



A QUEENS  
COMMUNITY TEACHER  
STORYTELLING PROJECT

NYC'S PUBLIC SCHOOL  
STUDENT ALUMNI  
THAT BECAME THE CITY'S  
LOCAL PUBLIC SCHOOL  
TEACHERS  
& COMMUNITY TEACHERS

*Las Maestras*

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The five teacher-participants/storytellers/las maestras of *A Queens Community Teacher Storytelling Project* are: Alexandra, Christina, Jasmin, Nathalie, and Nia. All self-identify as either Afro-Caribbean or Latina, or a combination of these identities. All five are public school alumni of New York City's public schools and have taught in public schools as well, across a range of subjects, and years of teaching. All five were willing and asked to appear here under their own names.

**Alexandra** (she/her/ella) self-describes as an Afro-Caribbean, Dominican Latina woman raised in Richmond Hill, Queens. She currently still lives within walking distance of her home community. She is an alumnus of PS 54, PS 99, Russell Sage Junior High, and Flushing High School. She is a visual arts teacher who has 14 years of teaching experience and taught visual arts in Astoria for the past 10 years in the same public school. In terms of writing, she wrote a Master's thesis on her journey of becoming an art teacher, and enjoys journaling and self-reflection.

**Christina** (she/her/ella) self-describes as a Colombian/Ecuadorian Latina woman raised in Jackson Heights, Queens. She currently lives in Rego Park, Queens. Christina is an alumnus of the following New York City public schools: P.S. 69 and I.S. 145, both in Jackson Heights, and Fashion Industries in Chelsea, Manhattan. She is an English Language Arts (ELA) high school teacher, and in her fifth (5th) year of teaching. Christina also currently teaches in her own high school alma mater. In terms of writing, Christina enjoys personal journaling.

**Jasmin** (she/her/ella) self-describes as a Honduran Latina woman raised in various parts of New York City, but mainly in Ridgewood, Queens. For the last ten years, she has lived in Woodhaven, Queens. Jasmin is a universal pre-kindergarten (pre-k) teacher in Elmhurst, Queens, and is in her fifteenth (15th) year of teaching. Jasmin, and both of her two children, are alumni of the following New York City public school: I.S. 77 on Cypress Avenue in Ridgewood. In terms of writing, while she does not identify as a creative writing writer, she is passionate about reading and enjoys reading people's creative writing.

**Nathalie** (she/her/ella) self-describes as a Colombian Latina woman raised in Sunnyside and Woodside, Queens. She currently lives in Washington Heights, Manhattan. Nathalie began her teaching career as a vocal coach and an after-school music teacher in her local home community. She is currently the music director of her childhood church in Woodside. Nathalie is an alumnus of the parochial school, St. Teresa RC School in Woodside and St. Raphael RC School in Long Island City, and an alumnus of the following New York City public schools: Fiorello H. LaGuardia H.S. for Music and Art and Performing Arts, located in Queens and Manhattan. In terms of writing, Nathalie is a singer and songwriter who enjoys songwriting and personal journaling.

**Nia** (she/her/ella) self-describes as an Afro-Caribbean Dominican Latina woman raised in her home community of Corona, Queens. During the course of this study and life storytelling project, Nia moved from her lifetime home community to The Bronx and remains teaching in Ridgewood, Queens. She is an alumnus of P.S. 19, I.S. 5, and Townsend Harris High School. Nia is a bilingual speech-language pathologist public school teacher in her tenth (10th) year of teaching. Nia began her teaching career in her home community, and since then, in Ridgewood, Queens. In terms of writing, she does identify as a writer and has previously published non-fiction writing.

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## Alexandra's Life Stories

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### Part 1: Oral Life Stories

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**[“ ...it felt like home but it didn't feel like home.”]**

It's like, it felt like home but it didn't feel like home. But there were layers to that. (interview)

**[“I've watched the neighborhood transition a lot.”]**

I've watched the neighborhood transition a lot.

Because I've lived in the same neighborhood for 40 years.

I've seen it go from like residential and factories to commercial while still staying residential.

You know, the memory that stands out the most to me is...

I spent a lot of time indoors. And looking out that fire escape window is a memory that is so vivid. And looking *into* those backyards and seeing *white* people--with swimming pools, literally golden retrievers. And thinking like, “Wow, I wonder what that's like.”

(interview)

**[“Growing up in Queens New York City...As diverse as Queens can be...”]**

Growing up in Queens New York City straddled a fine line between feeling like home and me feeling like an outcast. As diverse as Queens can be, my pocket of Queens - Richmond Hill (where I was raised) was not as eclectic (at the time).

Richmond Hill felt like home because “home is where the heart is.”

I grew up with an abundance of love and support from my parents, family, and friends.

Feeling like an outcast had to do with a combination of two things.

The first thing was, growing up in a 700 square-foot one-bedroom prewar apartment.

I resided primarily in what was the living room/dining room/family room also known as my bedroom and office until the age of 31.

I felt like I was squeezed into a space; almost like an afterthought. (writing prompt)

**[“The more I started to look like the demographic the more it felt like home?”]**

The second thing was; as far back as I can remember, my neighborhood was predominantly Caucasian, Hasidic Jewish, and African American.

I remember vividly staring out of the second-floor fire escape window (which made it feel kind of like a cage) into the backyards of the houses that are parallel to my building and seeing prefabricated above-ground swimming pools and golden retrievers.

When I would walk up the block going north, the neighborhood was flooded with large Hasidic Jewish families that consisted of 4 or more children.

When I would walk up the block going south The neighborhood was sprinkled with low income African American and Caucasian families, and crackheads.

The only place where there were Latinos were rampant was in the bodegas. They either worked in or owned. Those bodegas were lined up like crabs in a barrel on Jamaica Avenue.

It wasn't till about the mid-90s that Richmond Hill got an influx of West Indian/Caribbean families. The more I started to look like the demographic the more it felt like home? (writing prompt)

**["I am still in Richmond Hill...Yeah, so I've been here my whole life. "]**

My current neighborhood is, it's pretty diverse. I mean, it's similar to where I grew up.

I feel really similar, because if you go, I want to say east, it's Hasidic. And then if you go west, it's it starts getting super diverse. A lot of Latino culture on Jamaica Avenue. So it's mixed, like, Mexican, Peruvian, Arabic as well...

I am still in Richmond Hill. I am half a mile away from where I grew up. Yeah, so I've been here my whole life...

So the neighborhood isn't that much different? But I also think that society as a whole has changed a lot in the past 20 years. You know, so like, the mix is palatable for everybody. (interview)

So it wasn't just about, like the neighborhood, it was also like my home environment. You know, like a combination of those two things, which really affect you: as a child, as a teenager.

I was raised by my parents until my dad passed away at eleven. And when my dad passed away, it was just me and my mom.

But then also like the living situation...it was a 700 square foot apartment.

Even though it was just me and my mom, I never really felt like there was like space for me there. I had to talk myself into feeling at home for...I don't know. (interview, emphasis in voice inflection)

**["...the educational experiences, they kind of fall back a little bit..."]**

So like the educational experiences, they kind of fall back a little bit, because emotionally, I was in disarray. Because I really couldn't identify. And that's really important for teenagers.

Not to mention that, simultaneously, I still had, like, the residual effects of losing my dad. So you know, like, there's a lot of blackout dates. If that makes sense. And there's a lot of things I don't remember from my childhood because of that. (interview)

**["To me, community means coming together..."]**

When I hear "community" the first thing that comes to mind is collaborating, communicating, and consciously empathizing. To me, community means coming together and supporting one another

without judgment. Really “seeing” and “hearing” one another.

In my teaching and my role as a teacher creating/building, community is something that I strive for in my classroom with all of my classes from the first day of school.

As a teacher, I invest a lot of time exploring each students' personal definition of community and explicitly teaching what community is. The process of establishing this culture can be tedious when you have to do it with 180 students across five periods, however it is crucial for us because it sets the classroom tone for the year.

In each class we individually define a community, then in small groups, we create a unanimous definition, and then each group shares their definition and as a class, we come up with a classroom community definition of community.

I believe that my role as a teacher is to facilitate students' learning experiences by teaching them to use the “tools” of communication to articulate their feelings and thoughts in a productive and respectful way. (writing prompt)

**[“...deciding to become an art teacher was definitely inspired by the art teachers that I had.”]**

So, you know, deciding to become an art teacher was definitely inspired by the art teachers that I had.

And I know that there's a question somewhere in the interview where I cross-reference those art teachers. I guess I never really thought about it.

And now in thinking about it--I can't identify all of the similarities--but I could see more parallels in some places.” (interview)

**[“...(my second-grade teacher), she was way ahead of her time with her community involvement.”]**

I remember every single teacher I had from 1st grade to 12th grade.

The teachers that stand out the most in my memory are; Ms. Gilmore (my second-grade teacher), she was way ahead of her time with her community involvement.

With Ms. Gilmore we did a lot of community outreach including visiting nursing homes to bring greeting cards, second grade crafted art projects, and performing seasonal showcases for the elderly.

We also planted trees, went into other neighborhoods in NYC to explore other cultures. (writing prompt)

**[“deciding to become an art teacher was definitely inspired by the art teachers that I had.”]**

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**[“...made me feel proud of my finished art pieces.”]**

The two teachers that were able to identify that I was an artist and help me cultivate my talents were Ms. Hans and Ms. Weiss.

In Ms. Hans' class, I remember very vividly working on a Multimedia collage spider I made with bleeding tissue paper, newspaper, and lace fabric.

In Ms. Weiss' class we did a lot of drawing and painting. She taught me how to appreciate art materials, other artists and made me feel proud of my finished art pieces.

I ended up going to the Fashion Institute of Technology because of her guidance.

In my third year at the Fashion Institute of Technology, I bumped into Ms. Weiss in an art supply store that I worked in and got to thank her ( so much) for the impact she had on my life. We both cried. Wherever she is, I would like to send her love and gratitude. (writing prompt)

**[“The only time being Latina was something that I was proud of...”]**

I was constantly teased because of my height, weight, and hair texture.

I was racially ambiguous and therefore I couldn't identify with anything because I didn't look like anyone. As a result, I never felt black enough, white enough, or Latina enough for the demographic of the schools that I went to.

The only time being Latina was something that I was proud of was when I was helping my white teachers translate something for ESL students in my class. (writing prompt)

**[“I really couldn't identify...And I could never really, like, find my footing.”]**

It wasn't until high school that I experienced more racism. It wasn't so much the teachers, it was more the students.

So, I did mention that like I was never like "Black enough" for the Black girls or "Latina enough" to hang out with the Spanish girls.

And because I went to Flushing High School, it was like, you know, the demographics was super mixed. It was predominantly Chinese, African American, and then Dominican.

And I could never really, like, find my footing. (interview)

**[“...growing up and learning in New York City public schools...”]**

I consider growing up and learning in New York City public schools one of my many privileges.

Because of the choices that my parents made to bring me to this country I have been able to make it to higher education. Had we stayed in rural Dominican Republic I don't think I would have had the same opportunity.

The teachers that work in New York City public schools and help shape you are not perfect because after all, they are people oh, and people make mistakes.

Any unfortunate experience that I lived in New York City Public Schools was ultimately teaching me how to be a better person slash what not to do to other people. (writing prompt)

**“[I became a [art] teacher....”]**

My personal teacher and teacher training journey can be best described as a very long scenic and enjoyable bus ride with intervals of potholes, multiple stops, and a nomadic destination.

I have a visual arts teaching license.

I have worked for the New York City Department of Education/ City of New York For the past 14 years. This includes my teacher training and on-the-job experience.

I started my college career at Queensborough Community College. Went to the Fashion Institute of Technology and majored in graphic design and interior design.

Continued at Queens College and received a bachelor’s secondary art education in fine arts with a concentration in photography and bookmaking.

Followed by a masters in arts teaching at the School of Visual Arts I am certified to teach kindergarten - 12th grade.

I became a teacher after working freelance as a graphic designer & working in the art department of Hurst Publications at 17 Magazine. (writing prompt)

**["Teaching was a change of career for me."]**

Teaching was a change of career for me.

I was formally a graphic designer and got tired of being the only Brown/Latina girl in the office and being in the cubicle. I woke up and quit my job at the magazine and went back to school to pursue a BFA in secondary education and photography; Followed by a MAT ( Masters in Art Teaching).

Right after finishing my master's, I did not want to work. I wanted to make art that advocated **love** and **taking risks** for the benefit of the greater good - happiness and inner peace.

Shortly after finishing my master's I got a phone call from a classmate from graduate school informing me that at the school she was working in they need a second art teacher BUT the caveat was I had to teach two classes out of “license.”

I interviewed, got hired on the spot. Here I am 10 years later. (writing prompt)

**["Being a community teacher is leading with love beginning with loving myself first."]**

What I add and contribute to my school, community, and the Department of Education by being a community teacher is leading with love beginning with loving myself first and extending my self grace for the work that I do on a daily basis.



Facilitating learning for 180 students is no easy feat.

Be mindful & self-aware, take practice and discipline.  
If I am not OK the students will not be OK. (writing prompt)

**“...Becoming a mother made me a better teacher.”**

Yeah, that's another question that I've never thought about explicitly.

But in thinking about it with a prompt, I want to say, “It's me! What I brought to the table was myself, the best version of myself, my perspective, my energy, my insight, my empathy.

And you know, after I became a parent, was when I really realized that I want to treat my students the way I would want teachers to treat my children.

So that was a big shift: becoming a mother made me a better teacher. Um a 100%.

And I just think that, you know, it's kind of like, if there was a--if you had a scale in front of you, it's between that, you know, treating other people's children the way I want my children to be treated, especially when they're having creative experiences. (interview)

**“...that fourth-grade teacher...it was in front of my mom that she said that I was not smart enough to be a teacher.”]**

Like as a student I started off in private school...I was in a Catholic school, and then I transitioned into public school in first grade...

I kind of think like that, you know, elementary school, like fourth grade, is when I experienced my first bit of like racism with that fourth-grade teacher who--she really gave me a hard time.

And it's so crazy, I didn't mention this in the writing, but I had told my mom I was having a hard time with this teacher.

And my mom decided to come in and observe the class for a day. And she just sat quietly in the back and the teacher was so, like, in her own head, that she continued to be verbally abusive, even with my mom in the classroom.

And it was in front of my mom that she said that I was not smart enough to be a teacher.

And what my mom actually did was she pulled me out of that school, and she put me in another school--still in our neighborhood--that just was, you know, according to her, "better." But it was one of the best decisions I think she ever made. (interview)

**“...the lens; like my mom didn't have the awareness...”]**

But I guess the major difference is the lens; like my mom didn't have the awareness that I have. Because, you know, she's an immigrant so her priorities were different.

So for me, it's like, "What can I protect my children from so that they don't go through what I went through?" (interview)

So something that I do with my older daughter that my mother never did with me is that I remind her that her brown skin is beautiful and that her hair texture, which is very curly, is beautiful.

So because you know the climate of the classrooms, and teachers that--it might change a little bit, people might be a little more open to, like diversity, but I feel like it definitely begins with the self, with the personal.

And I teach my daughter to be proud of her culture: like who she is, what she looks like.

And also some, you know, to remind her that not everybody is going to be nice. So if anything, like I try to send her out with not too much armor but just enough to know that, you know, she is loved and she is beautiful.

Because like I said, I think it begins at home to help problem solve, and you know, sort of shield what could potentially happen in the classroom with her peers and you know, eventually teachers.

Because you know, people fuck up. So, I feel like I'm more mindful of that with Olivia because she, she, she's a mixed chick. Like she looks mixed. Similar to like me and my husband.

The baby, I mean, she's still two, a baby, so there hasn't been any experiences yet. (interview)

**["So that was important for me: for her not to get lost in the system...I didn't want her to disappear."]**

[slight laughter] So they're in Catholic school, but that's purely out of two things, you know.

Like, number one is the convenience because the school is two blocks away. And number two, the fact that the classes are smaller. So like Olivia's class size is only 17 students. Versus what happens in the Department of Education, they max 'em out like a 35 or 36, you know, depending who the union rep is.

So that was important for me: for her not to get lost in the system. Which is why I opted into Catholic school. Not necessarily because for the quality of education was going to be better, but I didn't want her to disappear. (interview)

Alexandra expresses acute awareness of how the intersections of her own experiences as a mother makes her a better teacher to her students because of her empathy, and how the amalgamation of her identities and experiences is what makes her an empathic community teacher.

**["...I'm not better than my students...my students are *exactly* like me..."]**

One thing I didn't mention was, like, humbling myself.

I feel like, as a teacher, seeing and experiencing other teachers, or like colleagues, they have this they demand or command respect, without necessarily giving the respect. And also, they see themselves as, you know, like grander than their students.

And the one thing that I've learned, that I tried to turn key, is that, "I'm not better than my students. You know, my students are *exactly* like me, minus the credentials. You know, at some point, they will have the education that I have, maybe, you know, or not. But just because I'm the teacher and I have a master's degree, it doesn't make me better than them, per se, or their parents.

For me, it's about like the human experience, and treating people with love and respect and honoring their individuality. (interview, emphasis in voice inflection)

**[“...most of the staff cannot relate...”]**

When I hear “community teaching“ and “community teachers” a few things come to mind: 1. the high school that I’ve worked for over the past 10 years.

Specifically what comes to mind is how most of the staff cannot relate to the demographic and are disconnected from the majority of the cultures because they cannot relate.

Most of the staff commute from Nassau and Suffolk County. They know almost nothing about Queens and its culture. (writing prompt)

**“Teachers are perceived...”**

Through the eye of the media, community teachers are represented as circus ringleaders with permanent courtesy smiles.

Teachers are perceived as sublime and should not dare make any human mistakes.

By The Department of Education, teachers are not only represented as automatons, they are shamed for having personal lives and prioritizing their families over careers.

In teacher training programs, teachers are represented as leaders and change-makers with all of the tools necessary to work fresh out of their preparation program and change the world.

Despite these erroneous assumptions, I am proud to be a New York City community teacher. (writing prompt)

**“[Being a community teacher means wearing multiple hats...You transition from theory to practice.]”**

What I would like others to know is that being a community teacher means wearing multiple hats.

You do your undergraduate work and your graduate work and specialize in a specific area, and then almost everything changes once you walk into the classroom.

You transition from theory to practice.

Teaching is more than just funneling what you’ve learned in higher education, it's about being relatable, it’s about being human, it’s about extending grace to yourself and the students in your shared space.

And working well with others even, if they don’t know how to work well collaboratively. (writing prompt)

**“[3 things I would like people to know about community teachers and community teaching].”**

“There are 3 things I would like people to know about community teachers and community teaching:

### #1

Teaching is a lifestyle. Yeah, it's your career/work/job, but it is also your lifestyle. So if you think you are walking into a brick and mortar, working 6.5 contractual hours, then going home and marathoning your favorite HBO series- again teaching is not for you. If you feel comfortable knowing that teaching is going to be an extension of who you are for the years that you are teaching, then this is for you.

### #2

Really get to know your students as individuals. Try your personal best not to see them as an OSIS number or last name on your roster. Find out how their day is going, how their weekend was, how their tests were, and other classes going or how was the class before the one you are teaching went. (As often as possible I did a one-word check-in. It looked like this: We would go around the room one word to express how they were feeling at that moment. If students felt compelled they could share why they felt what they felt but it was not mandatory. This activity is like a temperature check and would help me pace my lessons. Because if I knew the climate of my classroom, I knew what they were capable of, in terms of that 48 minute period, so really getting to know your students as people is important because if you connect with them, the productivity outcome will be better.)

### #3

Take care of yourself. If you are not okay, nobody around you is going to be okay. We spend more time with our students than we do with our families. So teachers self-care, and I don't mean like pampering yourself, like getting your nails done and shit. I mean like really taking the time to clear your mind. Maybe seek therapy to help you decompress from how stressful it is to be in the classroom and dealing with other adults in the workspace. (writing prompt)

**“...A love-hate relationship with the school...[and]my passion for building community through teaching creativity and problem-solving].”**

I formally taught at William Cullen Bryant high school. I taught visual arts to 9th-12th graders. The school community is carefully curated by administration.

The neighborhood is mostly residential with small pockets of commercial areas.

I teach at William Cullen Bryant high school because it is the first teaching job I got. I have been comfortable and reluctant to leave. I have a love-hate relationship with the school.

What influences me/continues to influence me teaching at William Cullen Bryant high school is my passion for building community through teaching creativity and problem-solving. Observing students grow and reach creative milestones is very rewarding. My relationships with 99% of my students are positive. Not to brag but I am loved by if not all most of my students.

My relationship with administration is neutral. I respectfully engage and try my best to adhere to their educational policies. My administration runs the school like a dictatorship. There is a message of fear that is used to lead. And there's a double standard between student expectations and teacher expectations.

I have positive interactions with most of my coworkers, especially those that are like-minded. Any coworker that leads with negative energy I respectfully decline to collaborate with. (writing prompt)

**“[Treat people with love and respect and honor their individuality].”**

For me, it's about like the human experience, and treating people with love and respect and honoring their individuality. (interview)

**“[...A major shift for me....in such a complex setting, like a high school classroom in Queens].”**

Leading with love" was a major shift for me. Specifically, after I did this program about four years ago...

“Breathe For Change<sup>1</sup>” is an S-E-L-F/slash/yoga program for educators.  
So it's about teaching social-emotional learning and then facilitating that in the classroom.

And after completing that program, it completely shifted my perspective on the human experience, and what teachers should provide for their students.

Especially in such a complex setting, like a high school classroom in Queens...  
There's just so much going on in there. You have to be ready to handle those situations with *grace* at any given moment.

So I guess--yeah--what I bring is me. And you know, extending grace: to myself, and to my students.

I'm just trying my best to keep the experience of learning as human as possible. (interview)

**“I always did a one-word check-in.”**

...another thing is: really get to know your students.  
As individuals.  
Don't see them as an all OSIS number.

You know: find out how their days were, how their weekend was, how their tests were in another class, or how was the class before this one. Ask them how they're doing.

I always did a one-word check-in.

So I always do a go-around-the-room, you know, “Give me one word to let me know how you're feeling at this moment.”

And that would help me pace my lessons. Because if I knew the climate of my classroom, I knew what they were capable of, in terms of that 48 minute period.

So really getting to know your students, as people, is important. (interview)

**“...driving force for having taught in a New York City public school...”**

I really like people (adults and children). I sincerely enjoy facilitating creative experiences with

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.breatheforchange.com/>

adolescents. I have a passion for the relationship between teaching and learning. Every day in the classroom I learn so much from every class and student. Teaching inspires me. Teaching excites me.

I teach visual art because making art is making magic, and magic is a real driving force. Magic has the power to empower, transform and heal. Being the liaison for this experience is my driving force for having taught in a New York City public school. (writing prompt)

**[“...What did I need?...And that's the experience I always try to provide for my students.”]**

And also, what did I need?

What did I need as a teenager, in a school that was super diverse and you know...  
“What did mini Mercado need as a high school student in an art classroom?”

And that's the experience I always try to provide for my students. (interview)

**[“...The talents that I intrinsically possessed and needed to be cultivated].”]**

Attending New York City public schools always felt like a disservice. It was a very traumatizing time in my formative years, to say that least. I never felt seen or encouraged enough by most of my teachers for the talents that I intrinsically possessed and needed to be cultivated. (writing prompt)

**[“...Being a product of/being raised in New York City public schools...shaped who I am today as a Latinx woman...”]**

Although I have some traumatic experiences/memories connected to my school/school-age years (because of a couple of teachers and bullying related to my complexion and features), being a product of/being raised in New York City public schools, in retrospect, has shaped who I am today as a Latinx woman and contributed to the strengths that I bring into the classroom as a teacher. (writing prompt)

**[“I never stressed PERFECTION...focus on a personal journey...”]**

If there's one thing that I've learned is: it really sucks to judge students based on talent that hasn't been cultivated.

So there are some natural artists, right, for you know, they're just needed--it needs to be cultivated, the talent.

But I feel like what happened to me, and what happens often is that: students and their artistic talents are judged based on, you know, dead white artists. There's no other way to put it. That's just the way the curriculum was written.

So, for me, when I turn-key any art project, I really have students focus on themselves. Like, you know, similar to what you're doing here with this project: focus on a personal journey.

Or make sure that the projects are connected to an aspect of themselves, so that they can get to know themselves better and I can get to know them better as well.

So I constantly, you know, reiterated that the better you know you the better I can get to know you and you know we become closer.

I always paralleled, you know, the 10 months of being in the classroom together as a relationship.

You know, a long-term relationship. So, you know, what can we share with each other, what can we do, so that the ride is smoother.

But I never stressed PERFECTION with any art project. It was really about skill-building, so that students have the confidence. So I was, you know, for me, it's really about empowering them from an artistic standpoint.

And also follow through--finish what you start. Because the art in this room is not about becoming an artist. It's really about teaching them the skills that they need in the world: to finish what you start.

And if you don't know how to do something, you know, ask for help.

So that's always, always been my lens.

It's never been about a beautiful portrait or a beautiful painting. It's, you know, describe the process. Explain how you did that. And, you know, finish it, reflect, and then talk about it. And then be confident enough to share so that you can understand that you're not the only one that, you know, had a struggle, or a triumph in a very specific way. So also, you know, teaching students to connect to each other so that they can you know, see the connections between themselves and their peers.

My mom used to always quote...that no man is an island. So I always stress that in the classroom too: that we need each other.

So even if you don't--you can't relate to the person next to you, or if you don't understand certain aspects of their culture, you know, we still need each other.

And art is a way to bring, you know, adolescents and adults closer in a less guarded way interview)

**“[The invisible labor that I did in my school was...to bring the best version of myself into the school building.]”**

The invisible labor that I did in my school was as often as possible to bring the best version of myself into the school building. Bringing the best version of myself into the school building every day was a practice and not perfect. When you are an educator every minute counts.

I would maximize my use of time by using my 40-minute drive across Queens to clear my mind. I would do this by listening to motivational videos on Youtube by Oprah, Anthony Robbins, Wayne Dyer, Deepak Chopra, and Mel Robbins over and over. At some point they became ingrained and it just became an automatic way of thinking. Doing this helps me remember that my main objective as a teacher is to lead by positive example in any capacity.

One of my main goals was to be the most positive and optimistic person in the classroom space with students and in my interactions with my colleagues.

Being consciously aware of how my energy moves through space with other people is labor-intensive but invisible to others. It involves the discipline to check in with yourself and remind yourself of the role that you play when you're facilitating in a learning environment. (writing prompt)

**“A double standard: [...the rubber band is always about to snap].”**

In the school I worked in, I found that there was a crazy-ass double standard.

So they wanted us to provide emotional support for students with a lot of limitations. But then the same thing wasn't provided for us.

I feel like we were just thrown in, and we had to figure out what to do.

So I think a better--like better facilitation from the leaders for teachers to give them the tools to be more complete and to handle situations that are very complex.

Not assume that just because we're adults we know how to handle shit.

I think that learning is lifelong. And as an educator one of the things that we're blessed with is being able to continue to learn. Because that's how you turn-key new information. As you know, things start to change.

So I wish administration saw things through that lens, and were able to just support us a little bit better. I think that if teachers were better supported, we can better support students. For many perspectives, you know, not just emotional.

To, you know, have the bandwidth. There's no cushion.  
Like the rubber band is always about to snap. (interview)

**[“Art-making and skill-building as a personal experience, not a data-driven end result.”]**

Working in a Title I high school in Queens I often felt that facilitating social-emotional learning through art making was the most beneficial for the majority of my student population.

I frequently turn keyed a component of personal awareness in relation to other individuals in a shared space from a creative angle, which I found helped students build better relationships in the art classroom. These relationships would be based on trust, comfort, and communication.

Administration did not like this approach because I did not have a rubric and could not assess students numerically. Almost always, the Administration would want teachers to be able to collect data and generate data-driven results. I do not think that that would have been impossible. I just did not have the support and/or the know-how to generate the data and share it.

Art making is an especially personal experience. When making art the artist puts a piece of themselves into any art piece that they generate.

Before embarking on any major project, I primarily focused on skill-building on most days by creating milestone assignments so that when students got to the bigger projects (summative assessments) they would have the skills necessary to follow through as successfully as possible. The administration



didn't/doesn't understand that skill-building is an important part of the art-making process. When students acquire skills it empowers them because they feel like they "can" do it.

Administration would focus more on pretty work and multiple art pieces so that the art show every spring would be a "success". I would have felt better supported if administration was less rigid and focused more on the growth mindset for not only the institution as a whole but in the art classroom as well. I would also feel better supported if the administration helped teachers develop teaching skills and flush out curricula that would better suit the population at the school.

Support for a community teacher should look like clear communication, empowering teachers professionally, and strengthening relationships between teachers and administration. (writing prompt)

**[ "...community teachers are represented..." ]**

By the media, community teachers are represented like circus ringleaders with infinite courtesy smiles. Teachers can't make mistakes in any capacity through the eye of the media.

By the The Department of Education they are represented as automatrons/emotionless robots who should not have a personal life or prioritize their family.

In teacher training programs, they are represented as leaders and change-makers with all of the tools necessary to work out of school and change the world." (writing prompt)

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Through the eye of the media, community teachers are represented as circus ringleaders with permanent courtesy smiles. Teachers are perceived as sublime and should not dare make any human mistakes. By The Department of Education, teachers are not only represented as automatons, they are shamed for having personal lives and prioritizing their families over careers. In teacher training programs, teachers are represented as leaders and change-makers with all of the tools necessary to work fresh out of their preparation program and change the world. Despite these erroneous assumptions, I am proud to be a New York City community teacher.

I am a New York City public school teacher because I genuinely like people ( adults and children). I also sincerely enjoy facilitating creative experiences with adolescents. The teaching inspires me creatively and spiritually. I have a passion for the relationship between teaching and learning. Every day in the classroom I learn so much from every class and student. Fourteen years in this lifestyle and career and teaching still excites me. I teach visual art because making art is making magic, and magic is a real driving force. Magic has the power to empower, transform and heal. Being the liaison for this experience is my driving force for having taught in a New York City public school.

Teaching was a change of career for me. Formally a graphic designer, I grew tired of being the only BIPOC in the office and being trapped in the cubicle. One beautiful spring day, I woke up, called my boss, and quit my job at the magazine. After careful thought and consideration, went back to school to pursue a BFA in secondary education and photography. With no breaks after undergrad, I quickly jumped into a Masters in Art Teaching program. After completing my graduate studies, I did not want to work. I wanted to make art that advocated love and taking risks for the benefit of what I consider the greater good - happiness and inner peace. About a month after finishing my master's, I got a phone call from a classmate from graduate school informing me that the school she was working for needed a second art teacher. The caveat was I had to teach two classes out of "license". I interviewed, got hired on the spot. Here I am 10 years later.

My personal teacher and teacher training journey can be best described as a very long scenic and enjoyable bus ride with intervals of potholes, multiple stops, and a nomadic destination. I have a visual arts teaching license. I have worked for the New York City Department of Education/City of New York For the past 14 years. This includes my teacher training and on-the-job experience. I started my college career at Queensborough Community College. Went to the Fashion Institute of Technology and majored in graphic design and interior design. I continued my studies at Queens College and received a bachelor's secondary art education with fine art with a concentration in photography and bookmaking. Followed by a masters in arts teaching at the School of Visual Arts. I am certified to teach kindergarten through 12th grade. I became a teacher after working freelance as a graphic designer & working in the art department of Hurst Publications at 17 Magazine.

I teach visual arts to 9th-12th graders at William Cullen Bryant high school (W.C. Bryant). The W.C. Bryant school community is carefully curated by the administration. W.C. Bryant is located in Astoria/Woodside Queens. The neighborhood is mostly residential, near the school, with pockets of commercial areas. I taught at William Cullen Bryant high school because it was my first teaching position out of graduate school. At W.C. Bryant I was comfortable and reluctant to leave. I have a love-hate relationship with the school. What influences me/continues to influence me teaching at William Cullen Bryant high school is my passion for building community through teaching creativity and problem-solving. Observing students grow and reach creative milestones is very rewarding. My relationships with 99% of my students are positive. I am well-liked by students. My relationship with the administration is neutral. I respectfully engage and try my best to adhere to their educational policies. My administration runs the school like a dictatorship. There is a message of fear that is used to lead. There is a double standard between student expectations and teacher expectations. I have positive interactions with most of my coworkers, especially those that are like-minded. Any coworker that leads with negative energy I respectfully decline to collaborate with.

Working in a Title I high school in Queens I often felt that facilitating social-emotional learning through art making was the most beneficial for the majority of my student population. I frequently turn keyed a component of personal awareness in relation to other individuals in a shared space from a creative angle, which

I found helped students build better relationships in the art classroom. These relationships would be based on trust, comfort, and communication. The administration did not like this approach because I did not have a rubric and could not assess students numerically. Almost always, the administration would want teachers to be able to collect data and generate data-driven results. I do not think that that would have been impossible. I just did not have the support and/or the know-how to generate the data and share it. Art-making is an especially personal experience. When making art the artist puts a piece of themselves into an art piece that they generate. Before embarking on any major project, a primarily focused on skill-building on most days by creating milestone assignments so that when students got to the bigger projects (summative assessments) they would have the skills necessary to follow through as successfully as possible. The administration does not understand that skill-building is an important part of the art-making process. When students acquire skills it empowers them because they feel like they “can” do it. The administration would focus more on pretty work and multiple art pieces so that the art show every spring would be a “success”. I would have felt better supported if the administration was less rigid and focused more on the growth mindset for not only the institution as a whole but in the art classroom as well. I would also feel better supported if the administration helped teachers develop teaching skills and flush out curricula that would better suit the population at the school. Support for a community teacher looks like clear communication, empowering teachers professionally, and strengthening relationships between teachers and administration.

The word “community“ deeply resonates with me. The word “community” echoes collaborating, communicating, and consciously empathizing. Community means coming together and supporting one another without judgment. Sincerely “seeing” and “hearing” one another. In my teaching and my role as a teacher creating/building, the community is something that I strive for in my classroom with all of my classes from the first day of school. As a teacher, I invest a lot of time exploring each students' personal definition of community and explicitly teaching what community is. The process of establishing this culture can be tedious when you have to do it with 180 students across five periods however it is crucial for us because it sets the classroom tone for the year. In each class we individually define a community, then in small groups, we create a unanimous definition, and then each group shares their definition and as a class, we come up with a classroom community definition of community. I believe that my role as a teacher is to facilitate students' learning experiences by teaching them to use the “tools” of communication to articulate their feelings and thoughts in a productive and respectful way.

“Community teaching“ and “community teachers” A few things come to mind; 1. the high school that I’ve worked for over the past 10 years. The first thing that comes to mind is how most of the staff cannot relate to the demographic and are disconnected from the majority of the cultures because they do not know how to. Most of the staff commute from Nassau and Suffolk County. They know almost nothing about Queens and its culture. 2) My undergraduate Professor Dr. Ricki Asher. She taught community explicitly with the content that she shared in class and the community she built among the future educators in the classroom. She told us stories about her international travels. How she would relocate for weeks at a time, and submerge herself in a community that was foreign to her to be able to facilitate children of all ages with art-making experiences. Being a community teacher means wearing multiple hats. You do your undergraduate work and your graduate work and specialize in a specific area, and then almost everything changes once you walk into the classroom. You transition from theory to practice. Teaching is more than just funneling what you’ve learned in higher education it’s about being relatable, it’s about being human, it’s about extending grace to yourself and the students in your shared space and working well with others even if they don’t know how to work well collaboratively.

Public school education shaped my personal evolution. My experiences in public school have helped me become aware of who I am physically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, and creatively. Public school education has taught me how to decipher my interactions with people of all ages. Most importantly, however, as a teacher, my public school education has shaped how I perceive students and the talents that they have not been discovered or cultivated yet. Students' artistic talents are judged based on their ability to duplicate the artworks of dead white artists. Unfortunately, that is just the way the curriculum was written. When I turn-key any art assignment, I have students focus on themselves. Similar to this Community Teacher Story Telling Project Project, students focus on a personal journey. Most of the assignments I have shared with students are

connected to an aspect of themselves with the goal of getting to know themselves better, and in turn, I can get to know them. In the classroom, I consistently reiterated-the better I know you the better I can teach you. I paralleled the 10 months of being in the classroom together as a long-term relationship. I have never stressed perfection with any art assignment. Art is really about skill-building so students can gain confidence and become empowered. In understanding the artistic process students learn the importance of follow-through. I would often emphasize how important it is to finish what you start. I do not see the art classroom as a space to become an artist. I see it as a space to teach students the skills that they need in the world- communication, following through, completing tasks, and learning how to ask for help. Thanks to my public school education this became the lens through which I taught. Artmaking has never been about a perfectly beautiful portrait or painting. I ask students to describe their process, to explain what they did the midway task, complete the task, reflect, be prepared to discuss, and be confident enough to share. The end goal is that students can understand that they are not the only ones that have had a specific struggle, or a triumph. Teaching students to explicitly connect to each other so that they build community by seeing the connections between themselves and their peers. My mother frequently quoted John Doone's "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main". I adopted this philosophy and emphasized we need each other. We are all connected.

Attending New York City public schools always felt like a disservice. It was a traumatizing time in my formative years. I never felt seen or encouraged enough by most of my teachers for the talents that I intrinsically possessed and needed help cultivating. In school, I was constantly teased because of my height, weight, and hair texture. I was racially ambiguous and therefore I couldn't identify with anything because I didn't look like anyone. As a result, I never felt black enough, white enough, or Latina enough for the demographic of the schools that I went to. The only time being Latina was something that I was proud of was when I was helping my white teachers translate something for ESL students in my class. I remember every single teacher I had from first through twelfth grade. The teachers that stand out the most in my memory are; Ms. Gilmore (my second-grade teacher), she was way ahead of her time with her community involvement. Alongside Ms. Gilmore we did a lot of community outreach including visiting nursing homes to bring greeting cards, second grade crafted art projects, and performing seasonal showcases for the elderly. We also planted trees and went into other neighborhoods in NYC to explore other cultures. Mrs. Chimiente (my third-grade teacher) I only remember her because she had a twitch that made it look like she was always winking, which in turn always made me smile. Mrs. Flatower (my fourth-grade teacher) played a vital role in the development of my self-esteem. She was a mega b\*\*\*\*. She picked on/bullied me often, was a fucken racist, and literally told me that I wasn't smart enough to become a teacher. The schooling experiences that stand out the most are the experiences with art-making my art teacher: Ms. Macado (middle school), Ms. Hans (middle school), and Ms. Weiss (high school). The two teachers who identified me as an artist and helped me cultivate my talents were Ms. Hans and Ms. Weiss. In Ms. Hans's class, I remember very vividly working on a multimedia collage spider. The spider was made with bleeding tissue paper, newspaper, and lace fabric. In Ms. Weiss's class, I did a lot of drawing and painting. She taught me how to appreciate art materials, other artists, and made me feel proud of my finished art pieces. I ended up going to the Fashion Institute of Technology because of her guidance. In my third year at the Fashion Institute of Technology, I bumped into Ms. Weiss in an art supply store that I worked in. I thought of her often and was finally able to thank her for the profound impact she had on my life. We both cried. Where ever she is, I would like to send her love and gratitude.

Growing up and learning in New York City public schools had its many challenges, regardless, I consider the experience to be one of my privileges. The choices that my parents made to bring me to this country made it possible for me to pursue higher education. Had we stayed in the rural Dominican Republic, I don't think I would have had the same educational opportunities. The New York City public school teachers that I worked with in my primary and secondary educational years helped to shape the educator I have become. In retrospect, my experience as a New York City public school student groomed me for humanizing educators and understanding that people make mistakes. The unfavorable experiences and memories that I experienced in New York City Public Schools ultimately taught me how to be a better person and what not to do to other people.

Despite my traumatic experiences and memories connected to my school-age years (because of a couple of teachers and bullying related to my complexion and features), being a product of /being raised in New York City public schools - in retrospect, has shaped who I am today as a Latin x woman and contributed to the strengths that I bring into the classroom as a teacher. Mindfully approaching teaching and earning and the relationships I create with students, Forces me to begin each day with this question: “what did mini Mercado need in high school that I can do for my students?”

The invisible labor that I did in my school was to bring the best version of myself into the school building. Bringing the best version of myself into the school building every day was a practice and not perfect. When you are an educator every minute counts. I would maximize my use of time by using my 40-minute drive across Queens to clear my mind. I would do this by listening to motivational videos on Youtube by Oprah, Anthony Robbins, Wayne Dyer, Deepak Chopra, and Mel Robbins over and over. At some point they became ingrained and it just became an automatic way of thinking. Doing this helps me remember that my main objective as a teacher is to lead by positive example in any capacity. One of my main goals was to be the most positive and optimistic person I know inside and out of the classroom space with students and in my interactions with my colleagues. Being consciously aware of how my energy moves through space with other people is labor-intensive but invisible to others. It involves the discipline to check in with yourself and remind yourself of the role that you play when you’re facilitating in a learning environment. What I add and contribute to my school, community, and the Department of Education by being a community teacher is leading with love beginning with loving myself first and extending my self grace for the work that I do on a daily basis. Facilitating learning for 180 students is no easy feat. Be mindful & self-aware take practice and discipline. If I am not OK the students will not be OK. what I brought to the table was the best version of myself, my perspective, my energy, my insight, my empathy. And you know, after I became a parent, was when I really realized that I want to treat my students the way I would want teachers to treat my children. So that was a big shift to like becoming a mother made me a better teacher.

Imagine a teacher preparation course asked you what people should know about community teachers and community teaching. Create a word and visual collage that incorporates what you want people to know.

There are 3 things I would like people to know about Community teachers and community teaching:

### **#1**

Teaching is a lifestyle. Yeah, it's your career/work/job, but it is also your lifestyle. So if you think you are walking into a brick and mortar, working 6.5 contractual hours, then going home and marathoning your favorite HBO series- again teaching is not for you. If you feel comfortable knowing that teaching is going to be an extension of who you are for the years that you are teaching, then this is for you.

### **#2**

Really get to know your students as individuals. Try your personal best not to see them as an oasis number or last name on your roster. Find out how their day is going, how their weekend was, how their tests were, and the classes going or how was the class before the one you are teaching went. (As often as possible I did a one-word check-in. it looked like this: We would go around the room one word to express how they were feeling at that moment. If students felt compelled they could share why they felt what they felt but it was not mandatory. This activity is like a temperature check and would help me pace my lessons. Because if I knew the climate of my classroom, I knew what they were capable of, in terms of that 48 minute period, so really getting to know your students as people is important because if you connect with them, the productivity outcome will be better.

### **#3**

Take care of yourself. If you are not okay nobody around you is going to be okay. We spend more time with our students than we do with our families. So a teacher's self-care, and I don't mean like pampering yourself, like getting your nails done and shit. I mean like really taking the time to clear your mind. Seek therapy to help you decompress from how stressful it is to be in the classroom and dealing with other adults in the workspace.

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## Christina's Life Stories

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### *Part 1: Oral Life Stories*

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**[“...an education nonetheless...a mixture of different ethnicities and cultures...”]**

Ah...so Jackson Heights--if you, or whoever else listens to this--is not familiar with Jackson Heights: part of it is--like 74th Street is considered “Little India,” and 82nd Street is considered “Little Colombia.” And that's based on the amount of businesses that are Indian or Colombian-centric, but also the populations. It's high numbers of people from those parts of the world in those specific parts of Jackson Heights. And then both of them would meld into the elementary schools and junior high schools that I went to, because they were in the same neighborhood. So...it was pretty cool to, you know, as a kid to see so many people that look like me and also to learn about another culture, hands-on.

Um, my, one of my--she became a good friend in elementary school and it developed into a lifelong friendship--we're still best friends to this day. She's from India, and it's because of her that I tried Indian food for the first time, many years ago.

And I don't think that's exclusive to New York City, but I do think it had, it helped the fact that where I was, where I grew up, and who I befriended, and what was available to us, you know.

Like, we, she took me on a tour of “Little India” and took me--she said like, “Here's the best place for, like mango lassies, here's the best place for chicken marsala.” And once we had some money, we actually took a little bit of a restaurant tour.

And I thought that was such a cool experience. Nothing to do with school, but it was an education nonetheless. Where I think...now that I think about it...being in New York City, I think, allowed for that. There are places, where there are, you know, there's a mixture of different ethnicities and cultures.

But it's just so prevalent in New York City, you know, how could you not--right? You can make a bubble for yourself, of course, or live in a bubble, but you also have the option to get out of that bubble of everyone who looks like you and try something new. And oftentimes it can be a wonderful experience. (interview)

**[“...the demographic has been changing slow...”]**

I still see the cultural hubs, right. They're like little enclaves.

They're there, however, the demographic has been changing slowly.

For the last, at least 10 years, there's been more white people, more Black people coming in. There's people of different religions coming in as well, who are setting up their own roots in Jackson Heights.

It's--I do wonder though, now that I'm an adult--I start thinking about things like rent, and real estate, and...the kind of stores that are now in Jackson Heights that weren't there when I was growing up, you know. And that they've come there because certain people have moved into the neighborhood. Like an organic, all organic, healthy supermarket.

In the 90s that wouldn't have appealed to--or at least that's what it was believed--it wouldn't appeal to the demographic of people currently there because either they were not interested or they hadn't heard of these products, or they were just out of their price points, you know. Marked too—they were too expensive.

And now they're there, and I'm thinking, you know, "Everything I'm reading about inflation and the cost of living going up and salaries not matching that rate of cost of living, someone else is moving in with a different income bracket." I have mixed feelings about that, you know. About that and gentrification. I mean, cool, you know, organic supermarkets--but--there is a price to pay. And usually, the people who pay that price are the people who [laughter] can't afford to actually enjoy those kinds of organic or healthy supplies. (interview)

**[“Our parents treat us like little adultos<sup>2</sup>...”]**

A fellow collaborator on this project, said of her experiences growing up that “in many ways, our parents treat us like little adultos.”

Though raised in different households, the idea was the same in my home. Being immigrants and having come to the States with the nebulous dream of their future children receiving an American education, my parents raised my sister and I with the expectations that school grades needed to be high, and of course, we were going to go to college. I thank them for those expectations. (writing)

**[“I didn’t often see teachers that looked like me.”]**

I didn’t often see teachers that looked like me.

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<sup>2</sup> Adults.

Since second grade, I noticed that many of the teachers in my school were white. I respected teachers and I thought how cool it must be to be so educated.

And then I wondered in dismay, is it not possible for people who look like me to be teachers? This is a disheartening thought for anyone, particularly for children who may not have a strong sense of self.

I am a public school teacher because to me, it is meaningful to teach others. (writing prompt)

**[“...a sprinkle...and a lot of white teachers...was there a reason why the majority of my teachers were white?”]**

Growing up in Jackson Heights, Queens, I was mostly surrounded by Latin, Indian, and Eastern Asian children. My educators in the public schools I attended were a sprinkle of Latin teachers, one Black middle school ELA teacher, one Chinese elementary teacher, and a lot of white teachers.

Being something of a teacher’s pet, I wanted to and did form positive relationships with my teachers. But ever-present in my thoughts was the question, was there a reason why the majority of my teachers were white? As a youngster, I remember wondering dismally if it was even possible to see people who looked like me at the front of a classroom.

Two times my thoughts were contradicted were in seventh grade with Ms. Stanley, my ELA teacher, and with Ms. Guzman, my algebra teacher in tenth grade. Ms. Stanley was a Black woman who possessed this unshakeable poise; the kind of poise one would hope to emulate from a self-help book. I had always enjoyed reading, a fact my parents can attest to, having discovered me with a flashlight in one hand and a book in another many a night.

Being in Ms. Stanley’s English class helped me be a more attentive reader, one who considered how characters felt or why the author wrote them that way. I enjoyed her readalouds because she had a soothing voice with just a hint of a lisp. On several occasions, I told myself that I would like to pass on those skills and encourage kids to read for pleasure as Ms. Stanley inspired me.

The second schooling experience that juts out in my memory was in Ms. Guzman’s algebra class, a subject I had sworn to loathe for all eternity. Ms. Guzman was a young professional with a joie de vivre for teaching math to clueless kids like me. Not only was I struck with Ms. Guzman’s youth and energy, but with the fact that she was Latina, and in STEM, an area that was as mysterious to me as the depths of the ocean. (writing prompt)

**[“So I started thinking, “...you give back to the community.”]**

Well, in seventh and eighth grade, in junior high school, I was part of a program... There was a TV studio in my school, in my middle school. It had, what was considered at the time, state-of-the-art equipment. And it was literally a class that kids could sign up to take, but also, they had to be in good academic standing to take it. And I was a nerd, so that wasn’t an issue for me. And, in this class, we learned how to edit videos, how to manage, how to audio correct, you know, like, at least the basics of it before, before the tutorials of today.

We also had to go out--we were literally conducting a cable news show, right, on the local KB cable news. So we would go out and think of stories, like journalists, and then create questions, and then go out and try to find the story, interview actual people in the community. And, so I did that, for several stories, and I *loved* it. That’s why I actually had the idea, “I want to become a journalist.” And...so during these community stories, you know, we like...



Okay, so one I remember was, shortly after 911, we went to interview the firefighters at our local firehouse in--on Northern Boulevard. And they were willing to talk to us, you know, just a bunch of kids recording and asking questions, just like a TV news crew.

They gave us insight into what it's like being firefighters, and especially at that particular time in history. And what it was like to serve and work and live because, you know, when they were at the station, they were living there, in this community. And they liked it. They liked the neighborhood. They liked how the people responded to them. And they liked that...I remember that the one particular firefighter said that he really liked that the neighborhood was always welcoming to them.

Even though some of them lived as far as Long Island, that, you know, when, when they were on the clock, they were living in Jackson Heights. And they felt like they belonged, as well as they--their own neighborhoods. And I just thought that was such a cool sense of community, um, despite people not actually having a permanent address in this neighborhood. So I started thinking, "That's such a cool thing, like you give back to the community."

You know. I always wanted to teach, I knew that too. But I didn't think I was gonna teach in my neighborhood. I thought it was going to travel far and teach but then having those conversations with people in my own neighborhood was like, "Oh, it could happen here too. This is a good school."  
(interview)

**[“...different communities in all five boroughs...”]**

New York City was my enlarged childhood bubble.

As a life-long student within this city's public school system, I had exposure to students and languages from all over the world, field trips to cultural institutions that people dream of visiting one day, and what I thought of as bragging rights because how cool was it to live in "The Greatest City In the World"?

I did not consider major flaws within this public school system such as how money is unequally distributed to schools, based on the zip code they reside in. I was lucky that my elementary and junior high schools were well-funded and had resources such as school supplies, extracurricular activities, and clean hallways.

Although I did not remain in my local neighborhood for high school but rather commute from Queens to Manhattan, I still went to a public school.

At the High School of Fashion Industries, I learned about different communities in all five boroughs and made friends with people from places as foreign as Staten Island. I learned about textiles, designing, and sewing and I was amazed that I was learning something with my hands that could prove to be life skills.  
(workshop writing)

**[“I was always a public school student, from preschool all the way to college ...I learned, “No, all schools are not created equal.”]**

Well...*when* I was a student, I didn't think that schools had--like the way neighborhoods are treated--I didn't think schools were treated differently. I thought: "They're all in the DOE, they're all public schools, they're all the same." In terms of, you know, access and supplies and opportunities.

So I went to what are considered "good schools."

I was always a public school student, from preschool all the way to college. But...I guess that was my own bubble.

I just assumed, "Everything had, everybody had the same."

And then as I got older, I learned, "No, all schools are not created equal.

Some get more funding than others. Some, some get a lot of funding. And some have opportunities that other schools do not. Whether it's different supplies or updated technology or more field trips.

(interview)

**[“...when I became an educator...”]**

And when I became an educator, another thing--like PD opportunities for its staff.

Some schools--well it also depends on the administration, and their policies, like how open are they to having PDs in their school that is actually helpful, useful versus wastes of time?

And how open is an administration to letting staff go to different PDs that might cost them money? You know, because some of the PDs, they can be very expensive. And...if you're not--if your school's not willing to pay for it or cover half the cost or something--that has to come out of your pocket.

But on top of that, the school has to be willing to let you go as a, as a teacher. They have to cover for you; get coverage for that day, which costs them money as well. Some schools are more open than others about that.

That is something I learned as I started my teaching career. (interview)

**[“All schools should be well-funded schools with access to technology.”]**

On a small scale, I hope schools are well funded--all of them, not just some that are considered the "good ones." It does make a difference, you know, what you have access to: whether it's technology or even pencils and pens, and working smart boards. It makes a difference--not just in how you teach but how kids respond. How motivated they are.

So that's a desire for--that I have for all public schools, for community teaching. (interview)

**[“I don't know why a lot of people don't teach in the communities that either they grew up in or live in.”]**

I don't know why a lot of people don't teach in the communities that either they grew up in or live in.

A LOT of teachers teach in the DOE and then leave; go to the suburbs. And, maybe it's because of their own dreams, or because the school districts are better, so the opportunities are better--I don't know.

But that--for people who make the choices to teach in one school and live very far away in another--they have to make a conscious choice. They have to have a willingness to integrate themselves into the community. They teach and sometimes they do.

You know, there's people who, who really, they, they care. They live somewhere else, but they care. Like the firefighters in my childhood neighborhood, or some of my colleagues--actually a lot of my colleagues.

Then there are those teachers who there's no community association, you know, and I think that matters.

Because it helps you understand another aspect of your students: of who they are as human beings, you know. Because the communities that they're a part of, it does shape their identity and their perspective, you know. How they present themselves, how they think, how they speak, how they see the world.

And if you're an outsider, and you make no effort to understand that, there's always going to be this huge disconnect between you and your students. It's just. "I'm here for the job--I. Do your work. Goodbye." But no actual relationship. (interview)

**[“...To me, community is a way of knowing others...be aware and mindful of cultural nuances within that community.”]**

The word community connects people because of a shared identity or common goal. I think of people working together for example in a neighborhood clean-up or shopping locally to support neighborhood businesses.

To me, community is a way of knowing others and developing a sense of trust that they also care about this place (this school, this neighborhood, the people who live here). It's also a way to imprint parts of yourself in a place, either by living there and going about doing daily tasks and errands or making your presence felt and even appreciated by others.

As a teacher, you may or may not live in the community in which you teach, but you certainly make your presence felt in a community because you are tasked with guiding the young ones to learn to think, solve, and build. The kind of dynamic an educator establishes in their classroom will extend beyond the walls of a school.

The type of teacher you choose to be will affect how children and teens feel about their community; are they supported, given structure and lessons? If yes, then students are likely to engage in positive ways with others and to carry themselves with at least some confidence and discipline.

Though it doesn't need to be a requirement for teachers to live in the area they teach, it does create an almost effortless level of camaraderie between students, their families, and their teachers because they are all literally in this place together. There is a level of connection to the community that is simply not there if a teacher is literally and figuratively far removed from the nuances of the community in which they teach.

This is not to say that it's impossible for an educator to feel connected and be accepted by a community they do not reside in, it means that this educator must now make a conscientious effort to be aware and mindful of cultural nuances within that community. (writing prompt)

**[“It is rare to meet a teacher who teaches and lives in the same community.”]**

In my experience, it is rare to meet a teacher who teaches and lives in the same community. From speaking with DOE colleagues who have children and live in Long Island, 'community teachers' are common in the suburbs; there is a strong connection between all schools, teachers, and families because there is a sense of familiarity.

I'd like for others to know that is not the only way to build community bonds. Teachers who teach in but don't live in those communities can integrate themselves into the community by making an extra effort to know its people and its ways.

One example presented itself a few years apart: the summer before I was to begin my student teaching

school year, I taught summer school at Aviation High School in Sunnyside, Queens. That summer, there were students from Aviation and three other Queens' high schools in the school.

I was trying to figure out what to do and how to teach it while working with freshmen students who did not want to be in the school building during summer and had no issues with vocalizing their dismay.

Flash forward three summers later. I walked into a bakery in Forest Hills, Queens for some gelato and behind the counter was one of my more vocal students from that summer. The last time I saw Jose, he was a scrawny and petite child whose voice had not yet acquired the bass he hoped for. The young adult behind the counter was tall with a deep voice. I did not recognize him but he recognized me! I was delighted to learn that he had graduated high school and was going to attend John Jay Criminal Justice College in late August of that summer.

After leaving the shop, I was struck with the thought that although I was only his teacher for that summer years ago, he wanted to tell me of his progress and he wanted me to be proud of him. I was. Despite time and different locations, the kind of relationships you develop with your students creates its own lasting community. (writing prompt)

**[“...my zone school.”]**

After my student teaching year, I was hired at Newtown High School in Elmhurst Queens to teach English Language Arts. The community is a mix of different immigrant populations, with concentrations of Latinos from the Caribbean, Central, and South America, as well as South Asians and Pacific Islanders such as Nepalese, Tibetans, Indians, Bangladeshi, and Filipinos.

I grew up in nearby Jackson Heights, which made Newtown High School my zone school. Though I did not attend the school as a student, I was familiar with its stately and castle-like appearance and thought to myself that it must be so cool to go to a school steeped in history. Because of where I grew up, my students have asked me about my own coming of age stories and were delighted when I would mention a locale that they too were familiar with. In this sense, I was a member of this community just by association.

One of my deciding factors in choosing to work at Newtown was that I liked the surrounding community it was a part of. I taught at Newtown for four years... (writing prompt)

**[“...the sense of community...as an internal effort of school spirit.”]**

I then decided to transfer to my own alma mater in the city, High School of Fashion Industries. I wanted to expand my craft and I wanted to teach different classes.

The population at my new school comes from all five boroughs so there isn't a single majority. Due to this much wider net for a population, the sense of community does not come from the school's relationship to the neighborhood, but rather as an internal effort of school spirit. My new school has a notable staff of former students, alumni of different ages, in different teaching fields from patternmaking to English Language Arts. When my students learned that I too, graduated from the same school they are currently attending, it impressed them. I would like to think this new knowledge could inspire students who viewed graduation as an abstract and even unreachable goal as something attainable because they know someone who ventured through the path they are on. (writing prompt)

**[“So, that became another community...”]**

So, that became another community: a community of alumni staff.

So, when the kids learned that I actually graduated from the school that they are now attending it--it did--it visibly sparked some interest for them. Because I am walking proof: "Hey, you're going to graduate high school and you're going to be fine. You might even be stylish," because I try to be.

And um, I think just reinforcing that. Like when I, when I bring little anecdotes into the classroom about, "Oh, when I was in the 10th grade, I was in this room actually and this happened."

And you know, and it's sometimes, it's really big experiences like, "Oh, I was in the school play all these years ago, or the school fashion show." Or it could be really small things like, "Yeah, I also struggled in chemistry and I ended up having to go to summer school." That one actually seems to be, ironically, one of my biggest failures is, uh, a connector for them.

And that creates...I didn't use the word community in my mind when that happened... when I revealed I did end up going to summer school, because I flunked chemistry...in 10th grade. But it suddenly developed this almost like a camaraderie with the students. The students were struggling, particularly, because, you know, it's not like, "You're going to summer school and that's it: schools over, life is over." It was a mistake and a chance to do it better, and finish that subject in the summer rather than another school year."

And, just *that* experience, from someone, you know, not making it up--having actually been in it--helped kids, or at least a few of them, realize, "It's gonna be okay, I'm struggling academically, but I can get better. I could even teach others in the future. (interview)

**["...different life skills that they're going to take with them, beyond passing a test..."]**

...I had previously participated in the drama club at Newtown. And, as a co-director, I was there to help..pretty much any capacity I could...

We did "In the Heights" and you know that play, it has a lot of Spanish. It has Spanglish but it also has a lot of Spanish inflection on certain words. And some of our kids don't, didn't speak Spanish. So I was helping them practice their lines and perfect their accents. And you know that--they appreciated that because, you know, it was private. It was patient, I was patient with them, and they were willing to try.

One student, she was very nervous, because she didn't speak Spanish *at all*. And her role called for saying several phrases in Spanish. So she and I would practice those phrases. And when she was about to graduate, she thanked me for that. You know, when I was writing in her yearbook, she actually said, "Thank you so much for taking the time to just practice those few lines with me so that I could pronounce it correctly in Spanish.

I've also had a writing workshop--I've conducted that after school--where kids would either come in for help with their homework. If they needed something like--specifically English--because I was *no* help in Math class. If it had been a math subject, then nope. [slight laughter] But to help kids improve their writing as well.

So...having a presentation, you know, putting on that show, that's different life skills that they're going to take with them, beyond passing a test. How to learn this material, how to present it, how to think about getting in this character's mind, how to develop the confidence to do something that was probably terrifying for a lot of them.

That they're going to take into their communities; not just their school community but beyond as well.” (interview)

**[“...Invisible labor goes beyond contractually-obligated hours and classroom walls.”]**

Even with strong boundaries for your time, invisible labor goes beyond contractually-obligated hours and classroom walls.

Planning and mapping a curriculum and its scope, creating daily lesson plans, grading with specific and actionable feedback in a timely fashion, filling out individualized education programs or IEPs, keeping a tidy and organized classroom all take time. I have color-coded hanging folders in my classroom for each class. In there, I put handouts based on the day they were used so that previously absent students simply walk over to them and pluck what they need.

Instructing kids on seemingly simple routines in class to make things easier takes invisible planning and organizing on my part.

I will only speak for myself in that I do not accomplish all that needs to be done during my contractual hours. It may be a failing on my part for not being fast enough.

When I co-directed the drama club, my co-director and I spent hours thinking of how to stage block, assembling props and costumes, working individually with students on how to improve their roles and performances, and planning everything else needed to make the show go on. (writing prompt)

**[“ ...teaching journeys and preparation...”]**

Hmm...[slight pause] I suppose it's connected, but I didn't really bring it up: about teaching journeys and preparation.

I think we should incorporate in these teaching prep courses, something about implicit bias, and, "Hey, let's, let's reenact some situations, some scenarios, that way when, if and when, they present themselves in real life, you're not *completely* overwhelmed and thrown off guard, because you have NO idea how to respond appropriately."

That is something that's—it's not mentioned at all. It's very theoretical when you're in grad school, and that's nice and all, you know, learning about things like zone of proximity learning.

Cool. But, I'll be honest with you, I've never considered that term once I graduated school and was actually in the classroom. I wasn't thinking, "Oh, you're in zone three, you're in zone five." You know, I didn't think about it like that. (interview)

**[“No book or theory could teach that, only stepping into a classroom and experiencing a million tiny triumphs and heartbreaks can.”]**

Graduate school presents much research and theory about how to teach; it presents nothing about connecting with the students before you.

No book or theory could teach that, only stepping into a classroom and experiencing a million tiny triumphs and heartbreaks can.

Ask questions of your students and your colleagues, participate in extracurriculars or show up to school

events because it is in those areas that students further see you not only as their teacher, but as a welcomed member of their school community.

An example: a student who made it a habit to cut class at least once a week but showed up to the pep rally in which students and staff played a fierce game of volleyball, saw me serving against the students. The next day, she came to class, congratulated me as well as my colleagues for our victory, and for the next two weeks, did not cut class.

Tiny triumphs indeed. (writing prompt)

### **["Community teachers in the media."]**

I enjoy watching films that focus on a struggling teacher and their only large and disruptive class because the teacher portrayals are often inaccurate. No teacher has just one class in which they can dedicate all their efforts and mental energy.

I agree that being in this profession is a calling; you have to consider all your students' academic levels from lowest to highest, how to reach, support, scaffold, and challenge them, how to look for signs of deep struggles and connect them to the correct supports, as well as how to develop relationships with them so that they learn to trust you and want to try their best.

Having a solid and trusting relationship with your students makes a world of a difference. Not everyone is willing to consider all of this when walking into a classroom. And not considering this leads to tension and failure.

With all of that being said, without explicitly stating so, media portrayals of teachers is often one of a martyr - one who is an undying teacher and nothing more. When it's a martyr depiction, teachers are publicly celebrated for their efforts in teaching other people's children. However, when teachers vocalize struggles with classroom sizes, low pay, or the negative pressure standardized testing has on students as well as teachers paid based on score outcomes, teachers are vilified as entitled and lazy complainers who have summers off, so why are they whining?

Pedagogy programs do not address this public dichotomy, nor do they focus on how teachers can show up for themselves and take care of themselves. Perhaps these programs, like a lot of people, do not know how to. (writing prompt)

### **["...two of them were people of color who would've become math and social studies high school teachers...but had to quit."]**

In 2016 I was stuck in a temp job by choice. The pay was low, there were no benefits except one: I worked with my best friend who also became my partner.

I was considering the Teaching Fellows program but my partner discovered a different pathway to certification so I enrolled in the Urban Teacher Residency or UTR program at the Hunter College School of Education. Compared to the Fellows program, the UTR program had more structure and support, which as a graduate student and teacher, I absolutely needed.

My teaching journey has a component I'm sure is often experienced but rarely discussed; the overwhelming expectations coupled with the low starting pay. Although the teaching program I undertook paid a stipend, it was far too little for someone to live on their own with no other means for financial help.

As a result, there were three candidates who I think would've made strong teachers one day but had to quit because they were not making enough money to sustain themselves in a place as expensive to live as New York City. Two of them were people of Color who would've become math and social studies high school teachers. (writing prompt)

**“[...it is classroom teachers...who know...]”**

I have seen people who are not teachers question, disagree, and make decisions about teachers, their teaching styles, and their pace when covering material.

It is disheartening to say the least when that happens. Policies and decisions made by such individuals are not considering the micro-community within the walls of a classroom but rather, budgets and optics.

Better support starts with listening to the teachers because they know their students better than the visitors who make final-say decisions. It is classroom teachers, not administrators or policymakers, who know at what pace they need to go so that they are teaching, supporting, and challenging their students. (writing prompt)

**“[In my teaching journey, much of my academic pedagogy read as sterile...]”**

*A Word: Observant*

A teacher prep course that tells teachers what to know about community teaching:

There are issues in this community, there are issues affecting this community. Your students are members of this community and therefore, are living with these issues to an extent or another. You cannot ignore the issue, the dynamic, the perspective that your students live.

Not only community issues, but current events.

How to be observant?

I think such a teacher prep course would not have a one-size fits all approach - there would be instructions on how to be culturally sensitive and aware, mindful of your own voice and how it can be similar or different from that community's identity and a way to persevere through discomfort.

There would have to be a direct approach to understanding implicit biases and why we have the ones we do - going back to facing discomfort.

In my teaching journey, much of my academic pedagogy read as sterile and was not often applicable to the children before me.

What can high school teachers learn from preschool teachers?

Look at the whole child.

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*Christina*

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Growing up in Jackson Heights, Queens, I was mostly surrounded by Latin, Indian, and Eastern Asian children. My educators in the public schools I attended were a sprinkle of Latin teachers, one Black middle school ELA teacher, one Chinese elementary teacher, and a lot of white teachers. Being something of a teacher's pet, I wanted to and did form positive relationships with my teachers. But ever-present in my thoughts was the question, was there a reason why the majority of my teachers were white?

As a youngster, I remember wondering dismally if it was even possible to see people who looked like me at the front of a classroom. Two times my thoughts were contradicted were in seventh grade with Ms. Stanley, my ELA teacher, and with Ms. Guzman, my algebra teacher in tenth grade. Ms. Stanley was a black woman who possessed this unshakeable poise; the kind of poise one would hope to emulate from a self-help book. I had always enjoyed reading, a fact my parents can attest to, having discovered me with a flashlight in one hand and a book in another many a night. Being in Ms. Stanley's English class helped me be a more attentive reader, one who considered how characters felt or why the author wrote them that way. I enjoyed her read alouds because she had a soothing voice with just a hint of a lisp. On several occasions, I told myself that I would like to pass on those skills and encourage kids to read for pleasure as Ms. Stanley inspired me. The second schooling experience that juts out in my memory was in Ms. Guzman's algebra class, a subject I had sworn to loathe for all eternity.

Ms. Guzman was a young professional with a *joie de vivre* for teaching math to clueless kids like me. Not only was I struck with Ms. Guzman's youth and energy, but with the fact that she was Latina and in STEM, an area that was as mysterious to me as the depths of the ocean.

A fellow collaborator on this project, said of her experiences growing up that "in many ways, our parents treat us like little adults." Though raised in different households, the idea was the same in my home. Being immigrants and having come to the States with the nebulous dream of their future children receiving an American education, my parents raised my sister and I with the expectations that school grades needed to be high, and of course, we were going to go to college. I thank them for those expectations.

The word community connects people because of a shared identity or common goal. I think of people working together for example in a neighborhood clean-up or shopping locally to support neighborhood businesses. To me, community is a way of knowing others and developing a sense of trust that they also care about this place (this school, this neighborhood, the people who live here). It's also a way to imprint parts of yourself in a place, either by living there and going about doing daily tasks and errands or making your presence felt and even appreciated by others. As a teacher, you may or may not live in the community in which you teach, but you certainly make your presence felt in a community because you are tasked with guiding the young ones to learn to think, solve, and build. The kind of dynamic an educator establishes in their classroom will extend beyond the walls of a school. The type of teacher you choose to be will affect how children and teens feel about their community; are they supported, given structure and lessons? If yes, then students are likely to engage in positive ways with others and to carry themselves with at least some confidence and discipline.

Though it doesn't need to be a requirement for teachers to live in the area they teach, it does create an almost effortless level of camaraderie between students, their families, and their teachers because they are all literally in this place together. There is a level of connection to the community that is simply not there if a teacher is literally and figuratively far removed from the nuances of the community in which they teach. This is not to say that it's impossible for an educator to feel connected and be accepted by a community they do not reside in, it means that this educator must now make a conscientious effort to be aware and mindful of cultural nuances within that community.

New York City was my enlarged childhood bubble. As a life-long student within this city's public school system, I had exposure to students and languages from all over the world, field trips to cultural institutions that people dream of visiting one day, and what I thought of as bragging rights because how cool was it to live in, "The Greatest City In the World"? I did not consider major flaws within this public school system such as how money is unequally distributed to schools, based on the zip code they reside in. I was lucky that my elementary

and junior high schools were well-funded and had resources such as school supplies, extracurricular activities, and clean hallways. Although I did not remain in my local neighborhood for high school but rather commute from Queens to Manhattan, I still went to a public school. At the High School of Fashion Industries, I learned about different communities in all five boroughs and made friends with people from places as foreign as Staten Island. I learned about textiles, designing, and sewing and I was amazed that I was learning something with my hands that could prove to be life skills.

From childhood, I wanted to teach. There was a profound sense of joy and accomplishment in being able to teach someone something, see them think about it, and apply that knowledge to their lives. There were two defining moments in which I knew I should be a teacher: when I taught my best friend to ride a bicycle and when I taught my partner how to drive.

In 2016 I was stuck in a temp job by choice; the pay was low, there were no benefits except one, I worked with my best friend who also became my partner. I was considering the Teaching Fellows program but my partner discovered a different pathway to certification so I enrolled in the Urban Teacher Residency or UTR program at the Hunter College School of Education. Compared to the Fellows program, the UTR program had more structure and support, which as a graduate student and teacher, I absolutely needed. My teaching journey has a component I'm sure is often experienced but rarely discussed; the overwhelming expectations coupled with the low starting pay. Although the teaching program I undertook paid a stipend, it was far too little for someone to live on their own with no other means for financial help. As a result, there were three candidates who I think would've made strong teachers one day but had to quit because they were not making enough money to sustain themselves in a place as expensive to live as New York City. Two of them were people of color who would've become math and social studies high school teachers.

In my experience, it is rare to meet a teacher who teaches and lives in the same community. From speaking with DOE colleagues who have children and live in Long Island, 'community teachers' are common in the suburbs; there is a strong connection between all schools, teachers, and families because there is a sense of familiarity.

I'd like for others to know that is not the only way to build community bonds. Teachers who teach in but don't live in those communities can integrate themselves into the community by making an extra effort to know its people and its ways.

One example presented itself a few years apart: the summer before I was to begin my student teaching school year, I taught summer school at Aviation High School in Sunnyside, Queens. That summer, there were students from Aviation and three other Queens' high schools in the school. I was trying to figure out what to do and how to teach it while working with freshmen students who did not want to be in the school building during summer and had no issues with vocalizing their dismay. Flash forward three summers later. I walked into a bakery in Forest Hills, Queens for some gelato and behind the counter was one of my more vocal students from that summer. The last time I saw Jose, he was a scrawny and petite child whose voice had not yet acquired the bass he hoped for. The young adult behind the counter was tall with a deep voice. I did not recognize him but he recognized me! I was delighted to learn that he had graduated high school and was going to attend John Jay Criminal Justice College in late August of that summer. After leaving the shop, I was struck with the thought that although I was only his teacher for that summer years ago, he wanted to tell me of his progress and he wanted me to be proud of him. I was. Despite time and different locations, the kind of relationships you develop with your students creates its own lasting community.

I didn't often see teachers that looked like me. Since second grade, I noticed that many of the teachers in my school were white. I respected teachers and I thought how cool it must be to be so educated and then I wondered in dismay, is it not possible for people who look like me to be teachers? This is a disheartening thought for anyone, particularly for children who may not have a strong sense of self. I am a public school teacher because to me, it is meaningful to teach others. I know that my presence and how I carry myself will

dispel similar thoughts in younger folks. At a parent-teacher conference one cold November night several years ago, two parents said to me “thank you for choosing to become a teacher” after I was able to extoll their child’s academic progress and how lovely their child was in Spanish.

After my student teaching year, I was hired at a high school in Northeastern Queens to teach English Language Arts. The community is a mix of different immigrant populations, with concentrations of Latinos from the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as South Asians and Pacific Islanders such as Nepalese, Tibetans, Indian, Bangladeshi, and Filipinos. I grew up in nearby Jackson Heights, which made this high school my zone school. Though I did not attend the school as a student, I was familiar with its stately and castle-like appearance and thought to myself that it must be so cool to go to a school steeped in history. Because of where I grew up, my students have asked me about my own coming of age stories and were delighted when I would mention a locale that they too were familiar with. In this sense, I was a member of this community just by association.

One of my deciding factors in choosing to work at this high school was that I liked the surrounding community it was a part of. People seemed to care about the school. I taught at my previously zoned high school for four years, then decided to transfer to my own alma mater in Chelsea, the High School of Fashion Industries. I wanted to expand my craft and I wanted to teach different classes.

The population at my new school comes from all five boroughs so there isn’t a single majority. Due to this much wider net for a population, the sense of community does not come from the school’s relationship to the neighborhood, but rather as an internal effort of school spirit. My new school has a notable staff of former students, alumni of different ages, in different teaching fields from patternmaking to English Language Arts. When my students learned that I too, graduated from the same school they are currently attending, it impressed them. I would like to think this new knowledge could inspire students who viewed graduation as an abstract and even unreachable goal as something attainable because they know someone who ventured through the path they are on.

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I enjoy watching films that focus on a struggling teacher and their only large and disruptive class because the teacher portrayals are often inaccurate. No teacher has just one class in which they can dedicate all their efforts and mental energy.

I agree that being in this profession is a calling; you have to consider all your students’ academic levels from lowest to highest, how to reach, support, scaffold, and challenge them, how to look for signs of deep struggles and connect them to the correct supports, as well as how to develop relationships with them so that they learn to trust you and want to try their best. Having a solid and trusting relationship with your students makes a world of a difference. Not everyone is willing to consider all of this when walking into a classroom. And not considering this leads to tension and failure.

With all of that being said, without explicitly stating so, media portrayals of teachers is often one of a martyr - one who is an undying teacher and nothing more. When it’s a martyr depiction, teachers are publicly celebrated for their efforts in teaching other people’s children. However, when teachers vocalize struggles with classroom sizes, low pay, or the negative pressure standardized testing has on students as well as teachers paid

based on score outcomes, teachers are vilified as entitled and lazy complainers who have summers off, so why are they whining?

Pedagogy programs do not address this public dichotomy, nor do they focus on how teachers can show up for themselves and take care of themselves. Perhaps these programs, like a lot of people, do not know how to.

Graduate school presents much research and theory about how to teach; it presents nothing about connecting with the students before you. No book or theory could teach that, only stepping into a classroom and experiencing a million tiny triumphs and heartbreaks can. Ask questions of your students and your colleagues, participate in extracurriculars or show up to school events because it is in those areas that students further see you not only as their teacher, but as a welcomed member of their school community. An example: a student who made it a habit to cut class at least once a week but showed up to the pep rally in which students and staff played a fierce game of volleyball, saw me serving against the students. The next day, she came to class, congratulated me as well as my colleagues for our victory, and for the next two weeks, did not cut class. Tiny triumphs indeed.

Even with strong boundaries for your time, invisible labor goes beyond contractually-obligated hours and classroom walls. Planning and mapping a curriculum and its scope, creating daily lesson plans, grading with specific and actionable feedback in a timely fashion, filling out individualized education programs or IEPs, keeping a tidy and organized classroom all take time. I have color-coded hanging folders in my classroom for each class. In there, I put handouts based on the day they were used so that previously absent students simply walk over to them and pluck what they need. Instructing kids on seemingly simple routines in class to make things easier takes invisible planning and organizing on my part.

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## Jasmin's Life Stories

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### *Part 1: Oral Life Stories*

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**["The neighborhood is really changing..."]**

And growing up in Ridgewood was nice.

It was a nice neighborhood, um, you can go outside and you can feel safe.

Everyone kind of knew each other, you knew your neighbors.

Now the neighborhood's changed a little though.

Now it's not as community-based.

The neighborhood is really changing.

You know, you have a lot of bars for hipsters, you have a lot of beer gardens, a lot of breweries, in the same factories where like some of my friend's parents worked that are now being turned into like breweries. Next to my mom's house, there's a brewery that used to be a factory.

So, you know, the neighborhood's changing. (interview)

**["Okay, this is my community..."]**

So growing up in--well I grew up in Ridgewood.  
I came to Ridgewood when I was 12.

But growing up, as you know, I went to many different schools.  
So it was like six months here, a year here, a year there.

So finally when I got to Ridgewood, it was like, "Okay, *this* is my community."

Like, if you ask me, "Where did I grow up?"  
Even though I didn't really grow up there because I got there when I was 12  
...and I went straight into junior high school.

But you know, I feel like that's where I grew up, like, that's my community, in Ridgewood. (interview)

**["...the first time I felt a sense of community..."]**

By the age of twelve, I had already lived in Honduras twice and attended six different schools in three different boroughs before landing in Queens.

My hero who raised me as a single mom did the best she could, sometimes working two jobs a day as a cleaning lady. She never truly spoke English just barely enough to get by. I remember she tried helping me with homework as best she could and would get frustrated when I didn't understand something. She would tap me on the head with her knuckles and say, "Bien, que para las novelas si tenes cabeza." Which translates, "you do have a good head when it comes to soap operas."

The earliest memories I have of my schooling experience are from fifth grade. Ms. Jackson, my fifth-grade teacher, had Reeboks in every color that she would wear every single day with a matching t-shirt. I remember that when she got upset she would take one of them off and fling it across the room.

Sixth grade was spent between two different schools. The first half was spent in uptown Manhattan and the second half in the Bronx, and not the nice neighborhood either. This neighborhood was so bad my mother opted out of putting me in Catholic school for the six months we lived there.

We then finally landed in Ridgewood, Queens. By the time we moved to Queens, I was almost 13 years old and ready to claim some freedom. I was the new kid in my seventh-grade class. I quickly became friends with all the popular kids.

Intermediate School 77 in Ridgewood, Queens, who would've thought that this would be the same intermediate school both my children would attend themselves. The school was located just two blocks up from my house. This was the first time I felt a sense of community.

I lived in the same three-bedroom apartment for 23 years.  
My childhood friend's kids went to school with my kids and some of my old teachers became my kid's teachers.

I always held those teachers with the highest regard.  
But even though those teachers were great teachers none of them looked like me. (writing prompt)

**[“Children need to see their faces in our faces...”]**

When I hear the term “community teaching” I think about myself and how I feel I’m making a difference.

From speaking the same language to sharing the same experiences this is what community is all about. We need more community teachers to share their experiences with their community.

Children need to see their faces in our faces and learn that they can grow to become whatever they want. (writing prompt)

**[“I think of how a sense of community is so important...”]**

“When I hear the word community I think of a group of individuals that share the same beliefs and values.

I think of how a sense of community is so important.

I didn’t come to have this sense of community until I...when we moved to Queens.

I understand that we moved a lot out of necessity but I was always sad to leave friends behind and missed out on having this sense of community. (writing prompt)

**[“Being a community teacher...it’s a different level of connectedness.”]**

Working in my own community is important to me because I want to invest in my own community. I want my community to thrive and succeed.

Being a teacher in my own community gives me a different level of understanding about my student’s livelihoods. I know about where they shop, where they eat, where they worship and congregate.

It’s a different level of connectedness.

Parents are more receptive to becoming partners in their child’s education when they can relate to their child’s educators and vice versa when they know the educators can relate to them.” (writing prompt)

**[“...we do it for a different type of wealth.”]**

I am a New York City public school teacher because I want to make a difference. We’re not public school teachers to get rich. We do it for a different type of wealth. We do it because it makes us feel good and fulfilled. To see a child learn something new or their eagerness to learn is all the richness we need. (writing prompt)

**[“I am very proud to be a product of the public school system and now a teacher in that same system.”]**

I am very proud to be a product of the public school system and now a teacher in that same system.

We are afforded the opportunity to be able to go to school which can’t be said of all other countries. I think having had a public school education has made me more humble and appreciative.

When I went to school we all got the same instruction. Not to say all teachers are rockstars. But it didn't matter if your parents owned a home or you lived in a cramped three-bedroom apartment you were all afforded the same opportunities.

NYC public schools taught me that teachers can be rockstars and they make such a difference in a child's life.

I had amazing teachers who taught me to appreciate my uniqueness.  
And I had horrible teachers who blatantly told me they were just there for the paycheck. But these horrible teachers taught me something.  
They taught me what not to aspire to be.  
They taught me that you can really have an impact on a child's life.

And this made me realize that I wanted to have an impact, a positive one. (writing prompt)

**[“...I kind of stumbled into...”]**

Growing up not too many teachers looked like me. Being a teacher was not something I aspired to be at a young age, it is something I kind of stumbled into. (writing prompt)

**[“Growing up I didn't dream of becoming a teacher...”]**

I have been an early childhood teacher for about 15 years now.  
I've taught kindergarten, first grade, and for the past seven years, I have taught pre-kindergarten which is where my heart is.

But this was not always a lifelong dream of mine. Growing up I didn't dream of becoming a teacher.  
(writing prompt)

**[“One of my favorite subjects has always been math...But even then teaching was not something I considered.”]**

Facilitating information always came easy to me. Even as early as Elementary and Junior High School I remember helping my classmates with difficult content they didn't understand, especially in math.  
(writing prompt)

One of my favorite subjects has always been math. It came easy to me and I even enjoyed teaching it to my friends who seemed to struggle with it. But even then, teaching was not something I considered.

I always thought a career involving mathematics was in the cards for me. Maybe a CPA that only worked half the year.

But after a few life choices, it became apparent to me that that was my calling. After getting a BA in Psychology I struggled with what career path to take. (writing prompt)

**[“My teaching journey...”]**

My teaching journey was not perfectly mapped out.

I came to be a teacher as a result of many life decisions. I had two beautiful children at a very early age. This shaped my career goals in that I didn't just think about what would make me happy but rather what

career path would let me provide for them and would not take me away from them as much.

I have no regrets and I know that teaching was always what I was meant to do even if I didn't always know it. (writing prompt)

**[What...“propelled me well as an Early Childhood Teacher...”]**

I had two small children at home whom I raised as a single mom. It was suggested to me to become a substitute teacher which at the time seemed like a great idea. The hours and flexibility it provided were convenient for me.

I later got a job as an assistant teacher at a daycare center working with 3 and 4-year-olds. This fostered the love I now have for early childhood education. While working at the daycare I pursued a Masters in Early Childhood Education.

Watching my two young children at home coupled with the learning going on at the daycare center propelled me well as an Early Childhood Teacher. (writing prompt)

**[“...Being mindful of what kids have and don't have...”]**

So...like you rephrasing the question...Now what comes to mind...my mom raising me as a single mother. Like when I had to go on trips and things like that. Like she didn't really have money to buy like a nice lunch or whatever. [slight laughter] And she would pack me a pack of, a little can of Vienna sausages, and like a little piece of bread or something, and it's like...that was lunch and it was delicious.

So like, being mindful of, like, what kids have and don't have. You know, and providing.

...that understanding of knowing like their living environment, their household environment. Coming from working parents, that can't always be there and take off, and be part of school or any activity that we have in school. Being mindful of and respectful to that they have to make a living. If they don't work--some people don't have that luxury of having sick days, and just being able to take off at the drop of a hat, because they have to be part of a child's activity at school.

So, just being aware and just knowing.

Like, I had the same upbringing. I had the same dynamics. I lived with many people in my house. My house was almost like a shelter. It was like, anybody who needed a place to stay my mom would just take them in. And thank God, like for some reason, we always had space, and we always made it work.

Some people are judgmental when the kids share, like, “Oh, my aunt lives with me, and my cousin lives with me.” And they're like, “Oh my god, you know, it's like 10 people in an apartment.” And, yeah, it is 10 people in an apartment because it's--because they have the necessity. They're going through something. This might not always be the case, but this is the case right now.

The family helps each other out.

And just being understanding to that dynamic, the family dynamic, and their environment at home. Being able to understand that they might not always have their own space to work on their homework or to do things for school. Or they might have a lot of sisters and brothers, and they might have to share the materials. It's just being mindful of those things. Not like, “Oh it's just mommy and daddy and no siblings at home.” It's more of an extended family. A lot of these kids live with their grandparents at



home.

So [slight pause] I don't know, I feel like that's what I bring. (interview)

**["I was exceded from my first teaching job."]**

I was exceded from my first teaching job at PS 151 in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

This school was my first true love. I loved the community and the staff not to mention my three-block walk commute was ideal. But due to the nature of always changing demographics, the families began moving out and being replaced by young hipsters.

I was there for seven glorious years but with each year the population of children in our school decreased more and more. Every year there was always the lingering threat that my services were no longer going to be needed until that awful day when this became a reality.

In retrospect, it was probably the best thing that happened because I would've never left that school had I not been exceded. We were like one big happy family. I was happy there but I didn't realize that I could be happier and more fulfilled in Pre-K.

At PS 151 I taught Kindergarten for five years and first grade for the other two.

And even though kindergarten was very gratifying it still had its difficulties in that the expectations for these young children from a low-income neighborhood with no Pre-K background was unrealistic and not developmentally appropriate. (writing prompt)

**["...a very difficult year..."]**

I then spent a very difficult year at PS 65 in Brooklyn. And although, like my previous school it was also within walking distance from my house, it was very difficult on my mental well-being. The administration there placed an unrealistic level of work duties which left me very little time for family and friends.

This then pushed me to seek another position which I found in the PreK center in Elmhurst, Queens. I started in this position as a result of a mass rollout initiative by the mayor to provide PreK for all students which is something I strongly believed in. (writing prompt)

**["I went into early childhood because it's very important...we're setting the foundation--for future learning."]**

I went into early childhood because it's very important.

I feel like this is the foundation--we're setting the foundation--for future learning. So if they have a strong foundation they can be stronger scholastically throughout. But if they don't have that strong foundation...

I taught kindergarten for five years, and...I used to see the difference between children that had the pre-K experience and children that had not had the pre-K experience.

It was a very big difference. Children that had the pre-K experience were able to...learn and were ready to learn...where children that were not exposed to pre-K before we're not as ready. (interview)

**[“...currently teaching...four-year-olds.”]**

I am currently teaching at a Pre-K center in Elmhurst, Queens.

I teach four-year-olds. I have been there for the past seven years now.

The community is mostly Latina and Asian. The Latina community includes Mexicans, Colombians, Ecuadorians, Peruvians, Hondurans, and a small population of Dominicans. The Asian community includes Chinese, Bangladeshi, Indians, Nepalese, and Filipinos.

I came to be at this school almost by accident. (writing prompt)

**[“...the freedom I do now to shape the curriculum...”]**

My school community is great. We are a very close-knit school and collaborate on all we do. Administration is very supportive and realistic on the goals and expectations they set on their staff and on the children we serve.

I also appreciate that in PreK there is a big push for parent involvement which I feel is very important for young learners.

In my previous schools, I didn't feel as supported by administration because I didn't have the freedom I do now to shape the curriculum to the needs of my students and make it more relatable.

I feel students learn with more ease when the topics and subjects are more relatable to them.

I feel teachers, especially community teachers, need more freedom in choosing a curriculum that is relevant for their students. (writing prompt)

**[“...always remember where you came from...”]**

To always remember where you came from.

Because as a teacher you can get into the teacher mindset. And it's like, “Why is this parent not as involved? Why is this kid not doing what he's supposed to? Why is this...whatever.”

But like, just keeping in mind where they came from.

And thinking about their community, and thinking about...

As opposed to just being quick to judge, to really think about: maybe *why* certain things are happening.

And trying to reach out to parents in different ways.

I call parents on Saturdays and Sundays.

I'm not sitting here thinking like, “Oh, it's Saturday and Sunday I can't be bothered.” Because, we're all human and Saturdays and Sundays might be the only time that you can reach them, or you can get to them, or in the evening.

So not forgetting where you came from. (interview)

**[“...as a student...so being a teacher...”]**

Okay, so...as a student, um...how can I say this?

As a student, I don't have many memories, except for, like, one in junior high school.

My memory is really bad--but I remember bits and pieces.

Like I said, I remember a teacher from the fifth grade. [slight laughter]  
She was very hard, um, on students, and with discipline.  
But, I also remember not feeling a sense of, like, belonging. I felt...

So I went to school for a year in Honduras, which I'm grateful for because I learned Spanish very well.  
So I don't regret that.

But, I do regret that my mom was not savvy enough, or did not know that like when I came back here, I shouldn't have had to repeat the second grade just because I lost a year in Honduras.

So I repeated the year and I should have gotten services. Because as a result of just going to school and learning Spanish I lost a lot of my English. So I always struggled with English and pronunciation so...

I remember getting very--and even now--it's like getting anxiety over reading or reading aloud or anything having to do with phonics.

I was very strong in math, and having gone to school in Honduras, math is um, they're very strong in their teaching. So I always felt very strong in math, but not in reading.

Reading was never my forte, and I always felt anxious about it. So that's what I remember about being in school.

So being a *teacher* in a public school...having had that experience, I make sure that I'm not singling kids out.

Like, whoever wants to share, shares, and whoever doesn't, I just, I give them the choice because I know how I felt when I was little being called on or, you know... (interview, emphasis in voice inflection)

**“[You have to think about the community you're in...]”**

It's been *extremely* hard. [laughter]

Because I teach early childhood, four-year-olds, it's been extremely hard. Because nobody expects children at that age to be in front of a computer all day. So getting them to be engaged, even as little as 30 minutes, 20 minutes, in front of a computer is very hard.

But also coming up with activities that they can do at home with things that they have at home. Because a lot of our learning is hands-on learning.

So you have to think about the community you're in:  
what they have access to, what they might have in their home that they can use to foster the learning content that they would be getting in school that they're not getting because they were at home.

So it's been hard. (interview, emphasis in voice inflection))

**["A computer at home..."]**

Oh, yeah, I mean, especially with Zoom now.

Like having teachers make comments or not being understanding of the fact that, if a kid has a computer at home, they might not just be the only one that needs that one computer. Or even having a computer at home.

Thank God, thank goodness that the Board of Ed gave out iPads and to every kid that needed it.

But, if it wasn't for that, it's like taking for granted that a lot of these kids don't own a computer at home or an iPad. And if they did, they would have to share it with like, two or three siblings.

You know, so who gets first dibs? You know, I guess it's the kid that's in the higher grades, not the younger ones. (interview)

**[“...a lot of these things, the schools should provide...”]**

I can't say that I'm not happy, but definitely more resources.

...because I'm in pre-K, and pre-K is like a different entity than public schools. But I know in public schools, like, grades K through fifth, some schools...

I was at a school in Bushwick where, they didn't have enough *books*, whether it be for like their leveled reading. We had to purchase a lot. Teachers didn't have a lot of materials. We were fortunate where organizations came in and donated backpacks and materials for kids.

Public schools, like I said, should not take for granted that some kids can't afford things...every year the list gets bigger and bigger as to what the parents have to provide for the students.

And I just feel like a lot of these things, the schools should provide for the students. Like pencils and crayons or whatever they might need...at least books, and definitely more resources, especially in low-income communities. (interview)

**[“The whole child approach should be part of every teacher’s strategy.”]**

I was fortunate enough to have gotten a degree in Early Childhood Education, where teaching the “whole child” approach was of most importance.

What this means is, we as teachers, have to support and nurture all areas of children’s development and learning, from social-emotional to cognitive skills.

The whole child approach should be part of every teacher’s strategy.

Children are more receptive to teachers to whom they can relate to. Or teachers who take the time out to get to know them.

Community teaching is not just being part of that community but taking time out to get to know your community and the population you work with. (writing prompt)

**[“...looking at the whole child...”]**

Also looking at the whole child: emotionally, socially, how are they developing?

My husband teaches high school, and I tell him....thank goodness, that's like maybe one of the good

things that came out of COVID. They're now they're really pushing the social-emotional component to teaching.

It's like, "How are these kids feeling?  
Why didn't they do their homework?"

It's not just because they don't want to; it's how are they feeling, what's affecting them?

So, things like that. (interview)

**["...you don't always think of yourself as a community when you're the only one in your school."]**

Um, it's been really eye-opening, in that, um, you don't always think of yourself as a community when you're the only one in your school. So, I'll elaborate.

So, as we got together, a lot of feelings came up of being the only Latina teacher at my school. And getting to know other community teachers and seeing that there are other teachers that are in my same position, being a minority in their schools or in their school community, you know, was very nice and connecting with them.

And also being acknowledged as being a contributor, you know, to your community. That somebody is actually acknowledging the fact that you do contribute a lot being from the same community. (interview)

**["I feel very strongly about advocating for the students and families in my community."]**

Teaching I feel is a gift that not many of us possess. Teachers not only have to be good at facilitating information but we need to be patient, understanding, and caring.

I feel very strongly about advocating for the students and families in my community. (writing prompt)

**["The invisible labor I provide for my students and their families is advocating for them..."]**

The invisible labor I provide for my students and their families is advocating for them to receive the best instruction that is relatable and inclusive to all.

I do this by bringing awareness of issues, customs, special holidays, and traditions our families might have and how we can use these as part of our teaching. (writing prompt)

**["Community teachers have the pulse of their community...."]**

Having taught kindergarten for all those years I really understand the importance of Pre-K, especially in low-income neighborhoods.

I love being able to speak to some of these children in their language.

I love being a parent's advocate when they need help with something they don't understand. I really enjoy going to work and the work I do, and how many people can actually say that.

I am the only Latina teacher at my school out of eleven teachers. In the first year, I remember being the only person they could turn to translate but thank goodness since then they have hired assistant teachers that speak Spanish and other languages to assist parents.

**["I can relate..."]**

Community teachers have the pulse of their community.

I, being a community teacher, can relate to some of the families I now serve.

I know what it is to share a home with many family members. I know what it is to have my family not speak the language and not attend parent-teacher conferences because they could not take a day off from work.

I can relate to many of the challenges our families face. (writing prompt)

**["...there is still such a disparity..."]**

The world now is starting to understand the importance of community teachers and how important they are in closing the learning gap.

I am now seeing more ads seeking teachers of color to come into our school system. And although this is all great there is still such a disparity of the amount of teachers of color in our school system. (writing prompt)

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### *Settling in Queens*

By the age of twelve, I had already lived in Honduras twice, attended six different schools in three different boroughs before finally settling in Queens. My hero, who raised me as a single mom, did the best she could sometimes working two jobs a day as a cleaning lady. She never truly spoke English just barely enough to get by. I remember she tried helping me with homework as best she could and would get frustrated when I didn't understand something. She would "tap" me on the head with her knuckles and say "Bien, que para las novelas si tenes cabeza." Which translates, "you do have a good head when it comes to soap operas."

The earliest memories I have of my schooling experience are from fifth grade. Ms. Jackson, my fifth-grade teacher, had Reeboks in every color that she would wear every single day with a matching t-shirt. I remember that when she got upset she would take one of them off and fling it across the room. Sixth grade was spent between two different schools. The first half was spent in uptown Manhattan and the second half in the Bronx, and not in a nice neighborhood either. This neighborhood was so bad my mother opted out of putting me in Catholic school for the six months we lived there.

We then finally settled in Ridgewood, Queens. By the time we moved to Queens, I was almost 13 years old and ready to claim some freedom. I was the new kid in my seventh-grade class. I quickly became friends with all the popular kids at Intermediate School 77 in Ridgewood, Queens. Who would've thought that this would be the same intermediate school both my children would attend themselves. The school was located just two blocks up from my house. This was the first time I felt a sense of community. I lived in the same three-bedroom apartment for 23 years. My childhood friend's kids went to school with my kids and some of my old teachers became my kid's teachers. I always held those teachers with the highest regard. But even though those teachers were great teachers none of them looked like me.

When I hear the word community I think of a group of individuals that share the same beliefs and values. I think of how a sense of community is so important. I didn't come to have this sense of community until I was about 13 years old when we moved to Queens. I understand that we moved a lot out of necessity but I was always sad to leave friends behind and missed out on having this sense of community.

Working in my own community is important to me because I want to invest in my own community. I want my community to thrive and succeed. Being a teacher in my own community gives me a different level of understanding about my student's livelihoods. I know about where they shop, where they eat, where they worship and congregate. It's a different level of connectedness. Parents are more receptive to becoming partners in their child's education when they can relate to their child's educators and vice versa when they know the educators can relate to them.

I am very proud to be a product of the public school system and now a teacher in that same system. We are afforded the opportunity to be able to go to school which can't be said of all other countries. I think having had a public school education has made me more humble and appreciative. When I went to school we all got the same instruction. Not to say all teachers are rockstars. But it didn't matter if your parents owned a home or you lived in a cramped three-bedroom apartment you were all afforded with the same opportunities. NYC public schools taught me that teachers can be rockstars and they make such a difference in a child's life. I had amazing teachers who taught me to appreciate my uniqueness and I had horrible teachers who blatantly told me they were just there for the paycheck. But these horrible teachers taught me something. They taught me what not to aspire to be. They taught me that you can really have an impact in a child's life and this made me realize that I wanted to have an impact, a positive one.

## *Not Your Typical Route*

I have been an early childhood teacher for about 15 years now. I've taught kindergarten, first grade and for the past seven years, I have taught pre-kindergarten which is where my heart is. But this was not always a lifelong dream of mine. Growing up I didn't dream of becoming a teacher. One of my favorite subjects has always been math. It came easy to me and I even enjoyed teaching it to my friends who seemed to struggle with it. But even than teaching was not something I considered. I always thought a career involving mathematics was in the cards for me. Maybe a CPA that only worked half the year. But after a few life choices, it became apparent to me that that was my calling. After getting a BA in Psychology I struggled with what career path to take. I had two small children at home whom I raised as a single mom. It was suggested to me to become a substitute teacher which at the time seemed like a great idea. The hours and flexibility it provided were convenient for me. I later got a job as an assistant teacher at a daycare center working with 3 and 4-year-olds. This fostered the love I now have for early childhood education. While working at the daycare I pursued a Masters in Early Childhood Education. Watching my two young children at home coupled with the learning going on at the daycare center was what propelled me as an Early Childhood Teacher.

I am currently teaching at a PreK center in Elmhurst, Queens. I teach four-year-olds. I have been there for the past seven years now. The community is mostly Hispanic and Asian. The Hispanic community includes Mexican, Columbian, Ecuadorian, Peruvians, Hondurans, and a small population of Dominicans. The Asian community includes Chinese, Bangladeshi, Indian, Nepali, and the Philippines. I came to be at this school almost by accident.

I was exceded from my first teaching job at PS 151 in Bushwick, Brooklyn. This school was my first true love. I loved the community and the staff not to mention my three-block walk commute was ideal. But due to the nature of always changing demographics, the families began moving out and being replaced by young hipsters. I was there for seven glorious years but with each year the population of children in our school decreased more and more. Every year there was always the lingering threat that my services were no longer going to be needed until that awful day when this became a reality.

In retrospect, it was probably the best thing that happened because I would've never left that school had I not been exceded. We were like one big happy family. I was happy there but I didn't realize that I could be happier and more fulfilled in PreK. At PS 151 I taught Kindergarten for five years and first grade for the other two. And even though kindergarten was very gratifying it still had its difficulties in that the expectations for these young children from a low-income neighborhood with no PreK background were unrealistic and not developmentally appropriate.

I then spent a very difficult year at PS 65 in Brooklyn. And although like my previous school it was also within walking distance from my house it was very difficult on my mental well-being. The administration there placed an unrealistic level of work duties which left me very little time for family and friends. This then pushed me to seek another position which I found in the PreK center in Elmhurst, Queens. I started in this position as a result of a mass rollout initiative by the mayor to provide PreK for all students which is something I strongly believed. Having taught kindergarten for all those years I really understand the importance of PreK, especially in low-income neighborhoods. I love being able to speak to some of these children in their language. I love being parents' advocate when they need help with something they don't understand. I really enjoy going to work and the work I do, and how many people can actually say that.

I am the only Hispanic teacher at my school out of eleven teachers. In the first year, I remember being the only person they could turn to translate but thank goodness since then they have hired assistant teachers that speak Spanish and other languages to assist parents. My school community is great. We are a very close-knit school and collaborate on all we do. Administration is very supportive and realistic on the goals and expectations they set on their staff and on the children we serve. I also appreciate that in PreK there is a big push for parent involvement which I feel is very important for young learners. In my previous schools, I didn't feel as supported by administration because I didn't have the freedom I do now to shape the curriculum to the needs of my students and make it more relatable. I feel students learn with more ease when the topics and subjects are more relatable to them. I feel teachers, especially community teachers need more freedom in choosing curriculum that is relevant for their students.



Community teachers have the pulse of their community. I, being a community teacher can relate to some of the families I now serve. I know what it is to share a home with many family members. I know what it is to have my family not speak the language and not attend parent-teacher conferences because they could not take a day off from work. I can relate to many of the challenges our families face. Growing up not too many teachers looked like me. Being a teacher was not something I aspired to be at a young age, it is something I kind of stumbled into.

The world now is starting to understand the importance of community teachers and how important they are in closing the learning gap. I am now seeing more ads seeking teachers of color to come into our school system. And although this is all great there is still such a disparity of the amount of teachers of color in our school system.

When I hear the term “community teaching” I think about myself and how I feel I’m making a difference. From speaking the same language to sharing the same experiences this is what community is all about. We need more community teachers to share their experiences with their community. Children need to see their faces in our faces and learn that they can grow too.

I am a New York City public school teacher because I want to make a difference. We’re not public school teachers to get rich. We do it for a different type of wealth. We do it because it makes us feel good and fulfilled. To see a child learn something new or their eagerness to learn is all the richness we need.

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## Nathalie's Life Stories

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### Part 1: Oral Life Stories

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#### **[“... a neighborhood in Queens that has small-town vibes.”]**

Whenever people say things like, “I don’t know if I could ever raise a child in New York City!” I love to tell them that I would.

I grew up in Sunnyside, a neighborhood in Queens that has small-town vibes.

Even though I was raised by strict parents, I still had the kind of freedom to roam and explore the city afforded to me by a student MetroCard and a vast (but always with service delays) subway system. I had the kind of independence at a young age that transplants tell me they wished they had. (writing prompt)

#### **[“I look back at my childhood...”]**

I look back at my childhood, growing up in Woodside and Sunnyside, and I had a chance to play outside.

I also was growing up in a time where, you know, you could use the internet, and sending messages to people online was like a new and exciting thing.

And, and also at the same time, I was so involved in local community organizations.

Like I...sang in the church choir.

I was an altar server.

I also was in the Girl Scouts.

And I'm trying to remember what else I did.

I participated in, I forgot, I think it's called the "United 40 Civic Association."

I participated in that organization briefly.

So my mom had me in a *bunch* of different activities, constantly keeping me busy. And, um, there were times where, you know, she couldn't really babysit us because she was babysitting other kids. So she wanted to put us in things to keep us busy and keep our lives enriched, even if, uh, she couldn't afford to put us in, even if she couldn't afford to put us in more prestigious programs. You know what I mean?

Um, but I had a lot of great friendships, from neighbors who would play tag with me and I would be climbing up trees and just hiding up there.

Or like.. [deep breath] Man I can't complain about the childhood I had in Queens. It was like such a small-town vibe for being in a large city.

So when I left that environment, it was a culture shock, even though, like, it's the same city you know? I've noticed how it's changed. (interview)

#### **[“I've noticed how it's changed...”]**

I've also noticed how much of a community divide there is between and within Woodside/ Sunnyside. Queens Boulevard is that divider.

I grew up on the south side of Queens Boulevard. And I currently work on the north side, like past the north side of Queens Boulevard. And like I've noticed how there's like, like, the poorer side of Sunnyside is the south side of Queens Boulevard. And that's where I grew up.

Meanwhile, where I work as music director, like a lot--some of the church parishioners that come in are pretty generous; generous with their donations. And the church where I work at right now is financially a lot better off than the church where I grew up singing, which was on the other side of Queens Boulevard. And there are some weird parallels between those two churches as they were their sister parishes.

Um, I don't know...I've noticed how it's changed, in a way where people know about Sunnyside now. And like some of my friends from high school, who didn't even know where I was in Queens, like some of them now live in Sunnyside and I don't even live there anymore. So...it's fascinating.

And I think about wanting to live in Sunnyside again, but at the same time I'm also like, I should probably not be so tethered to it, sometimes. I don't know. (interview)

**[“...I've noticed a lot more community in Sunnyside.”]**

Um...it's a lot different...

I feel, um, it's going through the same things that Sunnyside is. Although I feel I've noticed a lot more community in Sunnyside. Maybe it's because I'm in it more than here in Washington Heights. Because the way it's so rapidly gentrified up here...

But my partner, who's lived in this apartment for 10 years, over 10 years now, he's built a community. And the way that the neighbors step up whenever we need help is amazing.

And I've come to really love Washington Heights.

It's, you know, nobody complains about the noise we make because everyone is so freaking noisy around here. And it's great.

Although I do miss having Colombian food near me. (interview)

**[“...the freedom to express myself...”]**

So my experience as a New York City public school student...

when I transitioned from middle school to high school, coming from a Catholic school background, I was like, “Yay, I'm so excited not having to wear a uniform anymore. But then I was like, “Great, I have to think of something different to wear every day.” [laughter] (interview)

I remembered the first thing that stood out to me was the freedom to express myself through fashion, as I had to wear a uniform every day in Catholic school and I was punished for not conforming (I was given a demerit for wearing homemade bracelets on my wrist in 7th/8th grade). (interview)

**[“I took advantage of every opportunity that came for me...”]**

...being flung into an environment where children came from different socio-economic backgrounds and

having access to, what would have otherwise been an expensive music education.

I took advantage of every opportunity that came for me because I had a public school education. (interview)

**[“...students of different socio-economic background...”]**

And sometimes my mom would say to me that she regretted my sister and I going to LaGuardia, because, like I was saying, we were exposed to students of different socio-economic backgrounds. So we would be hanging out with rich kids, and we would think that we were like, we had like that rich kid mentality.

Sometimes my mom would be like, “Nah, uh uh uh, you can't be doing this and that because we can't afford to do that for you.”

And we would sometimes realize that there were certain shortcomings from that, from being in school and not being the first in consideration for a role because our parents weren't “Angel Donors” to our high school. (interview)

**[“...NYC public schools in a way saved me.”]**

Spending my adolescent years in NYC public schools in a way saved me.

I always loved music but it was at LaGuardia that I discovered my love for songwriting.

Prior to that, I was just studying classical music, choir, and opera. The academic teachers at my school were appreciative of all of the talented students there, and most of them were incredibly understanding and encouraging when it came to certain artistic conflicts with their classes.

I am now still doing music professionally and pursuing a career as a singer/songwriter. (writing prompt)

**[“...we saw what it was like to be free...”]**

And then also, us being in an environment where students were encouraged to be liberal in their artistic expression and also like, sexual expression. Like that was the first time that I had seen an LGBTQ community, within my classmates...And my teachers I had a *bunch* of teachers who were either out or they weren't...And having that sort of visibility, even though it didn't come to me when I was a teenager, looking back, I'm like, "I'm so glad I had that around me.”

And I think that if I had stuck with a Catholic school education, like, I would've been so far behind in where I am today.

And maybe, I think that my mom would be frustrated with us pushing back against her, like being rebellious because you know, we saw what it was like to be free, I guess, in our expression, you know, so I don't know [slight laughter]. (interview)

**[“...to see my potential and give me a chance to grow...”]**

But most of all, the thing that stood out to me the most was meeting people of different cultural/artistic backgrounds.

Some students were accepted into LaGuardia because they spent months or years studying their craft, and this school was a stepping stone into furthering their careers.

And then there were people like me, who walked into my audition unprepared but my performance was enough for admissions to see my potential and give me a chance to grow as a budding vocalist and musician. (writing prompt)

**[“...it was so easy to kind of fall through the crack...”]**

And it was through that public school education that I was able to get a scholarship for college. Which I can get into, I can talk about in some other instance.

But the other thing was that just as gratuitous my education was, because it was such a large school and because the public school system is so big, like, it was so easy to kind of fall through the cracks.

And I can say the same thing about my college education, having gone to a public university. So there were instances where I had to really be on top of myself, to make sure that I was hitting all of the necessary markers for me to graduate... (interview)

**[“I saw myself in my young voice student...”]**

I majored in classical vocal performance at Queens College in the Fall of 2011. Singing in the college choir, performing in opera productions and recitals while simultaneously writing pop songs and cantoring at church.

During my senior year of college, I was approached by a parishioner who liked my singing voice, and she asked me if I was available to give her eldest pre-teen daughter singing lessons. Seeing my uncertain future as a musician being imminent upon graduation, I took that opportunity having never taught a voice lesson.

I asked my private voice teacher, other teachers, and fellow peers for advice, as I was eager yet terrified. I saw myself in my young voice student, being Latina and from the same neighborhood, and I wanted to be the role model I would have wanted to have as a child.

My lack of pedagogical music education made me self-conscious, but perhaps I had a knack for it because it led me to more students and my private voice studio was always steady with students.

After a tumultuous departal from living with my parents from disagreeing with my career path as a musician, and exhausting my body doing bike deliveries for Postmates, I bumped into an old friend from Catholic school who offered me an after-school teaching opportunity on the spot. (writing prompt)

Teaching was not a career path I envisioned myself taking. (writing prompt)

My childhood was spent in Sunnyside, Queens, playing with neighborhood kids and participating in church activities such as singing in the choir, altar serving, playing basketball, and taking hip hop dance classes (the last two being my best worst skills). (writing prompt)

I stayed as far away from teaching as possible and closer to music (to my mother's chagrin), but it somehow found me once I worked myself up the church career ladder and began leading masses as a cantor as a 16-year-old young classical singer.

My music education at LaGuardia HS in Manhattan afforded gratuitous access to sharpening my musicianship skills and in turn, exercising those skills at church back in Queens. The music director at that time noticed my talent and soon began offering me opportunities to sing by myself at church. Singing at church was my only musical outlet at that time, and the only outlet in which I felt my mother's pride.

I followed the same path as my sister but I struggled believing in myself as a singer because my sister embodied that identity so fervently as an extroverted child and I felt like an impostor.

Either way, the music director entrusted my sister and me with forming a children's choir. We were still kids but we saw a need for helping the community in the same way they helped us.

I never saw it as teaching but we simply employed the same techniques we were taught as choir members.

Helping children find their voice brought me and my sister great joy. But eventually, we had to stop that choir once we began our college studies. (writing prompt)

### **[“...I was flung into the world of after-school completely unprepared.”]**

...I was flung into the world of after-school completely unprepared.

I began teaching music at P.S. 150Q in Sunnyside through Sunnyside Community Services, continuing to pay it forward to the community which shaped me.

I gained experience through trial and error, writing lesson plans, attending professional development workshops to better my skills, and connecting with elementary students by exposing them to fun music.

I was also balancing my teaching job with church singing, and jamming with other musicians at venues throughout NYC. As I continued to teach, I learned about “teaching artists,” and eventually I came to identify myself as such.

Through teaching, not only did I gain confidence working with groups of children, but it also forced me to become a better musician and confront my stage fright. With those experiences, I could empathize with nervous students and reassure them that those feelings are normal, and help them find their voice like I did for myself. (writing prompt)

### **[“The first job I had as a teaching artist...”]**

The first job I had as a teaching artist was to advocate for instruments for several years. In the meantime I took existing instruments in need of repair and took them home to fix, polish, and tune them. (writing prompt)

I also created lesson plans for students to make their own instruments.

I try to add excitement to the classes I've taught previously by picking fun repertoire for the students to sing. (writing prompt)

**[“Don't forget what brought you there in the first place.”]**

Remind yourself why you're doing it in the first place.

Don't forget what brought you there in the first place.

Whether it was out of necessity, by accident, or if you felt like it was your life's calling.

Because as far as I know, as I've continued to teach...I find that teaching has found me. And people seek me out because there's something about me that they want to know. There's something about what I do that they want to know.

And I'm more than happy to impart that wisdom, and impart my experiences onto them and hopefully inspire them to do great things. (interview)

**[“...chasing the performance high...”]**

And whenever I encounter certain frustrating situations, I remind myself of why I do it in the first place.

And why, despite rehearsals that can be frustrating, or classes, like at the end of the day, when that recital is over, when that concert is over, when that mass is over, chasing that performance high...that post performance highs, so satisfying.

But it doesn't come without all of that time spent preparing for that moment.

So...I try not to lose sight of why I'm doing it in the first place. (interview)

**[“I see myself in the students I teach and I feel in a way an obligation to “pay it forward.”]**

“I grew up in the NYC public school system and I understand its strengths and its drawbacks first-hand.

Despite falling into teaching, I see myself in the students I teach and I feel in a way an obligation to “pay it forward” by showing them that I am an example of a success story as a byproduct of the NYC public school system.” (writing prompt)

**[“I am a living testament of that experience...it takes a village to raise a child.”]**

Community is a group of people who work together to attain a goal that would otherwise be difficult to achieve alone.

There is the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” and I am a living testament of that experience.

There were many teachers, mentors, and other role models who shaped me into the teacher I am today, and I understand that I am playing a small but significant role in shaping a student's education. (writing prompt)

**[“...working with other students I would see those parallels...”]**

Well, when you are brought up in a whole community, and I guess in my personal experience, it's made

me want to give back. Because I would not be the person I am today if it weren't for the people around me that *saw* what I had in me when I didn't believe it myself.

And when I started working with other students I would see those parallels. And they don't see it because they don't know themselves.

And I remember saying that once, teaching, and I was telling the kids I'm like, "You guys don't know yourselves yet. You know yourself to a certain extent, but you don't fully know yourselves. And that's something that you're going to learn as you get older." (interview)

**[“...break down that wall of sort of authoritarian type of teaching style...”]**

And I would always try to relate my experiences with them to help them realize that, as a teacher, it's okay to admit that you don't know all the answers and that you're willing to learn from your students as much as they're learning from you in order to facilitate a healthy environment.

Because you know, every kid is different and you want them to learn. And in order for them to do that they need to be engaged and sometimes letting down your guard as a teacher help students engage more and kind of break down that wall of sort of authoritarian type of teaching style that one of us have encountered, you know, when we were kids, you know? (interview)

**[...a community teacher is someone who is constantly building...]**

“To me, a community teacher is someone who is constantly building a relationship with their students beyond the classroom.

Meaning, they inspire their students and motivate them to excel in their studies, investing themselves in the student’s progress in combination with other teachers and scholarly figures.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, so by having multiple people keep track of one student’s progress, it increases the chance of success in the student’s academic future.

My K-8 experience in Catholic school was filled with multiple teachers and administrators watching me and making sure I wasn’t left behind.

I look back fondly at those experiences because those teachers were academically and emotionally invested in my progress, despite my classroom attention issues.” (writing prompt)

**[“My teaching journey was supplemented by...”]**

My teaching journey has been haphazardly full of moments of trial and error.

I didn’t study pedagogy in college as I majored in classical vocal performance.

So my teaching journey was supplemented by seeking advice from my teachers, colleagues, attending workshops, Pinterest boards, and experience.

I learned from my students as much as they learned from me. (writing prompt)

**[“I try to take as much of what I learned from being a music student.”]**



Um, well, I did not come from a teaching background.  
Like I never, I didn't study music education.

So I recognize that my teaching style can be a bit unconventional.

But I try to take as much of what I learned from being a music student.  
I try to remember, "What did my choir teacher do before we learned music?"  
Like doing warm ups and challenging me and stuff.

I would try to do the same thing with teaching students.  
And a lot of that worked, and some of it didn't work.  
And it's also, you're dealing with a different generation.

Because I didn't study music ed, I know that there's some gaps in my teaching. But I feel like it's also been advantageous because I haven't been confined to a certain teaching style, like, "Oh, I'm not teaching "Orff [Approach]," or I'm not teaching like "The Suzuki Method."

But I might be employing certain techniques because *my* teachers before me probably learned *that* when they were in school.

So I try to employ an organic style that has so far worked. And as I continue to do it, I've noticed that, for me, what matters most is that I inspire my students to want to continue to make music after class is over. (interview)

**[“...teach songs that could encourage, like self-expression...I was really lucky that I had that liberty.”]**

...as a teacher, I felt like I could pretty much teach songs that could encourage, like self-expression, and embracing children that came from different backgrounds.

I loved being able to be in an environment with kids, like I was saying, different ethnic backgrounds because then it encouraged me to find, to look for music that would help them embrace that.

Having also taught in Catholic schools I had a lot of limitations with that.  
And with public schools--as long as my supervisor approved my lesson plan--I pretty much had free rein on what I could do with the kids.

So I was really lucky that I had that liberty. (interview)

**[“An outsider looking in...And then I remember that we all sometimes feel like imposters.”]**

...I was telling you in another conversation about...how I felt like I was an outsider looking in.

And I always psych myself out. I always had this really bad anxiety. Whenever I'm facing the classroom or whenever I'm facing people.

And this teaching experience for the past several years has taught me to just put my best face forward.

And then I remember, when I see students who are really shy.  
It can be challenging to get them to come out of their shells.  
But when they do it's such a satisfying feeling. It's so fulfilling.

And then I remember that we all sometimes feel like imposters and everyone is fighting their own battle.” (interview)

**[“...there's just so many shortfalls, and we're expected to bear the brunt of that.”]**

Frustrating [slight laughter]. Incredibly frustrating.  
And it's all because of the pandemic.

I had so many teaching opportunities as a result. And I've reached a point where there hasn't been a shortage of that. Teaching has become so accessible for someone who needs employment.

But at the same time, it's because there's just so many shortfalls, and we're expected to bear the brunt of that...

I felt so guilty thinking that no matter how frustrating it was, for me as a teacher, I always thought about how frustrating it was for a student. They didn't ask for any of this, you know, they...they're just being kids. Like, let kids be kids. And it's unfortunate that some of the things that they should be doing, they're being denied of it because of the current conditions.

And that was the kind of thing that I would always try to ingrain in my head before I stepped into a classroom. Or before I logged into an online session, because some of it was also virtual.

But yeah, it was very frustrating.

And prior to the pandemic, I had thought about quitting teaching. And these past two years brought me closer to that decision more than anything else. (interview)

**[“...if I was a kid, during this pandemic...”]**

And then also, during online teaching, some of the kids will kind of pretend like their internet connection wasn't working or like they were having computer difficulties, even though I could hear them on through their computer speaker.

So, it was frustrating, but I also understood where they came from, you know what I mean?

Like, if I was a kid, during this pandemic, I would have done the same. I don't completely blame them. (interview)

**[“Really go above and beyond.”]**

I hope that public schools, and just schools in general...that there's more accommodations for students...being able to be flexible. Because some students are visual learners, some students...they can read and catch it on the spot.

Being able to adjust to every student's learning style. Like find what is that student's learning style, because they're not going to tell you. They don't know.

But I wish that the educational system could recognize that there's much more that needs to be done

rather than just writing something on the board and then hoping that the student will get it. Really go above and beyond.

And I know that's gonna have to take more than one teacher in one classroom to do that. (interview)

**[“...the whole education system has to be overhauled...”]**

The whole education system *has* to be overhauled. Because...we have adults to this day that think Picasso was born in the 1500s. I see memes floating around about how stupid people are. And it's not their fault. It's because our education system is flawed.

**[“...they cut sight-singing from musicianship courses for vocal students...”]**

And the arts education is underfunded, unless you go to an expensive private school, and it really shouldn't be like that.

And it's unfortunate that the defunding of these educational systems are happening in public schools. And they're even happening at the high school that I went to.

When I was at LaGuardia, I had several different musicianship courses, and one of them was sight-singing, so I could learn how to read music and music theory. The last I heard they cut sight-singing from musicianship courses for vocal students, which is a shame, because how else are you going to learn how to read music, as a singer? It's beyond me.

The educational system needs to be funded properly.  
Students need to be supported, teachers need to be supported.

And I don't know. I don't have the answers. I don't know how to fix that.

And I would rather not be in that environment than try to figure it out and experience burnout at trying to fix a broken system.” (interview)

**“workshop as “[an eye-opening experience]”**

“It's been an eye-opening experience, not just talking about my own experience, but also listening to the other teachers.

And finding that we all had something in common, as well as things that we didn't have in common, but it was a bonding experience.

And it was really nice for me to kind of force myself to disengage with everything else that was going on, during that time, and just really focus on, you know, sharing my experience with everyone.” (interview)

**[“I knew the community of Sunnyside well.”]**

I currently hold a position as Director of Music at Queen of Angels R.C. Church in Sunnyside, Queens since February of 2018.

I direct two choirs (English and Spanish adult choirs) and I briefly directed a bilingual children's choir

pre-pandemic at QoA.

Prior to my music directing job, I was an after-school music teacher at P.S. 150Q in Sunnyside, Queens through the after-school program facilitated by Sunnyside Community Services and funded by the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD).

P.S. 150Q is pretty close to Queen of Angels church. The proximity of the school to the church meant that there was a lot of overlap in communities, as some of the volunteers at church were students, teachers, and administrators.

Having also grown up in Sunnyside, I was the perfect replacement for my predecessor Music Director who also was a native of Sunnyside.

I knew the community of Sunnyside well because apart from growing up there, I also benefited from taking college prep courses offered at Sunnyside Community Services, I worked one summer for DYCD at the LIC YMCA, and I was the church cantor at nearby St. Teresa R.C. church for many years.

It was safe to say that it was a smooth transition into my current church job.

Even though I don't teach after school anymore, I teach at my church job through directing my choirs.

I benefited from so many opportunities offered to me through my community and it feels good to be "giving back" when I do my job right.

I still see a lot of my former students and co-workers from time to time, and it warms my heart when students remember me. (writing prompt)

**[ "...a stance of: have no expectations..." ]**

Well, in the past, I would try to have a plan for myself. And I learned through the years that when you plan for something, you also have to take into account that some things don't exactly go to plan.

And where I'm in my life right now, as a result of that, is I'm taking whatever opportunity comes my way and not be afraid to take a risk.

And me becoming--me teaching--has been a result of that. Because I never saw myself as a teacher. But because that opportunity came my way, I thought, "Why not?"

And I'm kind of like--I'm in a moment right now, where, for example, I turned down a teaching gig because I'm trying to move away from that. But I'm not exactly closing myself off to teaching completely. Like I have a student who I'm going to start teaching at the end of the month, and it's just a private student and I'm happy doing that. So I've sort of taken a stance of: have no expectations.

And where I am in my life is me not expecting anything and just believing that things will come my way. But I want to be pleasantly surprised, then unexpectedly disappointed. (interview)

## Finding My Voice

Teaching was not a career path I envisioned myself taking. Ever since I witnessed my 1st grade crush throw up all over his desk and watched our teacher clean up after him in Catholic school, I was more horrified at my teacher taking care of the clean up than witnessing such a violent act. My childhood was spent in Sunnyside, Queens, playing with neighborhood kids and participating in church activities such as singing in the choir, altar serving, playing basketball, and taking hip hop dance classes (the last two being my best worst skills).

I stayed as far away from teaching as possible and closer to music (to my mother's chagrin), but it somehow found me once I worked myself up the church career ladder and began leading masses as a cantor as a 16 year-old young classical singer. My music education at LaGuardia HS in Manhattan afforded gratuitous access to sharpening my musicianship skills and in turn, exercising those skills at church back in Queens. The music director at that time noticed my talent and soon began offering me opportunities to sing by myself at church. Singing at church was my only musical outlet at that time, and the only outlet in which I felt my mother's pride. I followed the same path as my sister but I struggled believing in myself as a singer because my sister embodied that identity so fervently as an extroverted child and I felt like an impostor. Either way, the music director entrusted my sister and me with forming a children's choir. We were still kids but we saw a need for helping the community in the same way they helped us. I never saw it as teaching but we simply employed the same techniques we were taught as choir members. Helping children find their voice brought me and my sister great joy, but eventually we had to stop that choir once we began our college studies.

I majored in classical vocal performance at Queens College in the Fall of 2011, singing in the college choir, performing in opera productions and recitals while simultaneously writing pop songs and cantoring at church. During my senior year of college, I was approached by a parishioner who liked my singing voice, and she asked me if I was available to give her eldest pre-teen daughter singing lessons. Seeing my uncertain future as a musician being imminent upon graduation, I took that opportunity having never taught a voice lesson. I asked my private voice teacher, other teachers, and fellow peers for advice, as I was eager yet terrified. I saw myself in my young voice student, being Latina and from the same neighborhood, and I wanted to be the role model I would have wanted to have as a child. My lack of pedagogical music education made me self-conscious, but perhaps I had a knack for it because it led me to more students and my private voice studio was always steady with students. After a tumultuous departure from living with my parents from disagreeing with my career path as a musician, and exhausting my body doing bike deliveries for Postmates, I bumped into an old friend from Catholic school who offered me an after-school teaching opportunity on the spot.

In January of 2016, I was flung into the world of after-school completely unprepared. I began teaching music at P.S. 150Q in Sunnyside through Sunnyside Community Services, continuing to pay it forward to the community which shaped me. I gained experience through trial and error, writing lesson plans, attending professional development workshops to better my skills, and connecting with elementary students by exposing them to fun music. I was also balancing my teaching job with church singing, and jamming with other musicians at venues throughout NYC. As I continued to teach, I learned about "teaching artists," and eventually I came to identify myself as such. Through teaching, not only did I gain confidence working with groups of children, but it also forced me to become a better musician and confront my stage fright. With those experiences, I could empathize with nervous students and reassure them that those feelings are normal, and help them find their voice like I did for myself.

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## Nia's Life Stories

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### Part 1: Oral Life Stories

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#### **[“Corona is a very colorful place... everybody knows everybody.”]**

Corona is a very colorful place. Very high energy [slight laughter] So high traffic, it's very populated.

Lots of different foods--and not just from one, specific country. I think that's something that's beautiful about Queens in general. It's just very diverse. Even if we're talking about Latino--how many different types of Latinidad are there? And so you see a lot of that in Corona.

And there was this sense of local pride in local small businesses, it was the “frio frio” person<sup>3</sup> after school, if it wasn't them, it was like the snow cone person. And you knew their name, you know, your parents knew their name and there was the sense of like, "Oh, that's you know, fulanito."<sup>4</sup> Or, “Let's go buy empanadas from Maria.” You know, there was a sense of community, you know, people you try to support within the community.

Even as simple as greeting people. I remember being much--moving to a different neighborhood, when I was older, and really sitting with the fact that I didn't know my neighbors. Neighbors don't really say hi to each other.

That's not something that happens in Corona; you know all the neighbors, you know who lives on the block, you know who lives upstairs. Everybody knows everybody. You don't have to like everybody [laughter] but everybody knows everybody. (interview)

#### **[“...importance of education...a mantra in our household.”]**

My father always emphasized the importance of education. It was a mantra in our household.

My mother didn't go past the 7th grade, being sent off to do domestic work in the capital to help bring money home.

My father graduated high school and started medical school but didn't have the money to finish.

I am a product of the sobering reality that not everyone has access to education and they made sure I never forgot that. (workshop writing)

#### **[“The world can take away everything from you hija, except your education.”]**

Mami can't help me with my homework. She never says this out loud but I see her squint her eyes and shake her head slightly when I tell her I'm unsure of what to do next on my math assignment. I'm too young to process how she walks away from simple math word problems as though she's too busy in the kitchen to give me a few minutes.

I'm too young to wonder if it's a language barrier or a strategy she never learned.

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<sup>3</sup> Shaved ice person.

<sup>4</sup> So and so person.

Later, my father would tell me that my mother was pulled out of school in the 7th grade to go work in the capital.

But I didn't doubt that she loved me. I never doubted either of my parents' love and support, especially for my academic career.

She always brought me a hot plate of food as I worked on my assignments. Every. Single. Day. In High School, my peers wanted to do group projects at my house because they knew that Mama Nelly would feed the entire group even if she didn't give us feedback on the actual assignment.

My father sounded like a broken record every time he repeated, "The world can take away everything from you hija, except your education. It can't take your education away. (workshop writing)

**["I started to dream about the possibilities my parents hadn't had the access or finances to afford."]**

My parents were endlessly supportive of my education. They always showed up for every award ceremony (and there were a lot of those.)

I was fortunate enough to be involved in a lot of after-school programs, like Urban Scholars, that focused on providing academic intervention and enrichment that my family couldn't afford. I remember going to watch Cirque Du Soleil once with this program. I stared at the acrobats swinging in the air starry-eyed and excited for what other opportunities this program and my future might afford me. On another occasion, they brought us to a local college where we got to spend the day with college students and ask questions about what campus life was like.

I started to dream about the possibilities my parents hadn't had the access or finances to afford. (workshop writing)

**["I wanted so badly to communicate..."]**

On the first day of Kindergarten, I walked onto the courtyard of PS19Q with my sweaty palms holding on to my mother until the very last possible minute.

I lined up with my assigned teacher, took a deep breath and got ready for the new adventure my parents had coached me about.

"La educación es lo más importante hija" papi had whispered into my ear as he tucked me into bed the night before.

I didn't speak a lick of English.

We had made our way up the stairs, through the entrance, and away from our families when I felt it happen. The pain that followed pulsed as the swelling started to kick in.

I began to wail.

The teacher, who spoke no Spanish, kept trying to soothe me with promises about how my mother would come back for me at the end of the day. I cried for the entire day.

I wanted so badly to communicate that my tears weren't triggered by my mother's absence, but rather the bee that had mistaken my ear lobe for a wildflower.

Instead, I continued to bawl, knowing my Spanish would fall on deaf ears.

And so began my educational career. (workshop writing)

**[“...an English word of the day...a mini-classroom practice facilitated at home...”]**

A few months later, a teacher from the school came to our house and tried to convince Papi to switch me into an ESL class.

But Papi refused.

He said I would learn by immersion. And I did.

It helped that we learned English together.

Papi would come home from work with an English word of the day and we would go over it in unison, a mini-classroom practice facilitated at home. This daily ritual was a delight for the both of us. (workshop writing)

**[“I experienced deep joy when...”]**

Despite the language difference, I loved school.

I learned how to add and subtract with Ms. Cafeteria in the first grade. She brought in her pet snake and let us use the shed skin in our small groups as manipulatives.

I experienced deep joy when we got to celebrate our cultures in bright and colorful ways, like the giant Dance Festival we held in the outdoor courtyard annually.

Every grade would represent a specific dance or culture and we all dressed up in traditional outfits to perform for our families and friends who were also invited.

By fifth grade, no one would have guessed I walked onto that courtyard not knowing English. (workshop writing)

**[“When my teachers brought their passions to the table...”]**

My classmates teased me and called me a teacher’s pet, but I didn’t care.

My mom would drop me off early every morning and I was proud to call myself Ms. Cooperman’s student assistant.

I made copies, organized papers, and did whatever else she needed me to in the classroom before class started for the day.

I have vivid memories of the group projects she assigned us.

Being a proud Jewish teacher, she assigned us intense collateral projects about the Holocaust and Jewish internment camps and I became obsessed with the topic.

She even had us read the book “Four Perfect Pebbles” and one of the authors came in to speak to us about her experience. It was an unforgettable experience.

But a decade later in college, I will have wished I had learned a little bit about my own history (i.e. Trujillo and the parsley massacre, the racial history of the Dominican Republic, the transatlantic slave trade, etc.) (workshop writing)

**[“...above *all* else...I made sure that they know that I care.]”]**

Like I also have a very [slight laughter] vivid memory of—  
I think it was like seventh grade--and a teacher—  
I hurt my foot and my mom was coming to pick me up.



I was in a lot of pain

And the teacher offered me cereal that I'd never had before.

It was "Honey Bunches of Oats."

And she was like, "Do you want some? Are you hungry?"

And I was like, "Uh, yeah, I guess?"

I never had a teacher offer me anything, except for like the school lunch.

And, one, I remember loving it.

To this day I still love, "Honey Bunches of Oats."

But two, I just remember that gesture of like, "She's offering me her food?"

Like, "Woah, she's a really nice teacher."

Right?

And so those moments of care, like I *know*.

I know she was my computer teacher—

I don't necessarily remember all the lessons she gave me—

but I know that she cared about me.

And that stuck with me.

And so *those* lived experiences shape how I work with students.

Because I made sure that they know that I care about them, above *all* else.

Above assignments, above testing, and all the criteria they have to meet.

I made sure that they know that I care. (interview)

### **[...as a bilingual speech-language pathologist...]**

Coming into the education field as a bilingual speech-language pathologist was a difficult journey filled with lots of imposter syndrome. I was always "the only" or "one of" in my higher ed classrooms.

Having served almost a decade now in the public school sector, I can also say that I see the positive impact of students seeing pieces of their life reflected in me. (workshop writing)

### **["I contribute...a sense of relatability...at least there are pieces of me that they can relate to."]**

I think I contribute...

A sense of relatability that isn't always offered.

If we look at the demographics for teachers, and we look at the demographics of the students in the schools that we work in.

I'm not going to say every student sees themselves in me because I've learned that that's a gross generalization.

I'll never forget [slight laughter] we actually have a few Dominican American teachers at my school. I'll never forget having an El Salvadorian student, like two years ago. And we're very vocal about, for that reason, to show like representation. We tell them, "Oh, this is where I'm from, this is where this teacher is from."

And she's like, "Oh my gosh, there's so many Dominicans."

She's like, "When am I gonna have an El Salvadorian teacher?"

So I don't make the assumption that, because I'm a Latinx teacher, every Latinx kid *sees* themselves in

me. And also there's a lot of different--I'm getting a lot of different students from places like Yemen, and other countries that I don't speak the language and I don't know the culture.

But I think that because I grew up and I went to school in a really homogeneous school--my teachers were white and female, with the occasional male...with some exceptions, and I have very specific memories of those exceptions because they were different.

And so I think that--even if they don't see themselves *exactly* in me--they see something that's not “the standard?” And I put that in quotes.

Like if it doesn't look like everyone else at least there are pieces of me that they can relate to; whether it's the language, or whether it's the fact that my parents are immigrants, or I grew up poor or you know. These other tiny components of who I am--of my identity--that they can kind of relate to on some level.

I think that that is something that I bring to the Department of Education that students value. (interview)

### **[“community is...”]**

Community is family, support, encouragement, resources, help when you need it. Laugh when you laugh and cry when you cry. (workshop writing)

### **[“community teachers...”]**

Community teachers belong, contribute, or are intrinsically connected to the community they serve on a deep and meaningful level. (workshop writing)

### **[“a true community school”]**

...because I think that one of the most beautiful things--and one of the things I *miss* about being in a community school, and teaching at a community school, like a true community school, like all the kids that go here live within a certain radius of going here--is that sense of like, recognizing people and recognizing culture, if that makes sense? (interview)

### **[...like the school, was walking distance from where the kids lived...”]**

Like I remember in that first school, we did a *lot* of celebrating student cultures, right? We'd have days where the family came in and families brought in foods from their country, whatever country that was.

And that was possible in that sense because access; like the school, was walking distance from where the kids lived. So, for the most part, as long as the parent could get off from work, they could come in and bring something in.

Whereas, if the kid is going to school in a whole different neighborhood, for *whatever* reason, that becomes harder for a lot of these families, whether it's the transportation issue, a time issue.

So those things are something that I miss, that I'm not experiencing as much right now.

In addition, the pandemic has made that really challenging as well. Because now there's just a lot of protocols about who can come in.

Parents can't come in at all--we used to have parent visits at the son's current school, and the parents

would come--but now that's completely--I don't know for how long but, it's just not something that we do at all. There's no parent visits. (interview)

**“[so those tiny moments, like those, are very rewarding]”**

I think, in some parts, I've been really rewarding. Even in the tiniest moments.

...just the other day I was working with a parent, and she was so grateful...it was actually a great, grandmother who has guardianship...of my student, her great-grandson. And there's clearly a very complicated family history, in terms of why that's the case.

But she was just so grateful that I spoke Spanish, like, she was just like, "Wow, like, the only other speech therapists he's ever had, like one was Russian and one was Indian. And like, you know, they weren't agreeing with him, but I didn't understand what they were doing with him."

And so she was just so excited that I could explain it to her in her language. Like this is what I'm doing, this is how you can support it at home. And she'd never had that before. The kid is seven, he's been getting services since he was like three. So the past four years, she hasn't had access to that and she was just sooo, um, excited about that.

So those tiny moments, like those, are very rewarding. (interview)

**“[...equal parts rewarding and challenging...]”**

Um, and then simultaneously--which both things can be true--it's also been very challenging.

When we don't always have the time resources or the financial resources that we need to do the things we think of. Or even just like permission. Like I have all these ideas of things I'd like to do and then it's like, "Hmm no, you can't do that because X, Y, and Z."

Especially with the pandemic, trips aren't a thing anymore. I think trips are a *huge* part of learning. They're what make learning interactive. And we can do virtual trips, but different kinds of learners. It's not the same as getting the kids out there.

And so, it's been challenging to think about ways to keep kids engaged and we're trying to compete [slight laughter] with screens and games and things that give you a lot of instant gratification. So that part has been challenging.

So it's been, you know, equal parts rewarding and challenging, I think. (interview)

**“...a lot of us feel really undervalued...”**

My hope for future community teachers is that we can feel more valued than what we do right now. I think a lot of us feel really undervalued. And that affects our morale.

And in turn, that affects the work and the students.  
There's no other way around. It's like a family.

If the parents aren't good, the kids aren't going to be good, you know?... (interview)

**“Yeah, I'm one of the classes in the, in the trailers.”**

I grew up in Corona, Queens, and I started my career in Corona, Queens. So I was working in an elementary school that was literally blocks away from the elementary school that I went to. And, um, one of the things that is still very much true to this day--that I experienced as a student--was the overcrowding of the schools...

I went to PS 19 and I was one of the first classes that was ever put in an annex building. [laughter] But it's not even what it sounds like, right? Like the annex building was not a building. I think since then they've actually added extensions and the school's larger now.

But they were literally like, um, like trailers. Trailers that were put in the courtyard because they didn't have enough space in the classrooms. So overcrowding is--literally always been a--it's still an issue. We know that and it was an issue when I was there. Although, you know, as a young kid, I didn't see it as overcrowding. I was just like, "Yeah, I'm one of the classes in the, in the trailers." Like I don't know if that's even what he called it. I don't know what he called it, but I was like, "Yeah, that's fine. No big deal." The only thing I remember [slight laughter] is that the heat wasn't great in the trailers outside. So I remember that being a thing that we had to deal with.

Like that's one of the things that sticks out in my memory as a kid. (interview)

**["...because of the overcrowding--community schools can't even really be community schools..."]**

And then, in the first school in Corona, they kind of had, they had two situations: they had like an annex building. It wasn't quite a trailer, it was better insulation and those things have improved, but they also had an actual annex building. And I worked at both and the annex building was in a completely different neighborhood, which is crazy. We were in Corona. But the annex kindergarten building was in Forest Hills. And so, with that comes--what that brings to mind for me is starting to think about how *slowly*--because of the overcrowding--community schools can't even really be community schools... (interview)

**["...wherever they can find a space..."]**

"...So my first three years were in a community school in Corona. But then, since then, I've been in a District 75 School, which is for students with disabilities. And *these* kids don't go to a school that's in their community; they go wherever they can find a space. Because their local community schools don't know how--basically they don't have the training or the resources to manage their learning. They don't know how. *So* that's a little sad..." (interview)

**["District 75 is very segregated. We are always a school within a school."]**

I work in District 75 which is a specialized sector of the Department of Education that works solely with students who have disabilities. This school community is interesting. Generally, District 75 is very segregated. We are always a school within a school and some of the students have to travel far from their neighborhoods to get to their placement in our school because their neighborhood or community school isn't "equipped" to meet their learning needs. (workshop writing)

**["I bore witness to the over-referral of English Language Learners and low-income students into Special Education."]**

I don't know that I've arrived where I'm going to be for the rest of my career. I'm still growing, shifting, learning. I hope to always be doing these things, but I'm not sure the where/who part is fixed in stone.

In my first community school, I bore witness to the over-referral of English Language Learners and low-income students into Special Education. I am proud of the role that I played to educate staff about the difference between language difference and language disorder. However, I also took note of how community schools fail students with serious behavioral and sensory needs. Whenever they got to the point where they didn't know what they were doing anymore, they just shipped the students off to District 75.

In District 75, in the best of organizations, teachers truly are equipped to differentiate for student needs and manage a vast spectrum of behavioral, sensory, and learning needs. Still, a lot of these schools aren't at their best and students get lost. Entirely too many students in District 75 don't graduate with their High School Diploma and it breaks my heart to think about what their life opportunities look like with that kind of limit in place.

I am proud of the ways I advocate for moving students towards standard assessment (so they can qualify for a high school diploma) and inclusion whenever possible. I am also proud of the workshops I've facilitated for both staff and families. (workshop writing)

**[“There was some serious racial tension that came up.”]**

“This is very different from the first three years I spent in a true community school in Corona, Queens – the very neighborhood I grew up in and only a few blocks over from the elementary school I went to.

Not to say this community school didn't have its own issues. The administration was majority white (the school I'm currently in is entirely white) and so was the staff.

However, the student population was 90% Latinx.

There was some serious racial tension that came up.

One specific memory that comes to mind was when the Italian Principal asked the Student Aides in the main office to stop speaking Spanish unless they were specifically speaking to parents and it was necessary.” (workshop writing)

**[“The administration at this school treated me (us) as a means to an end.”]**

In my first school, the community school, my administration was a nightmare. They had a reputation for being bullies, yelling at teachers in front of students, tearing staff down in their observation feedback, and postponing tenure without any true rationale (especially for BIPOC staff.) I heard this last one firsthand from one of the few Latinx Assistant Principals once she had moved on to become a Principal at a new school.

On one particular occasion, I was asked to use my license to change the language of a student from Spanish to English for the convenience and compliance of the school. I followed up with my Speech supervisor cc'ing my frizzy-haired, pale-faced Assistant Principal to clarify what the legal protocol on this kind of change was. She later called me to her office to discuss the “scathing” email I wrote and described her shock in detail about something that was so out of character for me.

The administration at this school treated me (us) as a means to an end (the end being their paycheck and evaluations.) They treated the Latinx children, especially those with disabilities, as a nuisance that

brought down the caliber of their school. They didn't listen to what we needed to do right by the kids. They didn't lean into the community to tap into infrastructure that was already there, something I can say my current administration does a little better. (workshop writing)

**[“...what that labor might cost us...”]**

We don't often talk about how student trauma can trigger teachers.

I've had students whose life circumstances and traumas reflected my own in a way that was eerie. And when those students struggle (thinking specifically of a little girl who we suspected was being sexually assaulted and used to regularly tantrum and try to hit us and spit on us) well, we can start to struggle too.

Also though, it's interesting to me how to know that diversity and equity are training, we are expected to lend our personal experiences and professional expertise to whoever asks for it (especially administration) whenever they find it “necessary” without anyone considering what that labor might cost us. (workshop writing)

**[“...on the worst of days...on the best of days...”]**

I am a NYC public school teacher because of my loans. That sounds terrible, but morale is at an all-time low right now and the staff feels just as defeated as the students. On the worst of days, what keeps me in these schools is the hope for Public Service Loan Forgiveness on my hefty school loans. On the best of days, what keeps me there are the kids. It's always the kids. (workshop writing)

**[“...move away from standardized testing and move towards real-life learning...”]**

I have a lot of hopes for the future.

I hope that we can start to offer--move away from standardized testing and that being the focus in classrooms and move towards real-life learning.

Teaching students financial literacy, digital literacy, how to be digital citizens in a world that is becoming increasingly virtual.

And so those are hopes that I have. And I hope that we can create spaces where students can feel safe being their whole selves. I think those are some of the really big hopes. And hopes that we learn to individualize and cater teaching experiences for students.

Understanding that like, yeah, we want to encourage higher education--if that's what kids want, and if it makes sense. But we also want to encourage trades if that's what makes sense. We want to encourage--we want to really look at students as a whole, and have them participate

As opposed to just creating this tunnel of:

"Everyone's going here. Everyone needs to go to college. Everyone needs to do this."

And like really looking at students, and, one, what they love and, two, what's in their best interest.

As opposed to just creating another generation with a *whole* lot of student debt. (interview)

**[“...how we show up...we're teaching kids how to live...]**

...And what I would say to future community teachers is that (And I say this a lot. It's part of my teaching philosophy.)

We're not just teaching kids, academics.

We're teaching kids how to live.

And so how we show up in terms of how we speak down to how we dress and our demeanor is delivering a message and teaching something. If we're dragging ourselves into work, we're teaching kids that that's a way to live and that that's okay. That you can be miserable and you can keep showing up to work.

We're teaching kids how to live.

So I do my best where it's in my potential to show up joyful.

And when I'm not joyful, I do my best to be transparent and honest about why I'm not joyful. I am tired today. I am tired because I have a lot of paperwork.

I work hard to create a space where my students really see me and I see them. I'm not putting on a show for them. I love what I do, but sometimes I don't have all the resources and that affects me.

So I would just remind future community teachers that you're not just teaching kids academics.

Absolutely. They have to learn to read and write. They have to learn math as well as computers, science, social studies, all of that.

But they also need to learn how to live and they learn a lot of that by watching us, by watching how we show up each day, by watching how we handle the hard days. And I don't think that means that we have to hide it. But I think we need to be mindful of how we show up each day. Even on the bad days.

Especially on the bad days. (workshop writing)

**[I think the challenge *now* is how to kind of *remain* inspired and motivated].”**

In the beginning of one's career, there's the challenge of the newness and like, "Do I have to read a lesson plan for every single thing?" and, um, you know, "How I do this?" and there's just so much more time put into lesson planning. Whereas the more, the more years you do something, you're kind of able to do that kind of stuff a little bit quicker.

But I think the challenge *now* is how to kind of *remain* inspired and motivated, to give the same level of energy to the kids and put in the same amount of work, in terms of helping them engage. Because it can be kind of *jading* when you work in this system long enough and you realize some of the challenges that are still there and feel like they have always been there.

So I think at this point, going to like really about to hit a decade, for *me*, it's really important to me that I don't become jaded. I have been educated by, and worked with, colleagues who are jaded. And it shows, right, it shows when you just print out whatever handout you have to print out for the day, and hand it to the kid, and barely act as if they're there.

Versus you really put an effort into engaging your kids, and thinking about what they're interested in, and thinking about ties to the community, and how to teach them about *real life*, not just the curriculum. How to tie the curriculum to things that are personal, that matter to them.

And so, probably where I'm at right now is finding ways to challenge myself, to just stay inspired to do this work with the *same* amount of energy that I started doing with. It requires me to be intentional about how I spend my time, how I choose to work with the kids. Like I have to be really intentional about those things. If that makes sense. (interview)

**[“...on the other end of it...]”**

It was...felt very cathartic.

I don't feel that this school year--where the school system is right now and maybe it's because of collective trauma with the pandemic, and all that--really hasn't allowed for much time for reflection.

And so it was really nice to have some time to really reflect on my experiences in the public school system. On the other end of it--being a student versus thinking about where I am now being a teacher.

And so, that was a really rewarding experience in some ways. Like I just haven't had the time or the spaces to think about that, and being intentional about reflecting on that.

Even professional development isn't something where I'm getting much of it now because [slight laughter] we're so understaffed and overworked. So that part was nice. 'And then to be in community with other teachers was--that don't necessarily work with me but doing similar work--was really nice as possible. (interview)

**["I'm currently at a crossroads...it's time for me to start a new journey as well."]**

I'm currently at a crossroads. Next year will be my 10th year in the DOE and having just moved to the Bronx I'm trying to figure out whether or not I should try to transition into a more local, community school or continue to commute to Queens.

I'm struggling with the idea of leaving my coworkers behind who I work so collaboratively with, and my students. I'd like to at least see some of them graduate before moving on, but every year I get attached to new students so there's never really a good time to leave.

My Assistant Principal just left the school. She was a big part of the reason I stayed in District 75 as long as I did. I'm wondering if her departure means it's time for me to start a new journey as well. A lot of hard decisions to make. (workshop writing)

**["...Love and...A steady practice of reflection."]**

I guess, to answer the question, what I want people to know most is that at the heart of everything I do is two things: 1) Love and 2) A Steady practice of reflection.

Love alone is not enough.

We need to constantly be thinking and striving towards how to best meet student needs, especially as those needs transform due to cultural and societal influences (i.e. digital literacy, 21st-century skills, pandemic, trauma, etc.) (workshop writing)



On the first day of Kindergarten, I walked onto the courtyard of P.S. 19Q with my sweaty palms holding on to my mother until the very last possible minute. I lined up with my assigned teacher, took a deep breath and got ready for the new adventure my parents had coached me about. “La educacion es lo mas importante mija” papi had whispered into my ear as he tucked me into bed the night before.

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And so began my educational career.

A few months later, a teacher from the school came to our house and tried to convince Papi to switch me into an ESL class but Papi refused. He said I would learn by immersion. And I did. It helped that we learned English together. Papi would come home from work with an English word of the day and we would go over it in unison, a mini-classroom practice facilitated at home. This daily ritual was a delight for the both of us.

Despite the language difference, I loved school. I learned how to add and subtract with Ms. Cafeteria in the first grade. She brought in her pet snake and let us use the shedded skin in our small groups as manipulatives. I experienced deep joy when we got to celebrate our cultures in bright and colorful ways, like the giant Dance Festival we held in the outdoor courtyard annually. Every grade would represent a specific dance or culture and we all dressed up in traditional outfits to perform for our families and friends who were also invited.

By fifth grade, no one would have guessed I walked onto that courtyard not knowing English. My classmates teased me and called me a teacher’s pet, but I didn’t care. My mom would drop me off early every morning and I was proud to call myself Ms. Cooperman’s student assistant. I made copies, organized papers and did whatever else she needed me to in the classroom before class started for the day. I have vivid memories of the group projects she assigned us. Being a proud Jewish teacher, she assigned us intense collateral projects about the Holocaust and Jewish internment camps and I became obsessed with the topic. She even had us read the book “Four Perfect Pebbles” and one of the authors came in to speak to us about her experience. It was an unforgettable experience but a decade later in college I will have wished I had learned a little bit about my own history (i.e. Trujillo and the parsley massacre, the racial history of Dominican Republic, the transatlantic slave trade, etc.)

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I'll never forget my eighth grade ELA teacher and how much she supported my writing. She would read my poems outside of class. She showed true interest in what I was interested in and that was memorable for me. It was always memorable for me when my teachers brought their passions to the table. Their passion inspired my own interests.

High School Track and Field was a game-changer for me. I was “one of” not many brown students in high school in a school that was predominantly white and Asian. I didn't go to my zoned high school but was fortunate enough to qualify for a specialized Humanities school (likely because of all the help the Urban Scholars program offered me.) Track and Field became my family. My people. My community. Home in a place where teen angst and academic rigor triggered a hot mess of developmental depression.

My father always emphasized the importance of education. It was a mantra in our household. My mother didn't go past the 7th grade, being sent off to do domestic work in the capital to help bring money home. My father graduated high school and started medical school but didn't have the money to finish. I am a product of the sobering reality that not everyone has access to education and they made sure I never forgot that. Coming into the education field as a bilingual speech-language pathologist was a difficult journey filled with lots of imposter syndrome. I was always “the only” or “one of” in my higher ed classrooms. Having served almost a decade now in the public school sector, I can also say that I see the positive impact of students seeing pieces of their life reflected in me.

Reflecting on my personal experiences as a public school student, I can see a clear connection with how my history shaped my career. The teachers that changed my life and made the largest impact did so by incorporating their passions and taking a genuine interest in what I cared about. Something I'm really intentional about in my work with students is taking inventory of their interests. At the beginning of every school year, I have the kids make “happy lists.” I simply ask them what makes them happy. What brings them joy? And I take those lists and I keep them in my toolbox and in mind as I go through the rest of the school year because I think centering joy is a really important and underutilized part of learning.

I also make sure that my students know that I care about them above all else. Above assignments, above testing and all the criteria they have to meet. I make sure that they know that I care.

I have this one student who always walks around with really ashy hands. And I tell him jokingly but also very seriously, “You can't be walking around looking ashy bro. It's not a good look for you.” I brought him some lotion from home. It was this tiny little sample size and it was gone in a week. That entire week, every time I walked into his classroom, he looked at his hands and then he looked at me with so much pride and commented on how he wasn't ashy anymore. He even went out of his way to tell me that he needed more lotion. I smiled and just responded “I got you. I will buy you some lotion for you to have on your desk.” We haven't met his goals yet in terms of what we are working on, but I wouldn't be surprised if this is something that this kid remembers in life. A life lesson that he repeats to others “yo, my teacher said I can't be walking around ashy.”

To an outsider, I know this may sound silly, but I also know my students and know that he feels special by doing this. So I know that when I ask him to do the hard stuff this year, he's gonna show up and do that hard stuff and give it his all because he knows I care about him. He's going to trust that if I'm asking him to do something, it's for a reason. Even he doesn't understand it yet.

My hope for future community teachers is that they can feel more valued than what we do right now. I think a lot of us feel really undervalued and that affects our morale. In turn, that affects the work and the students. There's no other way around that. It's like a family. If the parents aren't good, the kids aren't going to be good,

you know? And what I would say to future community teachers is that (And I say this a lot. It's part of my teaching philosophy.) We're not just teaching kids, academics. We're teaching kids how to live. And so how we show up in terms of how we speak down to how we dress and our demeanor is delivering a message and teaching something. If we're dragging ourselves into work, we're teaching kids that that's a way to live, and that that's okay. That you can be miserable and you can keep showing up to work.

We're teaching kids how to live and so I do my best where it's in my potential to show up joyful and when I'm not joyful, I do my best to be transparent and honest about why I'm not joyful. I am tired today. I am tired because I have a lot of paperwork. **I work hard to create a space where my students really see me and I see them.** I'm not putting on a show for them. I love what I do, but sometimes I don't have all the resources and that affects me.

So I would just remind future community teachers that you're not just teaching kids academics. Absolutely. They have to learn to read and write. They have to learn math as well as computers, science, social studies, all of that. But they also need to learn how to live and they learn a lot of that by watching us, by watching how we show up each day, by watching how we handle the hard days. And I don't think that means that we have to hide it. But I think we need to be mindful of how we show up each day. Even on the bad days. Especially on the bad days.

