

"May" **by Vanessa Brown**

This is a case sample of a ninth grade special education student who knew what she wanted and needed from an instructional community and was ready and willing to use social action practices to achieve it.

"Knowledge is power". You have to know and understand all kinds of things in this world. If you want people to pay attention to pay attention to you, you have to be intelligent." (An entry from May's journal, October 1999)

May is a short, and round, dark skinned ninth grade female in my special education English class. Her eyes are dark and penetrating even through her thick eyeglasses which have been prescribed as a result of Lupus wrecking havoc on her youthful body. She has puffy thin pink lips made even more prominent with illness. Despite her tenuous health status, May is strong, resourceful and determined. She, Eisha and another friend from our class tried out for and won spots on the JV cheerleading squad. She helped out in the library at lunchtime and requested after school tutoring which is not exactly the popular thing to do amongst her special class peers.

She is keenly sensitive and intuitive as indicated in her long, lingering glances, which she follows with a slant of an eyebrow and a tilt of her head signaling to me, "I know, Mrs. Brown, I know" when a student does something that she and I both quietly agree is inappropriate. She will sometimes, without hesitation, pronounce to the class, "Some of you are only doin' that, 'cause you want Mrs. Brown to help you and you scared to ask her." May was feisty and not easily pushed around. She spoke her piece loud and clear---"I ain't takin that stuff from 'im, Mrs. Brown" or "Mr. K--- ain't teachin' us what we need---I want my class changed."

May was on a mission during her ninth grade year and "Knowledge is Power" became her battle cry.

She fit ever so neatly into my teacher plan of creating a teaching and learning environment that challenged and supported students to find critical connections between literacy and social action. She invited instruction and eagerly participated in activities. She was both engaging and supportive of the plan I wanted to set in motion.

So, when I announced that our class had an opportunity to apply for a local grant to support student projects, she led her class in a positive and

enthusiastic response. She volunteered to write student ideas on the board when I asked for suggestions for a project theme and helped to keep order when we began the process of narrowing the themes down to one. When I asked each person who suggested a theme to tell why they felt the theme was important to explore, she imitated my mannerisms of nodding, smiling and affirming each speaker. When she heard something she thought was off-track, she would look at me with that, "I know, I know" look and wait for me to say or do something. She was relentless in convincing her classmates towards accepting "Knowledge is Power" as the most applicable to our thematic project which we agreed would have a school to career focus using the historical context of our school community as a foundation for the inquiry.

May had great difficulty with spelling, organizing written information and reading comprehension and she knew it. Her strengths were in oral expression and listening comprehension and she knew that, too. She was adamant about finding away to market her strengths. She felt that a good teacher had the responsibility to help her use what she brought to the teaching and learning community to achieve academic success.

She was the student that most teachers would pray for. She would study my voice, my intonations, my graphics on the board and especially my shared journal entries. She seemingly studied everything about me as a teacher with a peculiar intensity, forever looking for clues, looking for an open door to knowledge and power.

She clearly and quickly recognized the significance of using an historical context for approaching our project and later worked with other students on social action initiatives that grew out of the research (such as writing letters to City council and the mayor about vacant lots and abandoned buildings along G-Town Avenue and the lack of diversity of businesses in the area)

Midway through the school year, we started the short novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963*. She became a key player in pushing forward a fire prevention initiative after hearing a radio news report regarding the number of reported fires in our surrounding school community. G-Town had the largest number of reported fires and fire fatalities than any other area of the city. She made a connection between that stark reality and a chapter in the book where a major character was discovered playing with matches after several warnings.

May's classmates were not far behind her. As a matter of fact, they were pretty much walking alongside each other. They had slowly evolved into a real community nudging each other forward and making allowances for

individual strengths and weaknesses. There was room to take risks and room to fall and plenty of room to move on.

So when we planned a fire prevention project that grew out of May's sharing of the radio reports, the class embraced the idea with such fervor that even I was taken aback. I became a resource person and they quickly became the fuel for what now seems to be an unquenchable flame colored with energy and enthusiasm.

They had found the intersection of school, career and community and together they teased out connections with literature about Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks and the literature of Christopher Paul Curtis, bell hooks, and even the children's author, Pat Palacco. Dr. Seuss', Hooray for Diffendoofer Day! Had a significant impact on their thinking about the power of thinking together and believing in one's abilities. Sandra Cisneros' *Those Who Don't in The House on Mango Street* led us into a most moving talk about how we represent ourselves and how others read our representations. We used a writers' workshop format to refine these pieces and hung them on the bulletin board with candid shots of ourselves working together both in and outside of the classroom. It was great!

Oh, was I pleased. Literacy and activism were merging in a most natural manner. No, we weren't ready to picket City council or form a human blockade across G-Town Avenue. But, we were recognizing the need for action and using what we were learning to fuel our shared passion for intervention and change.