

The Optimist

The day a high school student asked me: ‘Do you still like me?’

As an English teacher, I’ve always known words have weight. That day, mine landed harder than I meant.

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Guest column by Loren Kleinman

Danny pressed the buzzer again. I had asked him — nicely — the first few times. Then firmly. Then with authority. It didn’t matter. He smiled and pressed it again. Brandon and Eliana burst out laughing, as if it were the most brilliant rebellion they’d ever seen.

We were playing classroom trivia, something I had designed to lift the mood in my high school English class and maybe slip in a little learning on the side. I had stayed up late the night before, making the slides, obsessing over fonts, choosing buzzer sounds that wouldn’t be too loud. I printed out rules and even laminated them — like that would matter. I changed their names to protect their privacy so I could tell you this story.

That morning, I rearranged the desks into teams and told myself this would be the thing that flipped the energy. I pictured Danny leaning in with focus, Brandon joking but still playing. I imagined Eliana rolling her eyes but answering a question anyway. Something light in a long stretch of the school year.

Within minutes, it unraveled. Danny jammed the buzzer under his foot and pressed it repeatedly while I was trying to explain the game. Brandon shouted answers before I could finish the questions. Eliana was toggling between watching basketball on YouTube and muttering jokes.

I tried to hold on — to the lesson, to the classroom, to my belief that it still mattered. I redirected. I paused. I asked, “What’s going on?” I searched the room for a single face that looked sorry. No one met my eyes. My throat tightened. Heat rose up the back of my neck — the kind of slow-burn panic that feels like drowning while smiling.

When Danny hit the buzzer for the fifth time and smirked as I asked him to stop, I called the office to remove the three of them from class. My voice was calm. My hands weren’t. And when the door finally closed behind them, I stood in silence, not angry but gutted.

What they didn't know was that I had built that game for them. Danny had recently been suspended from the baseball team because of his grades. Brandon had been cut from basketball for the same reason. They had talked about it for weeks — the unfairness, the heartbreak of being benched. I thought maybe I could offer something to fill that gap. A game. A win. Something small that might come at the right time.

Later that afternoon, I decided to have a conference with the three of them. I was still holding on to something — a thread of belief that hadn't quite snapped. I thought maybe, if I said the right thing, something would shift.

"I need to talk to you about your grades," I told them. "You're failing all of your classes. You're not doing your work. I know you can do better. But I can't want it more than you do."

They laughed.

Danny leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "That's not our fault," he said. Brandon cracked a joke. Eliana didn't even look at me.

And that's when I said it.

"You're acting like losers."

The word landed. The laughter stopped. The air in the room changed.

I hadn't yelled. I hadn't cursed. It just came out — blunt, tired and hopeless.

For half a second, I thought maybe they hadn't heard me. But they had. Danny's smirk dropped. Brandon looked away. Eliana froze. The silence wasn't angry. It was alert.

As an English teacher, I've always known words have weight. That day, mine landed harder than I meant.

I wanted to take it back. I also wanted it to land. And I hated that both could be true.

After they left, I cried in my darkened classroom, the blinds drawn, the grading pile untouched. I sat in silence, wondering how it had all gone so wrong.

I didn't cry because I was embarrassed. Or even because they laughed at me. I cried because I had said something I didn't believe — and because for a second, I did. I had let this job make me cruel. I had let their indifference turn into my despair.

What no one tells you about teaching high school is that the students who drive you to the edge are often the ones you're holding on to the tightest. The ones you make excuses for, advocate for, quietly hope for.

And Danny, Brandon and Eliana? They'd been testing teachers all year. Other educators said, "Don't take it personally." But it felt personal. I had tried not to give up on them.

That day, though, it felt like they gave up on me.

A few days later, Danny stayed after class.

He lingered by the door, shifting from foot to foot. “Do you not like me anymore?” he asked.

He said it casually, like it was a joke. But something in his voice sounded uncertain.

I didn’t hesitate. “People can have disagreements and still care about each other,” I said. “That’s actually part of caring.”

He didn’t respond. But he nodded. His shoulders relaxed. It wasn’t an apology. It wasn’t resolution. But it was something.

A thread of connection. Frayed, but not gone.

In the classroom, they call me “Miss.” “Bruh” when they’re being annoying. “Karen” when they’re being cruel.

But I see them. I see Danny and Brandon and Eliana. I see Ezri, who stares into space and mutters, “Why am I even here?” I see their bravado, their apathy, their deflection — and I recognize it.

Because I wore it once, too.

In high school, I was the fat girl. The loud girl. The girl who cracked jokes before anyone else could insult her. I made teachers cry, too — not because I hated them, but because I was drowning and didn’t know how to ask for help.

Now I stand at the front of a room and see my reflection everywhere. Teenagers trying to protect their vulnerability with sarcasm and disruption. I want to tell them, “You matter. You’re not disposable.” I say it in a hundred different ways: feedback, games, calls home, second chances.

But some days, I wonder if they’ll ever believe me.

Some days, I wonder if I still do.

Still, I come back.

Some days, a student asks, “How are you, Miss?” and I say, “Good,” even when I’m not.

But there are moments that keep me going.

Like when Risa — who rarely submits her work — stood up and gave her presentation in front of the class. No prompting. Just quietly walked to the front and started speaking.

“Thanks,” I said, smiling, trying to keep the pride out of my voice.

“You’re welcome,” she whispered.

I jotted it in my notes like a prayer.

Every small act of effort feels like an offering.

I’ve seen teachers burn out before. I’ve watched them shuffle papers and sigh, say, “I used to love this job.” I’ve said it too. We’re told to care — but not too much. To invest — but stay detached.

Because love in a classroom doesn’t always look like inspiration. Sometimes it looks like trying not to cry while teaching similes. Sometimes it looks like holding boundaries, even when your heart is breaking. Sometimes it sounds like “You’re acting like losers,” said in defeat — and coming back anyway.

And sometimes, it sounds like:

“Do you still like me?”

The answer — even when I don’t say it — is yes.

It’s always been yes.

Loren Kleinman is an educator with two decades of experience in higher and secondary education. She is the co-editor of [If I Don’t Make It, I Love You: Survivors in the Aftermath of School Shootings](#).

What readers are saying

The comments reflect a mix of support and critique for the teacher's handling of the classroom situation. Some commend the teacher for being honest and addressing the students' behavior directly, suggesting that it was necessary for their growth. Others express empathy for the... [Show more](#)

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