

By Susan Metcalf

As 2004 winds down, it is time to make resolutions for 2005. I think this year I shall just resolve to reach out and make a difference. Shortly before Christmas, I received the news that one of my former students, who had recently moved to Colorado, had died of alcohol poisoning. His newfound "friends" had dumped him on his front lawn when he passed out. Later one of them returned to help his mother get him into the house where he died on the couch without regaining consciousness. Nick Trout was a senior in high school when he made a series of choices that ended his life.

The next weekend one of my former students, one of my daughter's classmates and a good friend, shot himself after making a series of bad choices.

I taught both of those young men for two full years in junior high. Could I have made a difference if I had tried harder? They knew the toxic effects of alcohol, and we covered suicide. They passed the tests. I taught them the health curriculum, but I failed to teach THEM. This true story about a teacher who made a difference has a happier ending!

As Mrs. Thompson stood in front of her fifth grade class on the very first day of school, she told the children an untruth. Like most teachers, she looked at her students and said that she loved them all the same. However, that was

impossible, because there in the front row, slumped in his seat, was a little boy named Teddy Stoddard. Mrs. Thompson had watched Teddy the year before and noticed that he did not play well with the other children, that his clothes were messy, and that he constantly needed a bath. In addition, Teddy could be unpleasant. It got to the point where Mrs. Thompson would actually take delight in marking his papers with a broad red pen, making bold Xs, and then putting a big "F" at the top of his papers.

At the school where Mrs. Thompson taught, she was required to review each child's past records, and she put Teddy's off until last. However, when she reviewed his file, she was in for a surprise. Teddy's first grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh. He does his work neatly and has good manners.... He is a joy to be around."

His second grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is an excellent student, well liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother has a terminal illness, and life at home must be a struggle."

His third grade teacher wrote, "His mother's death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best, but his father doesn't show much interest. His home life will soon affect him if some steps aren't taken."

Teddy's fourth grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is withdrawn and doesn't show much interest in school. He doesn't have many friends, and he sometimes sleeps in class."

By now, Mrs. Thompson realized the problem, and she was ashamed of herself. She felt even worse when her students brought her Christmas presents, wrapped in beautiful ribbons and bright paper ... except for Teddy's. His present was clumsily wrapped in the heavy, brown paper that he got from a grocery bag. Mrs. Thompson took pains to open it in the middle of the other presents. Some of the children started to laugh when she found a rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing and a bottle that was one-quarter full of perfume. She stifled the children's laughter when she exclaimed how pretty the bracelet was, putting it on, and dabbing some of the perfume on her wrist.

Teddy Stoddard stayed after school that day just long enough to say, "Mrs. Thompson, today you smelled just like my mom used to." After the children left, she cried for at least an hour. On that very day, she quit teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. Instead, she began to teach children. Mrs. Thompson paid particular attention to Teddy. As she worked with him, his mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the faster he responded. By the end of the year, Teddy had become one of the smartest children in the class and, despite her lie that she would love all the children the same, Teddy became one of her "teacher's pets."

A year later, she found a note under her door from Teddy, telling her that she was still the best teacher he ever had in his whole life. Six years went by before she got another note from Teddy. He then wrote that he had finished high school, third in his class, and she was still the best teacher he ever had in life. Four years after that, she got another letter saying that, while things had been tough at times, he'd stayed in school, had stuck with it, and would soon graduate from college with highest honors. He assured Mrs. Thompson that she was still the best and favorite teacher he had ever had in his whole life.

Then four more years passed, and yet another letter came. This time he explained that, after he got his bachelor's degree, he decided to go a little further. The letter explained that she was still the best and favorite teacher he ever had, but now his name was a little longer. The letter was signed Theodore F. Stoddard, MD. The story does not end there.

You see, there was yet another letter that spring. Teddy said he had met this girl and was going to be married. He explained that his father had died a couple of years ago, and he was wondering if Mrs. Thompson might agree to sit at the wedding in the place that was usually reserved for the parents of the groom. Of course, Mrs. Thompson attended. She wore that bracelet with several rhinestones missing. Moreover, she made sure she was wearing the perfume that Teddy remembered his mother wearing on their last Christmas together.

They hugged each other, and Dr. Stoddard whispered in Mrs. Thompson's ear, "Thank you, Mrs. Thompson, for believing in me. Thank you so much for mak-

ing me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference."

Mrs. Thompson, with tears in her eyes, whispered back, "Teddy, you have it all wrong. You were the one who taught me that I could make a difference. I didn't know how to teach until I met you!" (Dr. Theodore F. Stoddard, MD, is a resident at Iowa Methodist in Des Moines, which houses the Stoddard Cancer Wing.)

EXHIBIT 7
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