

## **American Teacher: Heroes in the Classroom**

by Katrina Fried

### **FOREWORD**

by Parker J. Palmer

I've worked with American teachers for nearly three decades, and they truly are "heroes in the classroom." But too often they are unseen and unsung heroes. That's why I'm delighted to introduce you to this beautiful book, a visual and verbal celebration of people who are doing some of the most important work on the planet: helping to educate and raise up the next generation.

My high regard for our classroom heroes explains why I wrote a book called *The Courage to Teach* (1997) and created a teacher renewal program by the same name. That program, now in its twentieth year, has served tens of thousands of courageous American educators.<sup>1</sup> As I reflected on what I wanted to say in this Foreword, I recalled a story from the early days of the program that will take us to the heart of the matter, once I take a moment to set the stage.

The Courage to Teach program takes a cohort of twenty-five K-12 educators through eight quarterly retreats of three days each—retreats led by a well-trained facilitator and held at centers with access to nature, good facilities, healthy food, and private rooms for all. The program is more costly than most teachers can afford. So when we launch a new cohort, we must raise money from the local community to cover costs. Our teachers deserve this kind of gift, and giving it to them pays off handsomely in teacher renewal and retention and deeper service to students.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.CourageRenewal.org>

At one of our first fund-raisers, we gathered fifteen local wealth-holders around the conference table at a community bank. Our aim was simple: to remind these folks that their teachers did vital and demanding work day in and day out, and needed the kind of support our program offers to keep doing it—support we could provide only if people of means made it possible for them to attend.

But things are never simple when it comes to public education in America! We'd been warned that the people around that table were deeply divided over such hot-button issues as vouchers, charter schools, teacher unions, and high-stakes testing. We were told that unless we quickly "took control" of the meeting, it would likely degenerate into an education policy food-fight.

As the meeting got underway I said, "Let's start by getting to know a bit about each other. Please tell us your name and a say word or two about your work. Then tell us a story about a teacher who made a difference in your young life—a teacher who comforted and encouraged you, or gave you inspiration and guidance, or somehow touched and even changed your life."

We took some time in silence while people strolled down memory lane. Then they began to tell their stories. By the time the fourth or fifth teacher story had been told, tears had been shed. By the time everyone's story had been told—and *everyone* had such a story—all those divisive questions about vouchers, unions, and high-stakes testing had disappeared. Now we were all focused on one vital question: "How can we help today's teachers touch and transform their students the way we were touched by the teachers who changed our lives?"

That's the question America needs to focus on today. Sadly, American teachers are too often treated by politicians, the press and the public as

scapegoats for problems that the rest of us lack the wit or the will to solve. It's all too easy to point to "educational failures" such as chronic underachievement among certain student populations, to pin the blame on "bad teachers", and to propose yet another policy that involves achievement tests and punishments for teachers whose students fall below the norm.

But every thoughtful observer of America's "educational failures" understands that the root cause is not "incompetent" or "lazy" teachers. The root cause is poverty and all that flows from it, depriving children of the resources they need—from adequate nutrition to strong adult support—to succeed at school.<sup>2</sup> The American public needs help cutting through the disinformation that keep us from understanding that teachers are heroes, not goats. These heroes keep returning to their posts *for the love of children*, despite the fact that their work is too often maligned, too many are underpaid, and our schools are underfinanced.

The book you hold in your hands helps with that "cutting through" by taking us inside the lives of fifty courageous teachers on the front lines of American education. The stories told in this book are so vivid and compelling that they reach into our hearts as well as our heads. Here, for example, are a few words from Keil Hileman of Shawnee, Kansas, a teacher whose story you'll find within:

I had a little 8th grader the first year I was teaching who was on his way to getting kicked out or dropping out of school—Jason. He was tiny and had a terrible temper. He got into fights all the time. But Jason had been abused by his parents. Dad sold drugs. Mom sold herself. So Jason had been sent to live with Grandma.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.salon.com/2013/06/03/instead\\_of\\_a\\_war\\_on\\_teachers\\_how\\_about\\_one\\_on\\_poverty/](http://www.salon.com/2013/06/03/instead_of_a_war_on_teachers_how_about_one_on_poverty/)

Read about Jason and feel your heart break. Then, in the next paragraph, read about what Mr. Hileman did for Jason, and many other students, and give Hileman, Jason's grandmother and everyone else involved a full-hearted standing ovation! The more we know about stories like this one—and there are many in American education—the more “We the People” will understand and appreciate our teachers, and the better able we will be to press for meaningful education reform.

I have only one hesitation about this book's title, and that has to do with how we Americans tend to treat our heroes. We ask them to take risks for us. We cheer for them when they emerge victorious. We give them a plaque and maybe a parade. Then we promptly forget about them.

We owe our heroes a lot more than that, and in the case of teachers, that means several things. First, we owe teachers our partnership. Parents and grandparents have many ways of collaborating with teachers, at home and at school, in the education of their children and grandchildren. If you don't have young children in your life, volunteer at a neighborhood school to tutor kids who are having a hard time in some basic subject. You'll be rendering a great service, and it will bring you new life.

Second, we owe our teachers the kind of understanding that leads to meaningful support. I know a city where high tech executives went to the superintendent of schools with an offer they felt sure he couldn't refuse. “We want to donate computers for every classroom. That will cure much if not all that ails our schools.” “Thank you,” said the superintendent. “But before we proceed, I'd like to ask each of you to shadow a teacher for a few days. Then we'll talk.”

A week later, when the executives met with the superintendent again, they had changed their tune. “We thought *our* jobs were hard! We don’t know how these teachers do it. We still think computers would help in the long run. But first tell us what we can do to make teachers’ work more viable and their lives more sustainable.” All of us can contribute to achieving these goals.

Which takes me to the third thing we owe our classroom heroes. We must “speak truth to power”, truth that’s rooted in a deep understanding of what teachers need to succeed on behalf of kids. We need to remind our political leaders that poverty is the real driver of many “educational failures”; that punitive testing programs are not the answer; and that we want our politicians to give teachers the support they deserve while *they* seek to solve America’s growing poverty problem.

As you read the many moving stories in this book, and get to know fifty remarkable teachers and some of their students, I’d like to ask you to do the same thing I asked of the folks I met at that “Courage to Teach” fund-raiser twenty years ago.

Think back to a teacher who made a difference in your young life, a teacher who saw more in you than you saw in yourself. Spend some time contemplating how much richer your life has been because of that teacher’s life-giving and perhaps life-changing support. Feel the gratitude that comes from realizing that a teacher went above and beyond the call of duty to help you become who you are today.

Then do whatever you can to support this generation of American classroom heroes as they, in turn, nurture our precious children.

(Parker J. Palmer, founder and Senior Partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal, is a well-known writer, speaker and activist. He has reached millions worldwide through his nine books, including the bestselling *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Courage to Teach*, *A Hidden Wholeness*, and *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. He holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, along with ten honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, and an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press. In 2010, Palmer was given the William Rainey Harper Award whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, and Paolo Freire. In 2011, he was named an Utne Reader Visionary, one of “25 people who are changing your world.”)

American Teacher introduces us to classroom heroes like Stephen Ritz of NYC's South Bronx, who uses sustainable agriculture as a tool to engage and inspire his neighborhood's most at-risk special-needs students; Rafe Esquith, a trail-blazing, multi-award-winning educator and author, who has spent 31 years teaching 5th grade from within the same four walls at Hobart Elementary School in Los Angeles; and Iowan Sarah Brown Wessling whose unique "learner-centered" approach to teaching high school English earned her the 2010 National Teacher of the Year award. These are our See more of American Teacher: Heroes in the Classroom on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of American Teacher: Heroes in the Classroom on Facebook. Log In. Forgot account? or.Â

Recommendations from the Best K-12 Teachers in the Country Last Fall, when we were publishing Katrina Fried's brilliant book, American Teacher, Heroes in the Classroom containing interviews with 50 of the best K-12 teachers in America, I asked the e Recommendations from the Best K-12 Teachers in the Country Last Fall, when we were publishing Katrina Fried's brilliant book, American Teacher, Heroes in the Classroom containing interviews with 50 of the best K-12 teachers in America, I asked the e See All. Photos. American Teacher introduces us to classroom heroes like Stephen Ritz of NYC's South Bronx, who uses sustainable agriculture as a tool to engage and inspire his neighborhood's most at-risk special-needs students; Rafe Esquith, a trail-blazing, multi-award-winning educator and author, who has spent 31 years teaching 5th grade from within the same four walls at Hobart Elementary School in Los Angeles; and Iowan Sarah Brown Wessling whose unique "learner-centered" approach to teaching high school English earned her the 2010 National Teacher of the Year award. These are our Google kicked off Teachers Appreciation Week in the US with a Doodle - a themed redesign of the website's signature logo, honouring the country's educators. "Google is celebrating the classroom heroes supporting their students every day." Google said in a statement on their website. The Doodle was created with the help of the 57 US State Teacher's of the year who were invited for a week long visit Google's headquarters back in January. "The week was full of workshops and activities, including one session in which every teacher was asked to dream up their own Teachers teach in many ways including lectures, small group activities and hands-on learning activities. Creating Classroom Environment. Teachers also play an important role in the classroom when it comes to the environment. Students often mimic a teacher's actions. If the teacher prepares a warm, happy environment, students are more likely to be happy. An environment set by the teacher can be either positive or negative. If students sense the teacher is angry, students may react negatively to that and therefore learning can be impaired. Teachers are responsible for the social behavior in their