dead, is a reminder that teachers may have the most important job in America. By all accounts, Grady transformed many other children as well, through more mundane methods.

To me, the lesson is that while there are no silver bullets to chip away at poverty or improve national competitiveness, improving the ranks of teachers is part of the answer. That's especially true for needy kids, who often get the weakest teachers. That should be the civil rights scandal of our time.

The implication is that we need rigorous teacher evaluations, more pay for good teachers and more training and weeding-out of poor teachers. The need for more pay is simple. In the 1950s, outstanding women like Grady didn't have many alternatives, and they became teachers. Grady was black, so she didn't have many options other than teaching black children in a segregated school.

Today, women like Grady often become doctors, lawyers or bankers — professions with far higher salaries. If we want to recruit and retain the best teachers, we simply have to pay more — while also more aggressively thinning out those who don't succeed. It's worth it.

"There are some kids who can't be reached," Neal acknowledges. "But there are some that you can reach every now and then." As his life attests.

I invite you to comment on this column on my blog, On the Ground. Please also join me on Facebook and Google+, watch my YouTube videos and follow me on Twitter.

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