



Undeserved Award

Thousands of teachers in red T-shirts converged for the Raleigh Rally. We watched on the evening news. Try as we might, we couldn't spot daughter Laura, but we knew she was there. Excitement and enthusiasm defined the day—except for the dead seriousness of their cause. Most politicians—and not just in North Carolina—care more about corporate profits than education.

Laura, like teachers all over the country, receives a low salary in comparison to other professionals. And like her colleagues, she digs into her own pocket to purchase items needed in the classroom.

I write this while recovering from serious outpatient surgery. I'm glad my surgeon and anesthesiologist are well paid. And I can't imagine either of these two doctors having to purchase their own "tools of the trade."

Not that I'm suggesting that the teaching and medical professions are easy comparisons. If Laura has a bad day and inadvertently assigns the wrong homework, little harm is done. A doctor's comparable error can be catastrophic.

My surgeon has a sense of humor, putting me at ease before the anesthesiologist performs his task. But such is a small bonus alongside his surgical skills.

I think of Laura in that same way. An expert elementary teacher, her endearing sense of humor is an added bonus. She sparks laughter among her third graders and puts them at ease when they need it most. She's a clever mimic and a soprano soloist, and on occasion when the kids become too boisterous she will suddenly speak in another voice or sing out a few measures, startling them into silence.

They love her and respond well to her teaching, begging her at the end of the year to move up to the next grade with them.

But she always has certain ones who are behavioral challenges. This past school year "Danny" ranked high in this department.

He was the smallest boy in the class and he had a serious speech impediment—a

pronounced lisp. His tenacious spirit, however, didn't hold him back. He managed to elbow his way into the playground pack of third-grade boys who were impressed by his creative forms of misbehavior.

Throughout her many years of teaching, Laura has become an amateur child psychologist and she understood his need for having to prove his toughness or else be bullied.

Speech therapy had served him well. No more lisping—except when he became excited or was put on the spot. Danny was the cutest little kid in her class, and she loved him despite his penchant for mischief.

And though he hardly deserved a good behavior award, she chose him as student of the week for the last full week of school. All the other kids had gotten the recognition—some more than once. Now it was his turn. He was all smiles.

Hardly had the week begun, however, when true to form, he led a pack of lunchroom boys in a chair-tipping scuffle. Laura reprimanded those involved and took away their afternoon recess. Standard procedure.

But she called "Danny" aside. She told him how disappointed she was with him—especially for his misconduct right after having been given the student of the week award.

His shame was palpable. Tears began streaming down his face. He told her he was "so sorry to disappoint" her as only he could pronounce the words. And, of course, he addressed her with the proper Mrs.—her last name also an S-word. He begged her to take back the award because he didn't "deserve" to be "special."

Laura consoled him and insisted that she wouldn't be taking away his student-of-the-week designation. Still sniffing, he ended the exchange: I "swear" I "promise" I will be good.

Tender mercies for the little boy, tears of laughter for us as she in her inimitable way regaled us with the story. □

—Ruth Tucker