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Superman Reminded Me

Many years ago before I was a journalist, I was a high school teacher. At the young age of 24, I was teaching 18-year-old Seniors in the public school system in South Carolina. It sounds so ridiculous now, but back then I didn't think twice about it. I was fresh out of graduate school, and ready for my first classroom experience. Honestly, I don't think about it much these days, but I was reminded this week when I saw the new film *Waiting for Superman*. The film is written and directed by Davis Guggenheim, the same man who brought us *An Inconvenient Truth*. The title sort of throws you off until you see the film, which highlights the plight of the public school system here in the United States. An educator, featured in the film, who grew up in a poor neighborhood, says he was always secretly waiting on Superman to swoop in and save his family and community.

Looking back on my students, I bet many of them dreamed of the same Superman idea. A majority of them came from broken homes, and communities where education was not a priority, so why should they pay attention and stay in school?

It's the age old debate. How do we keep our kids in school and keep them motivated when it's hard enough to get them to class?. Once there, as the film points out, they've got a 50-50 chance that their teacher will actually be a decent teacher. According to Guggenheim, the system is so broken, bad teachers are allowed to stay, even if it's been proven they are performing poorly in the classroom. Everybody knows who they are, but there's nothing administrators can do. The film points to union contracts and tenure, saying they often give teachers a solid spot in the classroom. Good or bad.

Looking back, as a teacher I likely scored points for enthusiasm and creativity. I didn't have years under my belt to know how to deal with lets say, discipline issues, but I know I had passion. I wanted to inspire. Eager beyond words, I was early to work every day. I found that many of my students who were from low income, and single family homes, would come to school early too.

Eventually I realized these kids were showing up early, not because they wanted to be at school, but simply because they needed a friend, a confidant, a teacher, anyone.. They just needed someone to listen.

I didn't teach long, less than 3 years, but I have never forgotten the lessons I learned from the profession. My students taught me that sometimes you don't have to be perfect, you just have to try. You don't have to know all the answers, you just have to be willing to talk it out. And most importantly, they taught me to listen even when I didn't want to.

Waiting for Superman, which opens in theaters in Los Angeles and New York this weekend, reminded me that no matter what profession we have chosen for life, there is always at least one student out there waiting for us to reach out and hold his/her hand. If each of us helps at least one child, we are one step closer to healing the system.