

'Teacher Tales' reveals passion that fuels the practice

Fifty-five Teachers of the Year contributed to a new book in the Chicken Soup for the Soul series. The short essays, all inspirational, reflect on why teachers commit their lives to the profession. "Chicken Soup for the Soul: Teacher Tales" also includes 46 other essays from teachers and students. As 2008 Minnesota Teacher of the Year, Derek Olson wrote the essay reprinted here. Enjoy.

The editor

Step by Step

"The job of an educator is to teach students to see the vitality in themselves."

—Joseph Campbell

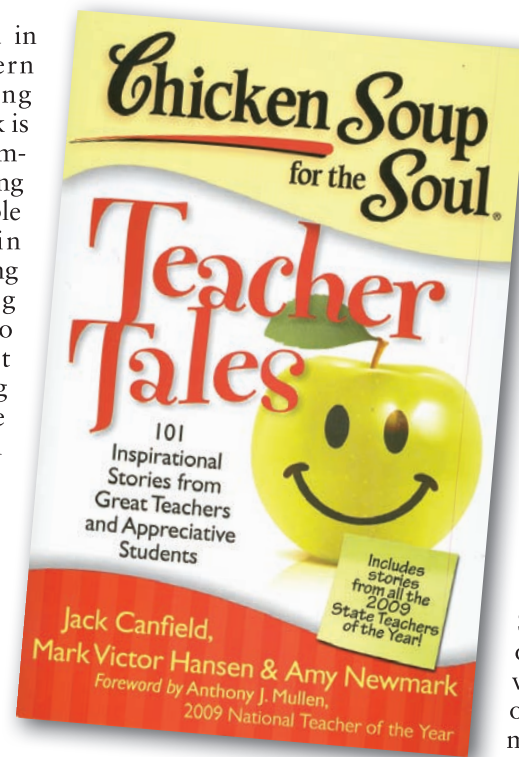
I'll never forget Chelsea. She was a wounded soul. Over the years she had always struggled—both academically and with self-confidence. In addition, her mother had died after a heroic battle with a terminal illness when Chelsea was a fifth-grader. As she began sixth grade, Chelsea was still hurting. I worried about her with good reason.

Each fall my teaching partner and I take our sixth-graders for a five-day adventure at Wolf Ridge, an environmental

learning center nestled in the woods of northern Minnesota overlooking Lake Superior. Our week is filled with learning, team-building, and overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges. We go in October, and the turning leaves—transitioning from summer green to fiery orange, brilliant yellow, and blazing red—come to symbolize the changes we see in our students over the week. The steps and growth students make at Wolf Ridge become a metaphor we use throughout the year as they face challenges in the classroom.

The culminating activity is the High Adventure Ropes Course, which stretches from tower to tower high amongst the treetops 40 feet above the ground. I knew this experience would be particularly difficult for Chelsea.

When it came time for her to strap on the harness, Chelsea was already trembling. The harness hooks into a safety wire overhead and offers physical protection, but not much mental comfort when



nothing but a slippery board or a wobbly wire is between your feet and the ground far below. Chelsea stepped hesitantly onto the swinging wood bridge, and only after the instructor's encouragement, slowly made her way across its rickety boards up to the first tower. With the support of a chaperone stationed there, she began her way across the Burma bridge, made of merely three wires and straps.

Her trembling body added to its shaking. From down below, her ground partner shouted up supportively, "Come on Chelsea, you're doing great!"

She finally reached the second tower and told the chaperone, "I can't do it." But eventually Chelsea stepped out onto the next challenge—a single log—and slowly inched her way across. She now faced what for many is the most difficult activity: the single wire. She wouldn't even step onto it until I worked my way over from my perch on the last tower to the middle of the wire. I could see the terror in her eyes.

I implored her to take just one step. With tears streaming down her face, she eventually did. And then another. Her classmates and our chaperones, sensing Chelsea's internal struggle, had gathered below and were offering constant words of affirmation while moving forward in a huddled group as she crept ahead, step by step. Ultimately, she reached the last tower—exhausted.

She collapsed in my arms and sobbed.

"Just one more big step, Chelsea," I told her. The final challenge is a zip line, which requires leaping off that last tower and trusting that the guide wire above will carry you safely down to the chaperones waiting 100 yards down the path. Chelsea just stood there for what seemed like hours. "I can't do it," she told me over and over again against the background cheers of the entire team now gathered below. Finally, when I was just about to say that she could turn around and go back (something I have never done), she looked up at me and in an almost imperceptible whisper said, "Tell them down there that I'm doing this for my mom. I know she's watching, and I want her to be proud of me." As I yelled, "This is for her mom!" Chelsea leaped.

Seconds later she was enfolded in the waiting arms of chaperones and students whose cheers could be heard echoing through the trees for miles. None of us there were ever quite the same. Especially Chelsea. And I was reminded why I teach.

♦ Derek Olson