

A Transparent Letter from Lindsey Downey—first year teacher and child advocate at
Rockdale Academy

My Why

So many of us walk around day to day, going through the motions and wondering if we are living out our purpose in life; from the summer before sixth grade until my junior year of college, I wondered the same thing. It wasn't until I started getting emotional about what I was doing did I know that I had found my purpose in life. That purpose for me is a profession called teaching, but one that should really be called learning. Jeff Wahl put it perfectly when he said "The difference between good teachers and great teachers is that great teachers have mastered the art of teaching people things they didn't know they needed to learn." My mediums of teaching are the human spirit, the inner soul, and the heart. If I can do something each day that leaves one student better off than when they came to me, then I have truly lived.

I have found myself standing alone so many times in teaching, and I used to let it bother me, but now I see that it's what sets me apart. I recognize now that I am not like most teachers out there. I have a young, fresh, vibrant outlook full of more than just hope; I am full of belief because I have seen what being a voice for the voiceless can do. I am an advocate, a teacher, a learner, a caregiver, a worrier, a doctor, a playmate, and a total goofball to each and every student in my classroom. I have nothing but pure thanks to offer them, because without them, I would not have a purpose or sense of being on earth. Isn't that amazing? Amazing that three, four, and five year olds can offer purpose? Their minds are astounding and should be looked to more often; they have a pure enjoyment and gratefulness for the simple joys that life has to offer. They have taught me how to appreciate silly jokes, how to laugh at myself as I dance like a fool in front of them, and to see the beauty in nature again. Each day, they help me step back and check myself and my mindset; am I seeing life through the unpolluted eyes of a child? I can finally say yes, and when I seem to think and act from a polluted state of mind, they are right there to bring me back to clarity again.

My Incredible Students

My preschool classroom is made up of thirteen learners who are ready and roaring to go the moment they step into our classroom. They are a part of a community of learners that honors respect, manners, courage, peace, and fun. They all have special needs, but their true love for life and learning, along with their individual silly quirks far exceed their "disabilities". My students learn best through music and laughter. Whether I'm dressed in costume, wearing a mask, singing, or dancing, they are learning and they love it. They set the bar high for me and keep me wanting to do more and find better ways of teaching. I have extremely high expectations for them, but the coolest part of that is each student reaches or exceeds my bar of expectations every time. Over and over **again**, I've had people tell me that I expect too much, that they are special needs students, but since when does having special needs define a person? Their special needs may mean that they learn differently, but they can still learn. I refuse to let them see any lack of belief from me because they will hear enough of that throughout their lives; I am taking the time now to build a solid foundation within them that will be unbreakable. We talk a lot about courage and what it means, and although they don't have the words to sight the definition from the dictionary, they know that courage is something that cannot be taken away. They are learning that courage means making mistakes sometimes, but it's how we use what we learn from those mistakes that really matters. In our classroom, sometimes courage means trying again tomorrow, but the biggest part of what I just wrote is that they will try again...and again...and again. We never give up on ourselves or on each other. Yes, they may only be in preschool, yet I have learned more about life from their sweet perspectives that I have from any adult.

My students deserve to just be kids without the concerns of when their next meal will be, if there will be heat or running water that week, or if they'll have clean and warm clothes to wear to school the next day. Four year olds shouldn't have to worry about the next time daddy will strike mommy or what the loud bangs outside of their apartment means. My students deserve to be kids; they deserve to laugh, to live, to be chased and tickled, to spin around a thousand times—fall—and get back up ready to do it again. They deserve to have books to call their own and toys that have all of their parts; they deserve to have clothes that are appropriate for the weather; they deserve to have clean underwear; they deserve running water; they

deserve everything in the world and then some; *they deserve everything in life that I found myself taking for granted.* They have so much love to give and so much to teach us. Their warm hugs warm up my chilly mornings and their laughter really is joy to my heart. They have auras about them that are contagious and fresh. It's impossible not to smile as I write about them because they really are that incredible. If I only had one statement to say about what they've taught me about life and taking my eyes off of myself, it would be this: You have not lived a perfect day, even though you have earned your money, unless you have done something for someone who will never be able to repay you.

Your time, contributions, and listening ears mean everything to me and to the smiling faces that you have yet to meet in person. I have no doubt that you will fall in love with the awesome kids of room 2027 at Rockdale Academy. They may not have tangible things to give, but they have the rest of the bases covered. We thank you, from the bottom of our hearts.

Love and Blessings,

Miss Lindsey Downey and the Students of Room 2027