

keeping the faith

How Moving
from School to Afterschool Kept Me an Educator

by Lily Rabinoff-Goldman

During my first year of teaching, I began what I was sure would be my first bestseller. It was entitled *Failure: Confessions of a First-Year Teacher*. It opened like this:

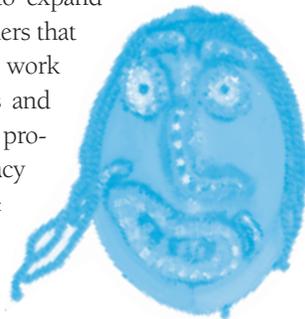
I don't know what you do, or how your friends and strangers you meet at parties and bars respond to your profession, but I wonder how you respond when you meet a teacher. Do you wonder aloud why they chose that career? Do you say, "Wow, what a wonderful job you're doing!" although you've never seen her classroom? Do you think that teacher is making a difference in children's lives? People say those things to me a lot. It's amazing how much good faith and trust grown-ups place in my ability to teach and do important things. Let me tell you now: So far, I'm not a very good teacher. You and I will both wish that the stories I'm about to tell had happier outcomes and that I were more skilled in averting or diffusing crises. Let's all hope that these things come with experience and, please God, some coinciding elements of consistency and systemic change.

I never finished that piece of writing. Not only did I have no perspective on my experience, but I was attempting to write it during a period when I could barely keep my eyes dry, a time when my assistant principal asked me, "Lily, do you even like children?" In the two years since that question, I have thought about it a lot. Though the question hurt my feelings, it also made me think about why I was a teacher and is part of why, after I finished my two-year Teach for America commitment, I was able to remain an educator. I found my answer in meaningful afterschool instruction.

I was hardly the only new college graduate to have a difficult time teaching public school. My experience as a sixth-grade teacher in the Bronx was unusually bad, but some of my Teach for America and New York City Teaching Fellows colleagues tell even more nightmarish stories. Today, I am lucky enough to be part of a small,

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unnamed cohort of ex-teachers who have joined the staff of effective, child-centered afterschool programs. Ex-teachers and afterschool programming have a mutually beneficial relationship. Schoolteachers know how to build curriculum, discipline children, and work in teams—the cornerstones of both classroom teaching and good afterschool programming. Afterschool programs, unconstrained by public school bureaucracies, look at children holistically and give them opportunities to expand their minds—factors that remind practitioners that we do, in fact, like children, and want to work with them in ways that enrich their lives and improve their prospects. StreetSquash, the program for which I work as director of literacy projects and special programs, has kept me an educator. Other quality community-based afterschool programs do the same for some of my colleagues.



Public School Initiation

I joined Teach for America three weeks after graduating from Brown University in June 2003. After a grueling summer training program, I was hired by an enormous Bronx middle school that had consistently ranked among the bottom ten middle schools in the city. The school's poor performance and reputation were the result of factors that plague most public schools in high-need neighborhoods: large classes, under-educated students from failing elementary schools, and extremely high teacher turnover. The year I finished teaching, almost a third of the school's faculty also left. This particular school's architectural model—partial walls divided many of the classrooms—further hampered instruction. In my first year of teaching, my self-contained sixth-grade class was collapsed due to under-enrollment. I became a cluster teacher in two classes abandoned by their previous teachers. A student who would end up in a juvenile detention facility before reaching the seventh grade commented on the size of my breasts. At twenty-one, I had never before experienced real failure. I cried at home virtually every night.

Looking back, part of me thinks I was out of my mind not to quit. I had never been so unhappy. Two things kept me teaching. First, I was too proud to admit that I couldn't handle my job. I truly believed, however unrealistically, that the next day I would get it right, the kids would start to listen, and the school would magi-

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cally overcome its challenges so it could function the way I thought a school should function. Second, I had a wonderful advisor and conference group at Bank Street College of Education who showed me that I was not alone. Those seven women helped me see that just showing up every day with a well-planned lesson was a success. Reminding me that it was all about the kids, they convinced me to stay for another year.

The second year was exponentially better. I spent much of that summer in deep anxiety, which led me to work hard at planning lessons and classroom management strategies that turned out to be fairly successful. In addition, I now knew the lay of the land at the school—who to approach for support and who to avoid—and how to quietly run my classroom the way I thought it should be run. But by February break, I knew I wouldn't stay beyond my two-year commitment, not because I didn't want to be a teacher anymore but because I had to get out of a system in which I couldn't do what I thought best for the kids.

Thinking to try something new, I sent résumés to publishing houses and museums. Though my friends laughed, I even briefly considered investment banking. I felt, though, that I had to give education another shot, having had such a bad experience. I went looking for a job that

would renew my faith in children and in education—a tall order. I applied and was hired for my current position with StreetSquash, where, as it turned out, the support I needed to work with kids was available in abundance.

Afterschool Redemption

In the years since its founding in 1999, StreetSquash has expanded from a small program that provided academic tutoring and squash instruction for 28 students to serve over 100 students with tutoring, squash instruction, community service, literacy programming, college preparation, and mentoring. Though many afterschool programs recruit students on a year-to-year basis, StreetSquash requires a six-year commitment from all program participants. Long-term, consistent involvement is central to achieving the program's and our students' goals. Additionally, StreetSquash is not a school-based program. Though we work closely with teachers and administrators at our

partner schools, our participants are primarily self-selecting, rather than being mandated to participate due to low academic performance.

Much of StreetSquash's success has to do with the diversity of our programming. On a given weekday afternoon, 20 ninth graders at Columbia University and 20 seventh graders at the West Side YMCA are working in pairs with tutors on homework and study skills. They then move to the squash courts with a coach and volunteers to practice specific shots and compete in challenge matches. Meanwhile, at one of our partner schools, tenth graders are working on SAT preparation and personal statements. Individual students may have appointments with their therapists at the City College Psychological Center or dinner plans with their StreetSquash mentors. StreetSquash and other community-based afterschool programs approach children holistically, attending to their academic, physical, emotional, and social needs in a way that public schools cannot. Coming into this environment from the strictly defined role of classroom teacher can create an entirely new way of thinking about how best to serve children and their families.

Beyond the impressive statistics showing our students' academic improvement and college admission rates, one of the most significant and intangible strengths of out-of-school-time programs like StreetSquash is the deep trust the children and their families place in us. A case in point is one of my ninth-grade girls, Shanese. Shanese is a small girl with a huge personality. Although she is not a high-achieving student, she was one of the best-liked students in her grade, getting all the teachers on her side. Shanese's likeability served her well last year when her mother grew increasingly ill with lung cancer through the fall and died in early winter.

The day before the funeral, Shanese, her older sister, and her father came to see the squash coach, Pat, and me at an afternoon practice. It was one of the most difficult conversations Pat and I had all year. The grieving family explained to us how important it was to them that Shanese stay in the program, which she loved, so that she could stay focused in school and do well in a way that would have made her mother proud.

Pat and I went to the wake the next day. In this private family moment, we were the only people there who were not part of the community—but we were not ignored. Shanese's aunt, for instance, greeted us warmly, hugging and kissing us and saying how much Street-

Squash meant to Shanese. She told us that, since she lived in Virginia, it was important for her to know that Shanese had a support network here in New York.

That year, StreetSquash worked to strengthen and expand that support network. Through our long-standing partnership with the City College Psychological Center, we connected Shanese and her sister to counseling, including weekly sessions to help them deal with their grief. Throughout her tumultuous emotional range, from manic excitement to anger, indignation, and sadness, Shanese came to StreetSquash every day. "I had a really bad day, and I didn't want to come, but I needed to see you," she said on more than one occasion. Shanese trusted StreetSquash as a safe and nurturing place that could serve her needs in a way that her school could not. In the marking period following her mother's death, Shanese raised her grades from a C-minus average to a B, an achievement of which she was rightfully proud.

Shanese, and others like her, remind us that our work is not ultimately about report cards, standardized test scores, or teacher observations. It's about making meaningful experiences for children—whole children, with all their complex experiences and diverse needs.

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Digging in Our Heels

Many programs throughout New York City are doing work similar to StreetSquash's, often with former schoolteachers as staff. George Polsky, StreetSquash's executive director, is fond of saying that squash need not be the "hook" for kids—it could be art, chess, or any other nonacademic activity. When I was a kid, StreetSquash might not have appealed to uncoordinated me, who only wanted to draw pictures and write stories. That's why a diversity of programs, focusing on all the different things kids are interested in, is so important.

One program that has a different nonacademic emphasis but shares the same principles with StreetSquash is 826NYC in Brooklyn. Hidden behind the front of the Brooklyn Superhero Supply Shop is a program dedicated to getting kids excited about creative writing and to bolstering their skills through tutoring and workshops. Joan Kim, the education director of 826NYC, is a former schoolteacher. She told me that many of 826NYC's volunteers are current New York City Teaching Fellows. I imagine that those teaching fellows choose to spend additional time tutoring kids—after a full day



of classroom teaching in some of the lowest-performing schools in the city—because there is something fundamentally different and revitalizing about out-of-school-time education. The same skills and aptitudes that teachers need in the classroom—patience, diligence, a sense of humor, and compassion for children—are invaluable to meaningful and productive afterschool programming. Invaluable to the staff, including current and former schoolteachers, are the warmth of the environment, our connection with the kids, and the feeling that we are doing something concrete to help children.

My colleague Claire taught eighth grade at a school about a mile from mine before joining StreetSquash. We often talk about how different our afterschool work is from anything we experienced in our public schools. Our executive director respects us, and we respect him. We spend our days and weekends with children who have chosen our program and are committed to being there. The whole dynamic of being an afterschool practitioner is much more positive and exciting than my life as a teacher ever was.

This positive dynamic is reflected across community-based afterschool programs. On a professional level, the flexibility, responsibility, and authority granted to afterschool educators is a far cry from the constant threat of evaluation that is the unfortunate currency at many public schools. On a personal level, we work in a kind of “in-between” space for children, combining the roles of teacher, big brother or sister, camp counselor, social worker, parent, and friend. We can be real allies to children in a way that teachers cannot always be. In afterschool programs, the ratio of children to adults is so much smaller than in urban public schools that children can feel visible, nurtured, and safe. Kids can know the educators both as individuals and as representatives of a program that supports them and provides them with opportunities—a combination that is a boon to both children and practitioners. All these factors are why I want to stay on for the indefinite future.

The promise of longevity echoes throughout StreetSquash and similar afterschool programs. Afterschool organizations and practitioners have dug in their heels. The community-based organizations want kids to know what to expect when they return each year. Individual practitioners commit to stay for the long term—and

therefore grow and improve to become better practitioners. This kind of commitment and longevity is part of what many public school systems lack. If young teachers had the support they need to be able to stay on past one or two years in the classroom, the crisis in public education might be at least slightly less severe.

Staff retention is central to positive and effective afterschool programming. Equally important is the philosophy toward and perspective on children shared by StreetSquash and other programs like it. We take a holistic approach, filling the roles that our children need at specific moments. When a child comes to the program without having eaten breakfast at home or lunch at school, we nourish her with healthy food. When a child comes in sad over an argument with a friend or a family member, we comfort and advise him as friends and counselors. When a child comes in having failed a test, we become teachers, showing her how to solve a math problem or understand a science concept. Our children are lucky to have committed adults who are flexible enough to fill all these roles. But staff members are lucky,

too. We get to work outside the limitations that a teacher, a social worker, a friend, or a parent might have, developing uniquely meaningful relationships with the children. This holistic approach is why afterschool programs are places where staff want to be and where children can become the people we’re working for them to become.

No one can foresee his or her future, professional or otherwise,

and I am certainly no exception to that rule. However, I know for certain that the chances that I will remain an educator—which I never doubted until I became a teacher in a public school—have been re-energized by working at StreetSquash. The influence on and connection with children that I imagined for myself, because I saw them as central to what it means to be an educator, have become realities here. The work former schoolteachers and lifelong afterschool practitioners are doing side by side at StreetSquash and in similar afterschool programs across the city is giving kids educational options and hope for the future. Working in afterschool programming helps us remember that the kids are the reason we are doing what we do. Afterschool programming is key in the quest to find, keep, and inspire educators who are making real changes for children.

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