



Video Story Transcript

MR. D'S CLASS

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://youtu.be/bX5VJGnuZxl>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Antonio Sacre.

Have you ever been inspired by a teacher to do something you didn't think you could do? Have you ever felt like you let somebody down for not being able to do what you said you were gonna do? I meet Dennis Danzinger, a high school English teacher, at Venice High School, part of Los Angeles Unified School District where I lived a few years ago. He had heard me tell stories in English and in Spanish. He was interested in me possibly working with his kids about how to write stories and tell their own stories. And so I met with him. And when I met with him in person, I was surprised at how intelligent his eyes were and how caring he looked and also how tall he was. I looked at him and before I even said hello, I said, "Wow, you are tall!" He was well over 6 feet. I just blurted it out, "Did you play basketball in college?" He said, "As a matter of fact, I've played in college and my college basketball coach said that if I was just a little bit faster, a little bit taller, a little bit better on the pick-and-roll, a little bit better outside shot, better hands on defense, I still wouldn't make the pros!" He had me at such ease and calm and I was just laughing and talking with him. Loved meeting him!

He told me that he had gotten a grant from a wonderful organization called Pen in The Classroom. It was for money to encourage kids to tell and write their own stories and at the end of the project, they would publish it in an anthology. An actual book that the kids could hold in their hands. And he was intrigued, he thought that I might be good with those kids. And I was happy to talk to him about the possibility. He told me about the money, though, and there wasn't a lot of it. And I told him that right away. I said, "That's not a lot of money!" And he said, "I know it's not a lot of money but these kids have so much potential and so many people have already given up on these kids. These kids have been given up on by parents, and administrators,

and school districts.” And he said, “These kids are almost graduating; they’re seniors. There’s so much potential with these kids!” And his passion for his kids moved me a little bit and I had to still consider it.

So as we sat, talking some more, he talked about how when he first moved out to Los Angeles, he was a screenwriter and a TV writer. And he got his first big break on a huge TV show. I thought that was great. So I said, “What was the show?” He said, “Taxi.” And I said, “Wow!”

And he said, “Yeah, it was a pretty big show.”

And I said, “Yeah, it was a big show. It’s just that you are older than you look. Gosh, you are old, old, old like senior citizen old. Like didn’t they shoot that in black and white?”

And he started to laugh. He said, “Listen, you’re not so young yourself! I see that gray around your temples, you know!”

And we had a big laugh, you know, and I thought it would be great to work with this guy.

And then I thought about what he had done. He said he’d given up working on that TV show, with all the dream and money and prestige that comes from writing for a big sitcom to become a high school English teacher in one of the toughest school districts in one of the most embattled districts in the country. He’d given up a world of wealth and pressure for a world of the pressure and none of the wealth. And he seemed happy. He seemed exciting; I was intrigued. And he took my silence for reticence.

And he said, “Listen, I’ll tell you what, I will buy you lunch before every class at the best sandwich shop in Venice, California and I will give you a copy of my new book.”

He held out his hand. I shook it. I said, “Dennis, lunch better be good and your book better not suck!”

He laughed and he said, “Listen, my book will make you laugh at least once, guaranteed. And if it doesn’t, I’ll give you your money back.”

When he took me to his car and gave me his book, I laughed immediately. The title was “A Short History of a Tall Jew.” He said, “There you are. One laugh guaranteed. See you in a couple weeks.” I read that book for two weeks and it made me laugh out loud a lot. I couldn’t wait to start with Dennis and his high school seniors at Venice High School.

When I showed up at his school (we had lunch before) and he talked to me. He said, “I want you to tell your bilingual stories in English and Spanish. ‘Cause I have kids from 30 different countries. A lot of them from Spanish speaking countries but all over the world. They’re gonna love that you’re bilingual. They’re gonna love you. It’s gonna be fantastic!”

And I got to his class; they had a little podium in the front. Huge seagulls right outside screeching away.- not too far from the beach. And I began to tell my stories. My bilingual stories of growing up Cuban Irish American, like one of my friends calls me, a leprechauno. And as I was telling those stories, those kids mostly listened and mostly looked at me. Although one kid was texting underneath his desk, another kid had his head on the desk the whole time. A bald kid over here, looked like a gang banger for sure, shaved head, tattoos,

piercings, black clothes! Looked like he was gonna do something to me after school and none of it was going to be good. When I was done, nobody clapped. Nobody said anything. And then the bell rang. Those kids walked out of the classroom, not even looking at me. Mr. D, Mr Danzinger, came up to me afterward. He said, "That was brilliant! That was incredible! I've never seen them listen for that long!" Now he had a way of inspiring me, making me feel like I did better than I actually did.

The next lunch meeting a week later, he said, "Listen, keep going on. Tell them how you write your stories. Tell them what you do when you're coming up with stories."

And so I told them more stories and I told them about all the things I do when I'm writing stories. And the same response! Silence! Kid still head on the desk, kid still texting, bald gang banger kid staring daggers into me. And again, when they left, no response.

The next week at our lunch meeting, I said, "Mr. D, maybe I'm not cut out for this, maybe I can't reach these kids." He says, "You know what? I will talk to them." The next class, he's cajoling and pleading and joking with the kids and making them listen. And they're very excited and he sits back down again. And they're looking at me again and I just looked at them. I had no idea what to do. Maybe I couldn't reach these kids. Maybe I was too old, too out of touch, not with it with these kids. Maybe I just didn't have anything to say. And I finally just said, "Look, I told you all the stories I know. I've taught you the things that I do when I write stories and I'm at the end here. So maybe it's just time for me to shut up and listen. Maybe it's just time for me to see what kind of stories you got. So what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna sit down on this desk right here and I'm going to leave this podium open. It's open podium. You come up and you just tell me one sentence of one story that might go in our anthology at the end of this little time that we have together. 'Cause you have an opportunity to be published in an anthology! An amazing opportunity to do that! Mr. D and I are working hard to do this. It's up to you now." And I sat down.

And Mr. D was silent. And I was silent. And those kids didn't look at anything. Just sat there. The longest 5 minutes that I've had in my performing career, my storytelling career. I sat there and I didn't say anything. Just the seagulls blaring on the way to the beach a mile and a whole world away.

And then, Courtney stood up. Courtney, long hair, she looked younger and older than she should have been. She stood at that podium and she said, "I left my mom in Washington State 2 years ago. She was doing things that I don't want to tell you about. I got on a bus with my under-the-mattress money, and I came to Venice. Got me a job at the grocery store, I work, I put myself up in my own apartment, and I'm a straight A student." And she sat down.

And there was silence. And then, a kid got up, took his head up from the desk and walked up to the podium. And he said, "I don't know if many of my extended family survived the Tsunami in Japan." And there was a deeper silence in the room. And he sat down and put his head back on the desk. Maybe that's why his head was on the desk these last three weeks.

More silence and then a kid walked up, wispy kid, blonde hair, blue eyes. He said, "I'm not Mexican enough for my friends and my white friends think I'm too Mexican. I'm somewhere in the middle. I'm 100% Mexican. I don't know. They call me Little Blondie, Whitey... I don't understand." And he sat down.

And then bald, gang banger kid stood up. I didn't flinch... or maybe I flinched. He was scary. I don't know. He came sauntering up to me, just passed me; stood at that podium. Turned around, growled at the kids and he

said, “It’s not easy keeping this head so smooth and shiny.” (Moves hand down head as he says “smooth and shiny.”)

And we all busted out laughing. 30 kids from 20 countries and 2 old, old, old as dirt dudes laughing, laughing as this kid went, “smooth and shiny.” (Moves hand down head as he says “smooth and shiny.”) And he walked back to his desk, high-fiving and fist bumping. And kids now, could not be contained in their chairs. Leaping at that podium. Everybody wanting to speak with one sentence of what their story might be in an anthology.

And at the end of that class that bell went off and nobody moved. And baldy in the corner said, “Yo, we just got started!” And Mr. D said, “That’s what I’m talking about. We just got started. You got eight more weeks with this guy and me and that podium to create an anthology that’s gonna be published in the world!” And a kid started almost to smile. And he said, “Next week he’ll be here, I’ll be here, that podium will be here! Don’t forget to read Chapter 7 in your book tonight and get on out to 5th period and don’t be late you Scallywags!” And the kids, as they walked by, looked at me through the corner of their eye and almost smiled. Mr. D came up to me, held his hand out, I shook it. He leaned into me and said, “It’s about time, Shorty!” I laughed and said, “Thanks a lot, senior citizen!”

And Mr. D and I worked with those kids. And those kids wrote their stories and after 12 weeks, we submitted them to Pen in The Classroom. And they published this book, “I Stand Alone: A Collection of Stories and Poems From Mr. D’s 12th Grade English Class.”

And if 30 kids from 20 countries and two old as dirt teachers can create this. (Points to book.)

In my heart, I sometimes feel that we can do anything. Now I don’t always feel that way but when I do, it’s powerful.

And I want to read to you the poem that I wrote for those high school kids that is included at the end of this anthology. It’s called “For Mr. D’s High School Kids in the Anthology.”

I came to Venice High School to work a two month writing residency with questions.

Would Mr. D be as cool in the classroom as he seemed outside the classroom?

Would I be able to find the office through the maze of jean-clad, texting teens?

Is this really where they film “Fast Times at Ridgemont High?”

Would I be too nervous to share my stories to seniors who are ready to graduate? Would they listen? Will I ever be able to help them write anything?

Is that kid white or Mexican? Is that gang banger in the corner going to kill me after class? And how does he get his head so shiny and smooth? It’s so smooth and shiny! I wonder how he does it? And then those high school seniors began to read one sentence of their story from that podium after that one break through. And they started talking and listening and I had more questions. Do they have the courage to face their woundings and put it on the page? Will that kid ever stop texting? Will that kid ever get his head off the desk? Will that girl ever have the gumption to leave that boyfriend of hers? And how did that kid get his head so smooth and

shiny? It's so smooth. And will he kill me after class? And those kids started to write and rewrite. And then they'd stand at that podium with the recycling piling high in the corner and the seagulls screeching. And they started to pour forth a rumped up, drizzle down, gush over, scream, whisper, speak secrets, reveal wonder, reveal wonder, show courage, rip tides, tear hearts open...Revealing wonder, revealing wonder, revealing wonder! Making me laugh, making me sigh, making it hard to keep my eyes dry! And I would witness and talk and question. And they would pour forth, knowing that I couldn't take away the pain of what they'd face in a day. But I know that they're survivors because they are here in class. They are not dead. They're not in jail. They're not ditching. They're here struggling to graduate.

And I knew it didn't feel like anything to them. But to me, it's amazing! And José wrote an amazing poem where we got our title saying that he stands alone. He stands alone. And I say to José, "You do not stand alone. I stand with you. You stand with me. We stand together."

And I will carry your memory from this class out into the world as I tell stories. And I will tell it and tell it and tell it. And journey with you even though we may never see each other again. And you gotta know and we gotta know and we gotta remember that we stood together for a time. We stand together, we stand together!

And even though I have more questions, always questions, at least I have one answer. For a smooth head, all you need is Neutrogena and a Mach 5 razor.