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Professor Fox

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**RICHMOND GARRICK**

*He was a prize-winning artist and owned the largest one-man art exhibition in Sierra Leone. When the civil war reached the cities, Richmond Garrick was asked by his exhibit’s ambassador to move to the United States, noting that it was the artist’s escape to safety. Garrick contemplated, then agreed, leaving both his family and his first exhibit in Sierra Leone for an opportunity to start fresh in the States. Soon after, Garrick’s brother was killed by a child soldier. Already in the United States, he was unable to say goodbye...*

*The Civil War emerged in 1991 in Liberia but soon moved to Sierra Leone after the rebellion and the pursuit of blood diamonds. Guerilla leader, Charles Taylor was disgruntled against current Liberian President, Samuel Doe, for creating a Peace Treaty with Sierra Leone to end the war. Taylor believed Sierra Leone was supporting Doe and in retaliation, led a rebel movement to topple Doe’s government. This fueled the 1990s conflict that then involved diamonds. Taylor and his rebels took over Sierra Leone’s mines and harvested what would come to be known as ‘blood diamonds.’ These diamonds were used to purchase arms and weaponry. Village after village, families were pillaged. Young boys were kidnapped, drugged with cocaine, and used as weapons. They were convinced they had become soldiers of the revolution. These child soldiers would continue to serve the rebellion to destroy towns, murder their own families, and side with the Revolutionary United Front. The greed within Sierra Leone had left the country in ruins, ending and changing many lives.*

Everybody loves where they were born because that is where you grow up. Even when you have everything here, you miss home. We have to give up everything just to have a better life here in the United States. Can you imagine a time, when the last time you saw your family was in the middle of a war? It makes me think. My mother had a stroke a few years back and I could not see her. The last time I saw my wife’s father was in 2010. The next time I saw my father in Sierra Leone, he was in a casket. As an immigrant, these are the things we sacrifice to live in America. When other people talk about immigrants, they will never understand the life we have to leave behind in order to have opportunities. I love this country and I always say, “if it wasn’t for the United States, I would NEVER have achieved what I have done so far.”

People are oppressed in Sierra Leone. You have no opportunity unless you have political connections. I studied art and received an associate degree, but the education in Sierra Leone was nothing compared to the United States. We didn't have computers in Sierra Leone. We had to do all of our work by hand and this prepared me for life. When I came here, I went to Middlesex County College. My first English class required me to write journals on the computer and didn’t know how to type. I typed almost every assignment with one finger at the time -- my brain went a lot faster than my fingers. The educational system was different which prepared me to move on to Montclair State University to receive a bachelor’s degree. I did not have a green card so I used to work for a company that would pay for my schooling. I was a full-time student and full-time worker. To pay back my tuition, it was done in increments and applied for every scholarship that was available at the time. I won at least six awards that I knew could help pay for school and I would not have to worry as much. I never counted myself out.

God creates a vision for you and puts it in your hands. I believe I was truly meant to be an artist. I painted. I was a music producer. I was a dancer. I work at Williamstown High School, New Jersey in the Monroe Township school district where the school had created an alternate route for me because I didn’t have an educational degree. After I received my degree, I worked for a company for graphic design and I was never happy. When I was in Sierra Leone, I taught for ten years and education became my passion. I loved teaching children art and knowing I am making a difference in others’ lives. I believe working for companies are not stable and I didn’t want to work in an area I wasn’t happy. As a teacher, I see everything. I stand in the classroom and everything is taken for granted. Teachers complain about how their budgets are too little and they have no money to run their classes every day, but we didn’t have budgets in Sierra Leone. Every school supply we needed to buy came directly out of our own pockets. The kids these days have no idea how good they’ve got it. People take education for granted in the United States and it is sad. There are other areas in the world where education is so valued and kids would kill for. Even the students here are not held accountable in the system -- the teachers are the first ones to get blamed a student does not succeed. There is always pressure on the teachers to create innovation and help students succeed. In Sierra Leone, if a student could not continue with the studies, they would be kicked out of school and their spot would have been given to a student who would work harder.

As a teacher, the main priority is students. I like my students more than the faculty and if I had to be honest, I only know about fifteen names of teachers in high school. I think it is funny because some teachers will pass me in the hallway and say, “Hi Mr. Garrick!” I feel embarrassed because I will have no idea who they are. If my students were not there, I have no job. I get paid to teach, but the part that I enjoy the most is that I can share my story and inspire kids, it means a lot to me. I am always on the mission to see what I can do for a student. When students feel they are in trouble, I would never write them up or send them to the office. I want to take the time out of my day to talk to them and tap into their rational side.

*Mr. Garrick will always be my favorite teacher. There wasn’t a day in high school where I genuinely felt happy unless it was in the art studio with my best friend and my favorite teacher. My senior year was my third and final year having him as a teacher, and I knew from the moment I met him, he would make a difference in my life. There were days when I would come into school ballistically crying over situations at home and my teachers would write me passes to go visit him in whatever class he would be in during the time. I was one of his favorite students and I loved to brag about it. He would stop the lesson he was doing and pull me aside to talk to me. I was never the type of student to bring my problems to school, but he was one teacher who understood my issues and was somewhat of a father figure to me. It was also easy for me to understand him because the stories he told us about his background were similar to my parents who had also come to the United States (the Land of Opportunity) to start a new life during the time of war. Mr. Garrick made it a point every day in his lessons to appreciate everything given to us and prepared us for the future. My favorite memory with him was when I asked him, “Mr. Garrick, have you ever ridden a rollercoaster?” He responded with, “I climbed a tree in Africa once. That was the ride.” It made almost every person in my class laugh uncontrollably until we realized that he was not joking and that we had to appreciate what we do have.*

In a daily setting, I make lesson plans, grade assignments, prepare supplies for the students. Those are just some responsibilities I have, but other teachers would say the biggest responsibility as a teacher is to prepare students for real life. My teaching philosophy is not that we must prepare students for real life, but to bring real life to the students. When I tell all my students about my life in Sierra Leone, they are so oblivious to what happens outside of their lives so it serves an eye-opener for them. This type of education also comes from the children as well. Education is a two-way stream and when I teach, I learn.

You can tell every day which kids are being held accountable for the work they do. There is a clear difference between the actions of kids that are being held up to higher standards by their parents and kids whose parents simply don’t care. For example, I gave a student a progress report of a 70 which he folded it, mashed it up, and shoved it to the bottom of his backpack. I said to him, “Are you going to take that home to your parents?” He said, “nope.” When my kids came home with a 98 percent on their homework, I would respond back, “What about the other two percent you’re missing?” It is very obvious which students are held accountable and when I am in the classroom, I know the capabilities of each student. My favorite class to teach is AP Studio Art III & IV because the students come up with their own ideas as to what they should draw or paint. Having a dialogue with the students is important because when it comes to their own art, the only way I can help them is through discussion and guiding them. With the students who are not as skilled as the AP students, there is only so much you can do it help them. Trying to help a student with no basic skills is like throwing a person with absolutely no technique or hand eye coordination into a game on steroids. Even on the steroids, they won’t win because they have no idea what they are doing. At that point, the students will have to learn on their own and the only thing I can do is have a good lesson plan. Without a lesson plan, there is no foundation for art. With this philosophy, the class becomes democratic, not a dictatorship.

Culturally, there is one big difference in the classroom. Respect. Kids don’t respect teachers in the United States and it baffles me. In Sierra Leone, kids are scared of their teachers. Sometimes you will go to the supermarket around town, see your teachers, and always say hi. Where I am from if you saw your teacher outside of school, you would run the opposite way because they were allowed to hit you and scare you. I once saw the principal try to stop a student in the hallway because he didn’t stop for the pledge of allegiance. The student turned around and yelled to the principal, “Fuck off!” and kept walking. If I yelled at my teacher, my teacher would hit me in front of the other kids to teach me a lesson. It’s like I said before. Students take the educational system in America for granted when they are given so much opportunity.

*I remember Mr. Garrick telling me stories about the people in Sierra Leone during the war. He told me the rebels would come into villages when people least expected it and shot everyone in sight. He said they would collect children to become children soldiers so they would become a part of the revolution. He said they would take men to ask them “long sleeve or short sleeve?” If you answered long, they would cut your hands off – Short sleeve would cut your arms off. It was an idea I never imagined humans would be capable of doing. It made me rethink how fortunate I was to grow up in a society with two parents supporting me, a roof over my head, an education, and food on my plate. My parents also explained that everything they do is to make sure that I did not live the same life that they did. I understood what they meant when I talked to Mr. Garrick too.*

Coming from Sierra Leone, I started from nothing. My background affects my work ethic because I appreciate everything this country has given me. If I was still in Sierra Leone today, maybe I wouldn’t have been alive. My fate would have been like my brother’s. Africa is not stable. The war makes everything you have worked so hard for, disappear. In my daily lessons, I want to emphasize that you have to take advantage of every opportunity that you have. I thought about staying in Sierra Leone with my family, but I left. I love the U.S. because it gave me the life I have today but there are sacrifices we have to make to live in America. As an immigrant, we have to give up everything in order to have a better life.

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**Reflection**

In the process of trying to choose a topic for this assignment, I tried to think about the hardest working people I know in my life. I knew my teacher from high school was going to be the focus of my topic in the aspect of working hard and telling an amazing story as well. While preparing for the assignment, I tried to remember all the things Mr. Garrick talked to me about or the stories that he told. In the style of the Terkel, working theme, I thought it would be important to expand on his personality and where it had gotten him today. I also believed there should be a main idea and that it should be kept consistent while reading his story which was to be appreciative for everything one has today. I prepared for this writing assignment by writing down 22 questions to ask my teacher about his life and his job today. I called him over the phone and recorded our conversation from my laptop which helped immensely. I also jotted down notes while he was telling his story so I could capture the parts I felt were most important and key information to include. My teacher had told me a lot more information that I never thought he would be comfortable telling me, but I do not think it could have gone any better than I imagined. I found myself very confident in the writing because the information Mr. Garrick told me was an ongoing story still being written. There was so much information, it was almost hard to incorporate it all along with my experiences as a student and child of two immigrant parents. The flow of conversation with my teacher is what made me personally feel like I was writing a novel. With the citations and works cited, I found it a little hard to incorporate the information, especially on the war. Mr. Garrick had told me his side of the story and about the war which was almost too similar to anything on the internet about the Sierra Leone Civil War. I had to research the topic of the war to make sure the information he was giving me was correct as well. I wanted to know the history on the war before writing about a topic I was clearly oblivious about. I also had to go back to his website and check out his biography just so I could completely capture his personality as a hard-working man. I felt as if I struggled with the structure of the essay because there was so much information about one person, it was hard to piece it together with fluency. I wanted to speak about my own story with my teacher’s which I found easy because he is another father figure to me. As for this project overall. I believe this project is an amazing way to teach student’s to be comfortable using different styles of writing outside of their own. I believe it incorporates creativity and to have fun writing about subjects they can be passionate about.