

True teaching tales

It was a time when the Governor of California ordered National Guard helicopters to tear gas the city of Berkeley. A time when two Oakland policemen stopped Huey Newton claimed he exited his car with a gun. Each officer, one in front the other behind, fired. They wounded each other. Newton was unharmed. True.

It was a time when ex convicts shot and killed Marcus Foster, the first, Black Superintendent of Oakland Public Schools and badly wounded his white assistant, Bob Blackburn. Later, the same ex cons kidnapped a rich, white girl, Ms. Hearst. True.

It was a time when Chicago police shot and killed Fred Hampton in his bed and Oakland police shot and killed eighteen year old Bobby Hutton near the Black Panther's office, a few blocks from where I began teaching elementary school. True.

It was the time when we killed, bled and died in Vietnam. True.

It was also the time when, in a windowless basement room, my teacher training began with a session on classroom management. First rule, a teacher was never to leave the classroom unattended.

Second rule, any student outside of a classroom must be carrying a pass. Third rule, the amount of lined paper, allotted per pupil. We preceded to the numbering and distribution of text books. Hours later, came the rule about live animals in a classroom: no mammals. The orientation leader paused for questions. Over half of the attendees, mostly female and mostly Black raised their hands. First question, could I bring in my pet mouse? Answer, No. A mouse is warm blooded, bears its young live and is a mammal. Second question, could I bring in my dog? Answer, No. A dog is warm blooded, bears its young live and is a mammal. A third question about a pet rabbit. Same answer. I caught the eye of the Black woman sitting across from me, raised my hand, asked if I could bring in a Black Panther. Straight faced, the same answer: a black panther is a mammal, warm blooded, bears its young live. 'Only the females,' the woman across from me muttered. True.

With my temporary license, I began teaching at Ralph J Bunche elementary, a Title I school with a Federally mandated class size of twenty-five. First day, I had thirty-two, fifth graders. My principal said I should take the matter up with the Superintendent. I phoned and was told I had twenty-five students. I suggested they come and count. They never did.

Each morning from outside the chain link fence surrounding

our asphalt playground a block down from Bobby Hutton park, aka de Fremery, a boy, who might have been number thirty-three, watched us at recess. When I asked, a chorus of kids filled me in: “He don't do school.” “He be bad.” “He be Huey's nephew.” A month into the school year, the kid slipped inside the fence, followed me around staying two arm lengths away. The kids ignored him and he, them. He knew my name. His was Howie N. He talked about American History. He knew all about Denmark Vesey, didn't do nothing but get himself killed. He knew about William Monroe Trotter who didn't do nothing but write and get blamed for killing himself. He knew about Marcus Garvey who rhymed with gravy. He wanted to know if I believed Nat Turner was black. Hopping from foot to foot, always a safe distance away, he was filled with questions. With special urgency, he talked compulsively about JFK's assassination. Did I think Jack Ruby worked for the FBI? Why had Oswald been in Russia, married a Russian and did I think he was white? Did I think the FBI gave James Earl Ray a safe house in Canada? I told him I was impressed with what he knew and even more with how much more he wanted to know. I suggested he might try school. He disappeared. I asked the kids. They said, “He be gone.” “They done moved.”

Two other memorable recess events. Umpiring a game, I

made a ruling which enraged Mike D. He collected a bunch of fist sized rocks and hurled them at me, missed, but splintered the wooden steps to our portable. I sent him with a note to the principal's office. He returned with a head down, mumbled, 'Sorry.'

A month later, still working under my temporary license, two white men in suits pulled up to the school. The kids whooped, "Ohee, Mr. G you been bad." "You be in trouble." Minutes later, I got a call to come to the office. Mike D. sidled up, asked if I wanted him "to take care of 'em."

I declined his kind offer.

Later during another morning recess Lewis R, ran into the chain link fence, got cut bad. He came to me, forearm slit open from wrist to elbow, bleeding freely. I wrapped my handkerchief around his arm, told him to hold it above his head and sent him with one of his buddies to see the nurse. Fifteen minutes later, back in the classroom, the door opened. Lewis, holding his wrapped, still bleeding arm above his head, stood in the doorway.

I asked.

He said the nurse wouldn't see him 'cause he didn't have a note.

I told the students to use their math workbooks, remain quiet and in their seats and I left my classroom.

I walked Lewis across the asphalt back to the nurse. I spoke with all the restraint I could muster. Note or not, Lewis needed attention and she should have provided it. Lewis got cleaned up, bandaged. I got a reprimand in my file for leaving my class unattended. All, true.

Another true thing. Not enough has improved in schools since then.