

OPINION

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition their Government for a redress of grievances.

Thank you, Kennedy



By Caitlyn May
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There was a time I didn't want to do this anymore. It was 14 months ago; and then 10 months ago; and then again a bit before Christmas. It's always been hard, but it got harder and felt like it had stopped yielding enough of a profit because if the cost of anything is the amount of life you exchange for it, than the price tag of local journalism began to feel like a noose by which to hang my future.

But in the heartbeats between my frustration and the constraint to withhold my resignation, there was a constant that dimmed the former and ensured the latter. Kennedy.

On the face of it, it would seem as though it's because it's difficult to hold a grip on a handful of misfortunes when stereotype demands the understanding that the kids at Kennedy have mountains' full.

And they do. But that's not the lesson.

I don't remember when I thought it would be a good idea to write about Kennedy. Somewhere between the ebb of spring and flow of summer, I'd heard the school mentioned benignly here and there and malignantly everywhere else.

"That's where the bad kids go." Reason dictated that simply couldn't be

true. And for the last eight months, I've been writing the same thing:

"On an early September morning, the staff of Al Kennedy High School gathered in a room at the South Lane School District offices. *The Sentinel* had approached the district in the prior weeks about chronicling the teachers and students at Kennedy to tell the story of alternative education through the lens of those on the ground. District administrators thought it was a great idea. Kennedy staff had questions. Eight educators sat in a room with a newspaper editor and had a conversation. At the end, they'd come to an understanding: The truth is the truth and the kids come first."

That's how we got here. After eight months of reporting, I suppose, like everything else, it's possible there's a school somewhere in the South Lane School District that houses the "bad kids."

But Kennedy isn't it. Yes, a higher percentage of Kennedy students are homeless. More of them go hungry and fewer of them are from two-parent households. Many of the girls in South Lane who get pregnant end up finishing their high school education at Kennedy rather than Cottage Grove High School. And Kennedy teachers have more children who qualify as special needs students in their classrooms.

So, if being poor, pregnant or in need of some extra help is a pre-requisite to being "bad," an argument could be made there are bad kids at Kennedy. But also, Cottage

Grove High School — because there are poor and pregnant teens there too. There's also students with individualized education plans (IEPs) walking the hallways at CGHS under the umbrella of its reputation, while Kennedy kids are being crushed by the weight of insinuation.

That's the lesson. There is no inherent difference between the students at Kennedy and the students at CGHS. They all struggle with the same, sometimes unfortunate set of circumstances. The only thing that separates them is the way their community perceives and treats them based on those perceptions.

There is no normal; only our relentless drive to draw the line and place some people on the other side of it.

The kids at Kennedy will be fine. They're resilient. They're smart. They're passionate and driven. Curious and hardworking.

They'll do just fine — if given the same opportunity to succeed as the resilient, smart, passionate, driven, curious and hardworking kids at CGHS. It's an opportunity not usually extended to them but should be. Not just in the form of opportunity not being utilized by someone else, or an opportunity that's good enough because they're just alternative students — but an honest-to-God, real, equitable opportunity.

Because they're good kids who reminded me the story is always worth it, and they deserve it.

Just like everyone else.

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Emailed letters are preferred. Handwritten or typed letters must be signed. All letters need to include full name, address and phone number; only name and city will be printed. Letters should be limited to about 300 words. Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar and clarity. Publication of any letter is not guaranteed and depends on space available and the volume of letters received.

Letters that are anonymous, libelous, argumentative, sarcastic or contain accusations that are unsourced or without documentation will not be published.

Letters containing poetry or from outside *The Sentinel* readership area will only be published at the discretion of the editor.

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As with all letters and advertising content, the newspaper, at the sole discretion of the publisher, general manager and editor, reserves the right to reject any letter that doesn't follow the above criteria.

Send letters to:

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Teachers are the stars at Kennedy



By Zach Silva
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Before this year, I knew next to nothing about alternative schools.

I studied education, primarily kindergarten through fifth grade, as an undergrad at University of Oregon's College of Education — and still this was a foreign topic until I traveled to Saganaw to visit Kennedy.

I didn't know who the students were that attended this school. I knew they had generally left CGHS for various reasons including credit deficiency; I knew for many, the traditional model of schooling had not worked for them; I knew Kennedy may be the last chance to right the ship for some.

But before I met the students, I met the one guiding the ship: Haile Ketcher.

In her first year as principal, it was Haile who was now calling the shots at Kennedy. In meeting Haile for the first time, my excitement to be at this school only grew. Over the course of an hour, Ketcher, who is ever-so-quick to deliver a joke or show you a picture of a bear that showed up on her property, kindly walked me through the

ins-and-outs of the school.

Like teaching a child to ride a bike, she was kind and patient and helped me prepare.

She didn't mind my simple questions as I tried to fully understand what exactly this place was. She guided me through the convoluted (at least to an outsider) workings of their daily schedule and its intricacies. (Wait, there are how many cohorts? What is Odysseyware? What is a Spark? Which students go to the GED program?)

In one meeting, I understood why a student, who is going through a number of struggles both academically and in their personal life would — and should — seek out Kennedy. But while Haile's kind demeanor and welcoming attitude is at the forefront of the school, she is certainly not a one-person show.

In seeing the nuts and bolts of Kennedy, it is abundantly clear the success comes from the staff. In general, teachers as a whole are some of the most overlooked hardworking individuals. And so, at Kennedy, a school that is already often overlooked, the tireless work done by the staff can certainly go unnoticed to an outside observer.

However, with a front-row view to the teachers, it was impossible to miss the impact they make.

Whether it's in their job description or

not, the role of teachers at Kennedy extends well-past the confines of the classroom. For students who have, in general, had unsteady lives that are full of question marks and in many cases a sense of self-doubt, a teacher is there to both help them learn as well as help them grow.

And the teachers are the stars of the show. There is Jess, who was best described lovingly by Star Posthumus as being "absolutely amazing. I love Jess. She's hilarious. I think it's because she's so short, got so much energy packed into a small space."

It's also Brandi who does everything she can for students — especially McKinney Vento students and teen parents — short of housing them. It's David and Daniel who are a powerful one-two punch of charm, wit and logic. It's Vickie and Aimee with Odysseyware; it's Girin with South Lane Mental Health; it's Matt with the Crew team; it's Jolie in the office.

It's all of these pieces together to give the students more than just a chance to be successful once they are out of school. It's them getting a second, and sometimes third and fourth and even fifth, chance because that is what they need to figure it out and make things work.

It's being a place for good kids.

It's Kennedy.

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