

With Justice For All

DIANE TOWNSEND MURPHY

Lpledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to . . ." My mind and my eyes were transfixed on the small, faded flag. "Stop thinking. Just say the words," I admonished myself.

I kept staring at the dowel holding the flag with staples, then at its metal holders fastened to the old wooden cabinet, a relic encased in layers of paint, each color representing a generation gone by.

"One nation, under God . . ." The recitation of the pledge surfaced again, and I forced my thoughts back to the 6-year-olds, back to the old room in the old school. ". . . with liberty and justice for all!" It was over, and the children slipped happily into a rendition of "God Bless America."

"With liberty and justice for all" hung in the air; here, in this old, damp, run-down room in the old school. I looked back at the happy toothless grins of the children as they unhesitatingly sang their patriotism loud and clear.

Back to Bobby and his dirty shirt more than one size too small; back to Queenie, who has no glue or glitter markers. Back to those who are going to be O.K. because they have advantages — two parents, clean clothes, prepared meals, bows in their hair.

"They all trust us to deliver that justice," my thoughts continued. "Stand beside her and guide her . . ." the song continued. "Yes, guide us," I prayed. "Guide us now as we embark upon the 21st century in 19th century

rooms and teaching styles. Guide us as we teach the haves and the have-nots who must carry this country forward."

"God bless America, my home sweet home," the song was now complete. The children moved to a line at the door and left for lunch. All except Bobby. He grinned at me and said, "I like you." "Thank you, I like you, too," I returned.

"No, I mean it. You smiled at me," he countered.

"Well, you're a nice fellow to smile at," I returned feebly, trying to ward off any suspicion on his part. He grinned again, waved at me, turned, and left the room.

Now I had to gather my thoughts, discuss my observation notes with the intern, make suggestions for improving her teaching, and go along my merry way.

How dare me! How dare anyone sit and observe and make suggestions to people who are trying desperately to teach in situations that have been neglected so long . . . not just the buildings, but the processes as well. How dare any one of us sit and pass judgment while our teachers try to teach space-age children in depression-era buildings with pioneer-age methodology. How dare any one of us offer suggestions while we allow state legislators and governors to forge "blueprint" plans for education with no substance or funding.

Isn't school supposed to be the place that evens the odds for *all*? Isn't school supposed to be the place that takes *all* of us and presents *all* of us with the learning that will provide *all* of us with opportunities? Yes. But is it? No. Those who are born to advantaged areas and families have, in spite of the system, a better chance. Those who aren't, don't.

Who's to blame? Every one of us

who allows the system to continue as it is. Every one of us charged with providing equitable chances for all our citizenry. Every one of us who sits and smiles at the children who trust us.

Yes, Bobby. I mean it. You're a nice fellow to smile at. And more important, you're a nice young man who deserves more than this old room, with old equipment, and antiquated teaching styles. You're a citizen of this country who deserves our dedication to your education, not just acknowledgments of paper dreams. You deserve a real chance to succeed . . . a chance to enjoy liberty and justice for all!

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