

## TO BE A GOOD TEACHER

WITHOUT RELATIONSHIPS IN TEACHING, YOU HAVE NOTHING



Heather Douglas with her students in South Korea in 2012.

Photos courtesy Heather Douglas

By HEATHER DOUGLAS  
For The Daily Astorian

After returning to school for a teaching degree in 2008, the piece of advice I heard most often was: “Don’t smile until Christmas.”

This pervasive cliché implies that classroom discipline is maintained through strict control and that obedient students will be too afraid to step out of line if the teacher asserts his or her dominance early in the school year.

Over my last 10 years in education, I’ve come to know this saying as the single worst piece of advice I’ve ever incorporated into my own pedagogical approach to kids.

I landed my first teaching job in the fall of 2009, as a longterm substitute English teacher for incarcerated male youth in Warrenton. It was here I first learned that my soft-spoken demeanor and desire to humanize my students was seen as a liability rather than a strength. I was quickly met with unsolicited advice from veteran teachers and guards: “You’re going to have to get mean.” “You better wipe that smile off your face.” “You’ve gotta be louder and more commanding.”

I perfected my poker face and learned to suppress my smile. A deep desire to please my superiors gave me the resolve to become something I was not: I didn’t want to be *that* teacher, the one who couldn’t hack it when my students stepped out of line. I thought I was on my way to becoming a great teacher.

Though it was the antithesis of the type of work I yearned for, I accepted the job simply because my options were limited in a post-recession economy. My spirit withered as I awkwardly stumbled up the steep learning curve that all first-year teachers endure, except I was under the constant gaze of two guards and 40 students whose collective pain oozed like a gaping wound — the result of crimes committed and tragic, horrific backstories.

There was no safe space for connection within the windowless gray concrete walls and deafening clang of thick metal doors that slammed shut and instantly locked behind me as I entered the class-



Heather Douglas with three of her students on ‘Sports Day’ in South Korea in 2010

room each day armed with my books. I maintained a wide berth around each student in case a pencil became a weapon to stab me or a flipped table suddenly signaled an impending fight between two inmates. I wore a mask every day and saved my smiles for the end of my shift.

### Power struggles

My second teaching job took me overseas. It was either that or go back to waitressing, the job I had done for 10 years before becoming a teacher. In South Korea I taught kids who wore matching uniforms, sported the same haircut and whose parents were fanatical about education.

Corporal punishment was still legal in Korea and — due to my increasing repulsion at the thought of sending kids to the principal’s office only to find out the bottoms of their bare feet had been caned — I practically abandoned discipline altogether.

My “soft” American management style earned me little respect, and I learned an important lesson about discipline versus punishment. The former is necessary for structure in a classroom but can be instilled with a smile. The latter can only be instilled with an unyielding frown, ultimately breeding fear and resentment rather than love and trust.

Returning home after three years in Korea, I

finally landed a full-time job on the North Coast. I learned that the teacher before me had struggled, and I would need to be extremely strict in order to reimpose order on the classroom so as not to meet the same fate.

Bent on being a good worker, I followed orders and engaged in daily power struggles with my most challenging students and whipped them into shape.

But underneath it all, I was miserable. Even worse, I failed to see what students actually needed: structure, compassion and connection. I burned out after two painful years of issuing countless detentions and handed in my resignation.

When the next school year rolled around, I cautiously dipped my toe back into education through the occasional day of substitute teaching.

To my surprise, it became the catalyst for an entire shift in perspective that would ultimately save my career.

### Welcoming students with a smile

As a substitute, I let go of grading, standards, testing, parental scrutiny and the guilt that comes with the self-defeating expectation that educators should be everything to everyone at all times.

I sat with kids and took the time to really see and hear them. I was seven years into my career when I had an epiphany that I was the teacher equivalent of the father in Harry Chapin’s cautionary tale “Cat’s in the Cradle.” In my quest to be a good teacher, I had utterly missed the boat.

And what I missed was this: Without relationships in teaching, you have nothing. No amount of testing, data, political mandates or work ethic can come close to the importance of connection. Nothing can hold a candle to modeling mercy, compassion, grace and authentic emotion.

Good teachers provide a sanctuary for students and inspire through kindness rather than fear. Good teachers are loyal to their students’ needs and not the latest political approach to education or mandated testing. Good teachers welcome each and every student into their classroom with a smile.

*Heather Douglas is an English teacher at Knappa High School. She has taught overseas in South Korea and Ecuador.*

GOOD TEACHERS PROVIDE A SANCTUARY FOR STUDENTS AND INSPIRE THROUGH KINDNESS RATHER THAN FEAR. **GOOD TEACHERS ARE LOYAL TO THEIR STUDENTS’ NEEDS AND NOT THE LATEST POLITICAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION OR MANDATED TESTING.** GOOD TEACHERS WELCOME EACH AND EVERY STUDENT INTO THEIR CLASSROOM WITH A SMILE.