

WHAT A GUN IN MY FACE TAUGHT ME ABOUT TEACHING

By Bev Johns

bevjohns@juno.com

At the age of nineteen the only gun I had ever seen was a toy. I was raised in a non-violent home in a non-violent neighborhood. I had the opportunity to work my way through college and was very happy to do so, excited to learn more about becoming a teacher. Those college experiences were the driving force in determining my career path; a life in special education working with students with emotional/behavioral disorders.

I had two different jobs during my four years in college; one was working at an institution for boys aged 9-14 who had already been adjudicated delinquent and were wards of the state of Kentucky.

The other job was as a worker at a community center in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. The center was located in what was considered a neighborhood with a high rate of unrest and arrests. Being a young and naïve woman, I had no fear. I needed the job and gladly accepted the opportunity to work with young people in that neighborhood. My job was to supervise the children who came in the evening to shoot baskets in the gym and to play a variety of other games.

There were clear rules at the center. Anyone coming in had to have an identification card which they applied for through the agency operating the community center. At 7:00 p.m. I would stand at the door, check identification cards, and let the young people in. If they didn't have a card, I was not to allow them entrance.

On a chilly evening, I was on the job stationed at the door and eager to see the kids that I had gotten to know. A young man with whom I was not familiar came to the door with a group of other kids. I asked to see his identification card. He said he didn't have one. I kept my explanation calm and short. "Our rule here is that you have to have your id card to come here." He became agitated and pulled out a gun.

Thinking the gun was a toy, I said with no fear: "Oh put that silly thing away and go on home."

I can remember this unfamiliar young man's shocked face when he actually put the gun away and headed away from the center.

Some of the other kids I knew looked at me with shock and came in the community center for an evening of fun.

Later that evening, the police came by to check to see whether I had seen a young man that fit the description of the individual who I thought had pulled a toy gun on me. I explained what he had done. They started shaking their heads at me. I asked what the problem was. They explained that the gun was real and he had been threatening others in the neighborhood.

In this situation, the saying: “Ignorance is bliss” held true for me. I drove home that evening making a conscious decision that I would never tell my parents; in all probability a good decision because if I would have told them, I may never have moved further in my teaching path.

I reflected on that experience many times as I pursued my career and I have carried the lessons I learned that night into my teaching.

Five lessons I learned from that experience:

1. The importance of Remaining Calm in a Crisis. Students and parents may raise their voice at you, or a crisis may occur within your classroom. If you become upset or agitated you are fueling the fire and can cause the aggressor to become even more agitated. You are a role model for your students and your behavior sets the tone for any incident. If you handle the situation in a calm and controlled manner, the student learns that a calm approach is the preferred way to handle a potentially explosive situation.
2. It is critical that you send a message to your students that you are not afraid of them. You will handle difficult situations in a factual manner and communicate the parameters about what you expect of the student. If students sense that you are afraid of them, they will take advantage of situations and think that you may back away from what you should do.
3. Humor and surprise can defuse a potentially volatile situation. What I did that night as a young, naïve future educator was to use both of those techniques that took the boy with a gun by surprise.
4. Always provide clear expectations and structure. Let the student know exactly what you expect of him or her. Students need reminders of the rules of the setting and they need to know the consequences for not following the rules.
5. Do what you say you will do and follow your expectations. It is easy to establish expectations but not as easy to enforce them. Yet when you don't enforce them, you are showing that you are inconsistent in your relationships with your students. The community center had established rules for entrance into the facility and I knew I had the responsibility to follow those.

As I have moved through my career, I often think about that situation and how I handled it. I never had another gun, real or otherwise, pulled on me. My parents both went to their graves not knowing the story. That potentially negative event taught me valuable lessons about teaching that have served me well for many years. When life and teaching experiences challenge us, we don't give up. We reflect, we learn, and we grow.