

Cadillacs and Kias.

~ John D. Sheffield

I originally wrote the poem at the end of this writing for the “Tell It Like It Is” listening tour by NYSUT in the spring of 2013 in the Syracuse area when Dick Iannuzzi was still their president. I was addressing my concerns about a “1 size fits all” approach to education.

The majority of my teaching experience has been in an “alternative” or supplement role to the traditional classroom. I have worked with ages two to fifty-two in a wide variety of settings. It is my work with adolescents that I address here.

I was a Job Coach for BOCES / Vocational students that were learning disabled. The program found employers in the community that had work experiences available for that type of student. I went to the job site, learned the job alongside of the student, and then was responsible for training that student for the given job’s requirements. The goal was for them to gradually over time be completely independent of me and be able to fulfill the required tasks on their own.

My first true position with title of “teacher” was for the NYS Division for Youth (DFY) in Syracuse, NY. I spent three years working with incarcerated youth from a variety of ethnic populations from all around the state. Our program housed them in a group home setting and we had a separate facility for our school. I worked with youth ranging in age from 11 to 18 with skill levels which ranged from 2nd grade to 10th. Some were learning disabled, some had come from gangs and violence, they were rural (places such as Dryden and Cato NY) and inner city (places such as Rochester, South Jamaica the Bronx), male and female. Many of them from abject poverty. Our goal was to eventually move them into the public schools in Syracuse, and ultimately move them out of the system with the tools necessary to keep them out of the system.

I spent a year after that as a juvenile probation officer for Oswego County. This afforded me further experience in the juvenile justice system. I was responsible for supervision, writing reports, doing home investigations for custody, and appearing and speaking in court. I literally visited homes that were in such deplorable and unclean conditions that I dreaded sitting on the furniture. In my current position in Central Square I have been brought along on home visits by guidance counselors in which the living conditions were absolutely heart wrenching.

In my current position in Central Square I have worked mainly with the AIS and Special education population. I have also taught in the traditional classroom setting for 4 years and provided “push-in” services for several more. The poverty in my district, my county, and the counties that surround me is evident on a daily basis.

My older brother was a high school dropout, school was not his thing. He once told me that a teacher once said to him (in an unflattering manner) “What do you want to be...a ditch digger all your life.” As a teacher myself, I am ashamed that one in my profession would somehow think that that type of sarcasm and commentary would motivate someone! My brother has now been employed by the NYS Department of Transportation for over 35 years. His work ethic, knowledge, and experience cannot be taught and there are no short cuts. As ditches go I would listen to him well before a college trained engineer with little or no field experience. In short, my brother is a “ditch digger,” and he is damn good at it....and I damn proud of him!

I originally wrote this as an analogy for our schools and the need to recognize certain things about the kids they work with on a regular basis, but I proudly dedicate this to my brother Bill.

Cadillacs and Kias

I wanted to build a Cadillac
All shiny and tricked out
But I was given a Kia part
And it gave me cause to doubt.

I did not doubt the Kia part
For it had value of its own
It would never be a Caddy though
From no matter what angle it was shown.

But the Kia part that was given me
From which I was to make
Could really be a nice car
If its identity I did not take.

It could be given power windows
And given stereo oh so fine
Power seats and air bags
Given enough time.

It would be a great car
Its own purpose it would serve
Being appreciated by commuters
I am sure it would not swerve.

But trying to make a unique thing
Into something it is not
It really seems preposterous
And not thought through a lot.

What about the bobcats?
Trucks, and cycles too?
Don't we really need them?
For the things a Caddy cannot do?

The truth is all are needed
For travelers to thrive.
I worry for the other cars
That their model won't survive.