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Teaching the Unteachable

Author **Stacey Bess's** inspiring story shows the importance of reaching all students



Upon her mother's advice, Stacey Bess went to college and got a 'degree she could use' — in elementary education.

To be honest, Bess said, she didn't really want to be a teacher; she wanted to be a mother. But once she got her degree, her mother and husband encouraged her to go to the Salt Lake City School District and inquire about a job.

At the district office, Bess was offered a tough assignment — teaching students at the city's homeless shelter. Immediately after being offered the job, Bess cried in her car in the district office parking lot. She wasn't crying because she was happy, she was crying because she didn't want the job.

After a few nights contemplating whether or not to take it, she came to a realization.

"It isn't your skills that these people will remember, it is you," Bess said. "All of the trials and all of the triumphs that make us people are what changes the lives of children and their families."

Bess didn't know it at the time, but the job would change her life. She would write a best-selling book based on her experiences that would eventually be made into a movie.

In her classroom, Bess had 36 students and 15 desks. It didn't take long for her to feel out of place. One student, Zachary, resisted Bess. At the end of each day, he gave her a little

shove and told her to go home.

One day, Bess pulled Zachary into her classroom and asked for his help. Zachary, who was a leader among her students, told her to not be anyone's friend, just teach. Eventually, Bess learned Zachary's story. When he was five, his mom lined her children against a wall and said she couldn't afford to keep all of them. Zachary was one his mom decided she couldn't afford. He lived with his dad and frequently moved from city to city. Every time he grew attached to a woman, he had to leave.

Bess made a promise not to leave him, "I told him, 'If you help me, I will stay until you graduate from high school.'"

Soon after making this promise to Zachary and gaining his trust, Bess was diagnosed with cancer and had to undergo surgery. When Bess told her students she would have to leave for a while, Zachary took it badly.

As Bess woke up after the surgery, a group of her students were standing around her bed. The students were led by Zachary who had put his trust back into Bess. "You said you'd stay, I trust you," he told her.

Zachary, who is now an adult, works in Alaska as a contractor. Before speaking to one group, Bess called and asked Zachary what she should tell people. "I kept hearing you say that I was incredible and I believed

you," Zachary said. "That's what you should be telling people."

In another story, Bess promised to give an especially energetic child a prize if he would listen to her instructions for two weeks. At the end of the two weeks, the student pounded on her desk and told her he was ready for his prize. Bess told the student the prize request had to be within reason. The student said he wanted to meet Karl Malone, an all-star basketball player for the Utah Jazz.

Doubtful that he would respond, Bess put in a request to Mr. Malone. Remarkably, he agreed to visit the school. Bess remembers walking down to the lobby of the homeless shelter to meet Malone. She saw him standing in the lobby — all 6'9" of him. Intimidated, Bess introduced herself and was surprised to hear he was eager to meet her students.

"He told me, 'Miss Stacey, I didn't come here to hide behind my jersey. Today I want to be Uncle Karl, I want to get down on the floor and play with the students,'" Bess remembers.

In the classroom, Bess said she cried as she watched the children climb all over Malone, measure his hands, and play with him on the floor of the classroom.

"I learned that you can't hide behind your credentials, you've got to get down on the floor and be a human being," Bess said. ■