

Thank you, Ole. Even today, students and teachers at Parker remember your courage, grace, maturity and integrity. You are an ambassador for the Netherlands, and we were more than happy to have you as a part of our community.

I'd like to take this time to also thank Rikie and Edith for inviting me to speak. I'd like to thank Rikie, especially for her inspiration and partnership. Thank you to everyone in the Netherlands who has welcomed me. I feel very fortunate and inspired by your country's goodness, grace and generosity.

We all have our own story of why we've come to the profession of education. There's power in knowing your story, telling your story and hearing each other's stories. It can be a resource for the powerful fuel to transform schools and reignite one's sense of purpose and source for passion. This is my story.

One teacher, in particular, changed the way I thought about my self, my school, and my community. She was my beloved middle school teacher, Ms. Dana Barber. Ms. Barber came into my life when I was 12 years old.

At the time, I was living in the conservative city of Dallas, Texas. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, there are 84 hate groups in the state of Texas, with more than half of them being located in the Dallas area. These hate groups include Ku Klux Klan, American Nazi Party, and organizations created with the sole purpose of fighting homosexuality. Just this last Christmas, 15 hate crimes had been reported in Dallas' Oak Lawn neighborhood within three months.

When I was in 6th grade my dad came out as a gay man. I was scared for my dad, and my dad was scared for me. He knew all too well what school would be like if people

found out about him and our family. This fear was the reason why he had been the closet for all of his life, and while at 40 years old, he was ready to take a risk for his freedom; he didn't want his children to have to take a risk too. My parents decided that I should keep this particular part of my dad's identity a secret.

Having to keep a secret left me feeling vulnerable at school. Left and right, hateful slurs were frequently passed around about gay people. I desperately wanted to stand up for what I believed was just, but fear prevented me from doing so. I went from being a lively and vivacious young girl to being deeply sad and scared. I lived in fear that my family would be ostracized, and worst of all, that my father, my glue, my champion, my safety would be harmed.

My parents noticed the dip in my confidence and decided to confide in my 7th and 8th grade Arts and Humanities teacher, Ms. Dana Barber. Ms. Barber was a lesbian and her partner was our track coach, Coach Weems. Because of the culture of hate and fear in my hometown, Coach Weems and Ms. Barber kept their relationship a secret. I vividly remember the parent-teacher-student conference when my parents shared with Ms. Barber my current struggles. I was trusted enough to keep Ms. Barber's secret, and she was trusted enough to keep mine. With Ms. Barber, I felt like a weight had been lifted for me – she knew, and she embraced my family for who we were.

Ms. Barber took me under her wing. She offered her classroom as a place where I could go if I ever needed to talk. She reached out to me when she noticed me struggle. She was funny, she was bright and she was thoughtful. Ms. Barber provided a safe classroom and developed a strong relationship with me on the basis of trust. She provided me with enough comfort, so that I could take intellectual risks. I was not the

only student who benefitted from her gifts. I remember other students seeking out her guidance, and I remember her being a champion for all sorts of students. She used to have two posters in her classroom: “To be great, surround yourself with great people.” “To achieve, you must first believe.” We all flourished in her classroom and gained the confidence needed to tackle adolescence, and this led to me flourishing academically.

In my current practice as a teacher, Ms. Barber is alive. Today, I am a 7th and 8th grade Arts and Humanities teacher at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Massachusetts.

A few years ago, I taught a student named Thomas. When Thomas was in 6th grade, Thomas’ mother died of cancer. Thomas became my student a year later when he was 12 years old. Thomas was off the wall. In American culture, he would be compared to Dennis the Menace or Bart Simpson. He was mischievous, always off task, always seeking out fun, and always with the ladies. He was what we what we call in America, a “stinker”. Thomas struggled with school. He never did his homework, never raised his hand in class, and had a narrative of apathy and mistrust. He lacked confidence, and sought ways to belong through acting out and eventually through engaging in drugs and alcohol.

In his own way, Thomas chose me as his Ms. Barber. There were moments when I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be the person Thomas needed me to be. He required extra attention, extra time and extra energy. There were moments when I wasn’t sure if I could be the person Thomas needed me to be. He required extra patience, extra trust and extra respect. There were moments when I wanted to take the easy road with Thomas, but each time I talked with him about his behaviors in school, he would look at me in the eye,

pleading for help, pleading for guidance. In those moments, I knew that, as a teacher, I am called to serve my students.

I couldn't do the tough work of being a teacher without the support of a school that is intentionally structured in ways where students can be known well.

My school, Parker, is an essential school. We believe in knowing each one of our students well, and to do this, we believe that all our resources: our time, our money, our energy needs to be spent in a way that strengthens our school's culture and the individual experience of each child. When a child is known well, when a child feels safe and supported, that child can do the important work of a student and of a person.

These beliefs are reflected in the Coalition of Essential Schools' 10 Common Principles. Three of them, in particular guide my work each day:

- 1. A Tone of Decency and Trust:** The tone of the school should explicitly and self-consciously stress values of unanxious expectation, of trust, and of decency.
- 2. Democracy and Equity:** The school should demonstrate non-discriminatory and inclusive policies, practices, and pedagogies.
- 3. Personalization:** Teaching and learning should be personalized to the maximum feasible extent.

I could support Thomas because I was being supported with a low student-to-teacher ratio, common planning time with faculty who could support me, and the structures and time needed to coach Thomas through his rocky adolescents.

And, I am not the only teacher who does this good work. Parker is an incredible school where teachers in every classroom and in every hallway are playing the part of Ms. Barbers and Thomases. Parker is designed with students in the forefront, and what

students need more than anything – more than textbooks, more than rules, more than technology, more than supplies is to be safe, known and respected. When this is true, students can focus more on their intellectual, social and emotional growth and less on the struggles that keep them down.

And Parker is not the only school doing this good work. Yesterday, I had the privilege to visit Were Di, a school in Valkenswaard. They are exercising progressive education everyday and with every student. When I spoke to the students they said that they loved their school and wouldn't change a thing. Their favorite part was their trusting relationships with their teachers and the freedom to be them selves.

When I was 14, Ms. Barber and Coach Weems became pregnant. In the hospital, after their daughter Shelby was born, Ms. Barber contracted a staff infection that quickly attacked her heart. At this point, it became obvious to our school community that Ms. Barber and Coach Weems, and Shelby were a family. I witnessed our school stand in line to donate blood, I witnessed the student body writing 'get well' cards, and when Ms. Barber died, I witnessed our community attend her funeral. Her funeral was held at the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, Texas. While Texas is one of the states in America with one of the largest numbers of hate groups, it is also home to the world's largest gay congregation. Hundreds of families each Sunday attend worship in a building that received a bomb threat each Sunday in its existence. At Ms. Barber's funeral, I vividly remember sitting in the packed pews of Cathedral of Hope next to my father, my head leaning on his shoulder, my heart heavy with sadness and uncertainty. I peaked out from behind his shoulder, and looked around the packed sanctuary. I wondered why were so many of my peers and their families were at Ms. Barber's funeral. Did they know they

were in a gay church? Why was the Smith Family there – they believed homosexuality was a sin? Why was the Anderson Family there – John Anderson was always calling people hateful names?

It was the relationship that Ms. Barber had shaped with each of her students that moved people once blinded by hate and fear to rise above their differences to show humanity and love.

Ms. Barber's grace and love inspired me to be a teacher – if the world was going to lose a teacher; I was going to do my damndest to replace her.

That year, from my own adolescence, I learned that people can prioritize being loving over being hateful. This gave me the hope that I could prioritize being brave over being safe.

Each day, it is imperative that I am in touch with my purpose as a teacher and as a person. Each day, it is imperative that a school be in touch with their purpose in society. Each day, it is crucial that I model fairness, decency, trust and respect with my students. Each day, it is crucial that schools model what is true and just in this world.

My deep hope is that my kindness will inspire them to be kind. One day, they will be called to rise above their own set of differences, in order to show humanity and love

With every curse word, paper plane launch, outburst in class, and with every Thomas, I have the opportunity to cultivate and model a tone of decency and trust. The times when I've taught from this place, I've gained a stronger connection to students. Students are calmer when I'm calmer, more fair-minded when I lead with fairness, and can gain a greater vision of themselves and their behavior when I communicate my belief

in them. Our classroom environment is a trusting community, and this has increased students' willingness to take academic risks and to ask for help. Students are learning that making mistakes is not a weakness, but an opportunity to build character. Students are more open to share with me what they need to succeed. We laugh more, and this helps us stay more engaged. When you know your students and they know you as a whole person (not a perfect, never wrong person), they learn to believe in themselves as whole people.

It's a win-win situation, really. What more can we ask for in our schools than one in which we get to practice being our best selves so our students can practice being their best selves?

It's not easy – days aren't perfect, and each class offers a new challenge. Schools around the world are overcrowded, underfunded. In every region of the world, violence on all scales impacts schools and students.

If we can all have a heart to heart with ourselves and with each other, we can reclaim our purpose, and our own stories of why we have all been called to do this work. This reclaiming can be the fueling our world needs to reignite education for all our children.

When we start from a place of purpose and heart, we can redesign our dialogue, our resources, our time, our relationships, and our communities. We have the power as educators and adults to take what is possible and ideal and make it a reality for our children. One day, they will be shaping our world, and we want to make sure they are tackling their own lives with a tone of decency and trust, supreme creativity and supreme compassion. In short, we want all of our students to be kind, so that they can work hard.

