

IN A TEACHER'S SHOES

By Renata Dolz

It's a crisp, bright February day and I can tell I'm getting close to Dora Moore K-8 school off Downing and 9th because I see yellow school buses, some teachers with signs and crossing guards. I'm getting anxious about finding a place to park when I see a very small parking lot on the left, marked 'staff only'. *Hmmm, are substitute teachers considered staff?* The clock says 7:30 so I make an executive decision and snag the second to last spot, but not without some minor qualms.

I'm entering the imposing, solid brick school from a side pathway that allows me to bypass the teachers picketing directly in front of the school. It's day 2 of the Denver Public School (DPS) teacher's strike. I know they can see me and I do my best to avoid eye contact. I wish they could know how much I support their stand AND the student's needs, many of whom have nowhere else to go.

Dora Moore is a Title I school, which means they have a high percentage of students from low-income families. Federal grants provide breakfasts, lunches and additional help for those students struggling with core subjects like math and reading. The Dora Moore students are a reflection of the many neighborhoods feeding into this school, comprised mostly of those with Latin and African roots, mixed in with some Caucasians. Incidentally, a big sticking point in the strike negotiations centers on elusive and opaque incentives designed to entice teachers to Title I schools.

I report to the main office and receive a box filled with Mrs. Frank's papers, books and instructions for her first-grade class. I realize later that I am one of the lucky subs, since many

teachers did not leave anything behind. I'm anxious to get organized before the bell rings at 7:50. Instead, we are whisked to the teacher's lounge to discuss the strike and consequential adjustments to the school day. I scan the room. It is a mix of teachers, subs and random DPS employees from functions like finance and engineering – all coming together to support the school and students during this unprecedented, challenging time. I have a good feeling about this school that proudly displays a 'School of Excellence' ribbon outside. They are so welcoming and grateful and even offer donuts and pie to sweeten the situation.

The 'soft start' bell rings and it's finally time to get escorted to my classroom. *When am I going to get a chance to read the instructions?* is all I can think. I don't like being unprepared for my first guest teaching assignment *ever*.

The administrative assistant and I commence walking through the long, musty hallways. Moore is a very old, stately school flanked by giant, scarred oak doors with transoms beckoning students, and beautiful wainscoting throughout. We are approaching a wide, central staircase with carved wooden banisters that have been flattened over time because kids have used them like fire station poles to get down fast. The staircase soars up three stories, and I can't help but make the comparison to Hogwarts. Already, the school is teeming with kids ranging from three feet to six feet in height.

My room is situated on a corner with enormous windows spanning an entire wall. The sun is naturally lighting up the room and some kids are already there. I scooch down and greet each one and then scramble to the desk to try and read the class curriculum. I get as far as the Peace Circle because a mother has brought in her sweet, autistic child, Selene, and wants to share a little about her needs and temperament. Selene looks like the Greek goddess of the moon, after

whom she is named, with her long, unruly coal black hair. I am supremely grateful when Gabriella enters the room shortly thereafter. She is a Para-professional who specializes in working with special needs children. Ordinarily, she is only in the classroom for one hour; but today, she's here for the entire day, since Selene disappeared from the classroom yesterday and it took a long time to find her.

And that pretty much sets the tone for the day, as I teach on the fly trying to follow the work plan-- *amidst the mayhem*. We have Brandon, who is supremely intelligent, obviously bored and thus compelled to disrupt the class, crawl under tables and throw pencils. Marcus, who's also bright, has a chipped front tooth and proudly sports a striped clip-on tie. He swings from super engaged to antagonistic, muttering, "I don't have to listen to you because you're White." There's darling Anton, with amazing eyes that grab you, who loves math and wants more challenge, but is also highly emotional due to a difficult family situation. Anton and Marcus are good friends *and* at each other's throats practically all day – literally. Sophia has lovely long dark hair and cries at the drop of a hat because no one will let her sit near them. Jeremiah, who wears glasses, has been held back a year and is convinced his family and classmates hate him; he decides to run crying out into the main hallway so I can chase after him -- *three times*. Zaniah, with tightly wound braids perched high on either side of her head, has serious attitude and refuses to do anything I ask. That is until I say she can take attendance after recess and read to the class. Unlike Brandon, who easily read from Harry Potter earlier in the day, Zaniah struggles with basic words but happily ploughs ahead. And, I say to my beleaguered self, thank God she insisted on taking attendance after recess; otherwise, we would not have found out three kids were missing! Leah's hair has been cropped super short because of lice. She

is pretty comatose all day because she was up all night watching Netflix and gaming. I have to confiscate Alexander's and Marcus's Beyblade toys – all the rage in grammar and middle schools. I will eventually discover that the two rascals secretly retrieve their toys from the teacher's desk. Unbeknownst to them, I am subbing the next day and there will be an unpleasant consequence.

It's only 11:30 and I already have a screaming headache. I feel overwhelmed and disoriented with the noise of the room dinning in my ears. I am reminded of Arnold Schwarzenegger in Kindergarten Cop and wish I had his whistle about now. In desperation, I call the class to the front of the room and most come. I tell them we are doing Yoga. Marcus says he is not allowed to do yoga. But, once we start doing warrior poses, he's all in. In fact, as a class, we go beyond warrior I, II, and III to invent warrior IV, V and VI. The bell rings. I sigh... lunchtime.

The little darlings are charging in after lunch. It's about time for writer's workshop and I am printing instructions on the whiteboard – all about characters, settings and events. I'm just finishing the last sentence when Anton screams "Miss R, that's technology!" and runs up and tries to rub off the words with his hands. It doesn't work. Neither does a wet paper towel. Uh oh. This isn't good. Desperate, I look around for anything that might remove the evidence of my stupidity—confusing a smart board for a whiteboard. There, in the corner, by the sink, are the antibacterial wipes! I grab one and start wiping like a mad woman. Eventually, the board is almost white again.

I turn around and everyone is running and some are crying for one reason or another. I wrangle the kids back into some semblance of order and charge ahead with the workshop.

Most participate in creating a story; Brandon is at the teacher's desk dumping little fuzz balls on the cluttered surface. The kids share and some even act out their simple, sweet imaginations. I love their creative initiative and inhibition that hasn't been tamped down yet.

After story time, it's naptime – *for me!* I feel like I just climbed a fourteener in a blizzard. I glance down at the day plan and am about to get started on writing the spelling words, which by the way, are nowhere to be found. *Ummm.* “Knock knock”. I open the door and am greeted by three smiling faces. Three DPS employees from Finance are here to do art with the kids. Boy oh boy am I happy to see the art cavalry. This unexpected respite is such a treat and gives my head a chance to clear. What a great idea by the principal to both entertain the kids who are upset by the strike and change in routine, as well as provide relief to the many subs. I help the kids make hearts and write messages on their Valentine cards, but I almost cry when the cavalry says they have to leave.

In between disciplining and consoling, I manage to actually teach a little. It is difficult to meet so many different levels of need, both intellectual and emotional. I just wish I had more time to spend with the kids who are a little behind. It is such a thrill to see a student's confidence rise when the light bulb goes off and he/she finally gets a concept! Here is the joy of teaching interspersed with equal parts pain and frustration.

It's finally the end of a very long day and just as I'm thinking I can NEVER do this again, Zaniah, who was especially hostile, spontaneously gives me a big hug as she runs to catch the bus. And of course, now, I'm hooked on the opium that is connecting with a child.

Everyone should walk in a teacher's shoes....

Please note: all names have been substituted to protect the identity of the subjects in this creative non-fiction piece.