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## Profiles in Teacher Leadership Today

**W**e begin this book with four compelling stories that illustrate what is possible when teachers embrace teacher leadership. What makes these stories so interesting and unique is how dramatically different they are from one another. We hope these stories will show you that your journey in teacher leadership is your own, and the evolution of how you see yourself—that image in the mirror—is driven by the choices you make. Read the following stories carefully. We speak of them repeatedly throughout the book as authentic examples of each concept in action. Don't become just a "mirror image" of teachers you have seen in the past. Instead, embrace your own vision for what is possible and create the type of teacher leader you are destined to be.

### **SHE CHANGED THEIR LIVES AND FOUND HERSELF**

Kate Murray is an English and French teacher and department chair for her high school in a wealthy suburb near Detroit.

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Historically, Detroit has been one of the most segregated metro areas in the United States and Kate teaches in a predominantly Caucasian, wealthy, and high-performing high school. Students who attend the school come from affluent families. Many of these families made their money as top executives in the auto industry.

Kate's school has gone through a rather dramatic change in the last several years. Confronting a shrinking urban population, numerous high schools in the city of Detroit were shut down almost overnight. Students from these schools were rerouted to every corner of the city and some found themselves redistricted altogether, suddenly in the mix with these wealthy suburbs.

Following multiple generations of homogenous, high achievement, Kate's high school faced a unique challenge—assimilating a small but significant number of African American students whose culture, background, and educational opportunities had been anything but equal. Suddenly without a school, the students were asked to connect with a building unfamiliar to them in every way possible.

Not surprisingly, these new students struggled in every way. Many had extremely low reading scores and would by all accounts be considered at risk or low performing. While Kate's school welcomed these new students, it was undoubtedly a difficult challenge for everyone to be faced with supporting students whose culture, background, and academic challenges were very different from the students they had served in the past.

Like many of her colleagues, Kate experienced some disconnect given her experience as a teacher in an affluent building. She also had a personal disconnect as she had gone to high school in a wealthy Chicago suburb and attended a prestigious college. As a young, white woman with this pedigree, Kate knew how hard it would be to connect with these students in a way that would best meet their needs. Kate also knew that she was thinking of leaving teaching. As she thought about her future, she wondered if her "image" of a teacher wasn't more appropriately

linked to a pursuit of higher education and perhaps a career as an Ivy League professor. Kate was at a crossroads.

When she entered teaching, Kate had responded to what you may know as “the calling.” While she could count many victories in the classroom and had served her students well in her short career, Kate realized that the challenge in front of her was transcendent—and one she couldn’t ignore. She realized these students were in trouble. If her high school didn’t respond appropriately, it was likely these students would drop out and face numerous economic and social challenges.

Kate began with the academic challenges these students faced in reading and writing. She organized a program called Freshman Assist, designed to help transitioning ninth graders boost their reading levels and develop study skills in preparation for a new, competitive environment. Kate approached her department’s reading teacher about teaching in the Freshman Assist program. She refused the assignment. Placing visions of graduate school and a doctoral thesis on hold, Kate ignored convention and took on the challenge herself.

At this point, almost everyone thought Kate was in over her head. She had never taught reading and she knew her students’ academic deficits were excruciatingly difficult. She admitted that she didn’t know or understand their culture and would have to make a commitment to improve her knowledge in this area. Not to be deterred, Kate worked hard to become the loving and supportive guide she hoped to be for those students.

Naysayers said Kate was out of her element. She was the wrong color, had the wrong background, and wasn’t academically prepared for the job she was trying to do. After all, many of these students had reading scores at the second- or third-grade level. The prospect of getting these unacquainted, uncomfortable, and academically challenged students through the ninth grade and in a position to graduate was a challenge that few at the school actually thought Kate could meet.

What these pessimists didn’t know about Kate, and perhaps what she didn’t know about herself, was that she was a

#### 4 Mirror Images

fighter. She decided to pursue additional academic credentials in reading and literacy and immersed herself in literature related to working with students from tough, economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The more she read, the more excited she became about the opportunity to transform the lives of the students she served.

Much to everyone's surprise, one year after Kate's home-made program began, each of the troubled, academically challenged students was reading at grade level. In addition to raising their reading scores, Kate had also become their leader and guide. They came to her when they faced challenges in other classes and she encouraged them. She raised expectations and supported each of them in meeting her demands.

Suffice to say, Kate's success caught the attention of her principal and the school board. They elected to continue support for the program. Kate reshaped the program into what is known today as FAST, the Freshman Academic Success Team. This evolution identified other subject-matter teachers who understood her mission and were willing to help this special group of students. These teachers joined forces with the goal of saving the students.

With new levels of support, the second cohort of students in the FAST program saw an amazing turnaround in their reading scores, as well as in their academic readiness in other core subject areas. The relationships they established with the teachers helped the displaced high school students feel wanted and appreciated. For the teachers involved, the admiration was mutual.

When the students left Kate's program, she remained connected to them. She supported them throughout their high school years. Astonishingly, all of the students in Kate's first year of the program graduated on time and attended college. Today, Kate can reflect on her first freshman group with pride. She shared her passion, set the bar high, and helped each student achieve unexpected results through discipline, connection, love, and consistency.

Kate is a hero in the hearts of the students she serves. When she heard her calling as a teacher, she embraced the challenge

and found the unique treasures waiting to emerge from her students, her colleagues, and herself. She became a teacher leader who reshaped her own image of what it means to lead, teach, learn, and grow.



### THEY LEARNED TO LIVE THE LESSON

Several years ago, Khris Nedom's sixth-grade class in Northville, Michigan, read Robert Coles' *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. The book is about a four-year-old African American girl who made national headlines as one of the first black children to break the educational color barrier in Louisiana. They also read Marshall Poe's *Little Rock Nine*, a similar story about black high school students in Arkansas. Khris's students were moved by the struggles these students faced just to get an education. They reflected aloud with Khris on how fortunate they were to live in a community where education was available to everyone.

Later, while these same students studied twentieth-century segregation, they were shocked to learn that in many regions of Afghanistan girls were not allowed an education. The brutal rule of the Taliban made change and progress difficult. In what might be described as the ultimate teachable moment, the students looked at Khris and asked, "Is there anything we can do to make this better?"

If you were to observe Khris in her classroom, you might describe her as a "typical" Michigan elementary teacher. Khris, however, is anything but average. She is unusually intelligent and has spent a lifetime serving the needs of others. She has traveled internationally many times, traversing rugged terrain to help those who might otherwise never be served.

Her journeys brought her satisfaction in service, as well as the knowledge that providing this type of help is not for the faint of heart. Khris knew that to teach her students what it takes to make a difference, they would have to understand

that profound action and sacrifice would be required. While most of us would feel good if we held a fund-raiser and sent a check, Khris and her students shocked the world when they announced plans to build a school in Wonkhai, Afghanistan.

Few beyond Khris, her professional network, and her students believed this was anything but a dream. Most teachers, parents, and community members thought the pursuit absurd. The reality would involve changing tribal paradigms in Wonkhai to get approval from the village elders to allow girls to go to school. If the elders approved, they would still have to go to the Taliban leadership to ask their permission. Even if they leaped all these hurdles, Khris and her students would still need to raise a substantial amount of money to support the project.

Anyone who has served on a bond or construction committee in their school district understands how difficult it is to erect a school. Imagine trying to do it halfway around the world with dramatic cultural challenges, hostile political forces, and the economic difficulty of fund-raising and hoping the dollars would be appropriately spent. As you might imagine, not all parents embraced the merits of their sons and daughters giving time, energy, and family treasure to support an effort in Afghanistan.

Khris and her students began their journey to make a difference in 1998. In January of 2001, construction was complete on a six-room schoolhouse complete with many of the accoutrements of a modern school in the United States. In just 36 months, the simple question, "Is there anything we can do to make this better?" was answered in a profound, transformative, and life-changing way.

In 2011, Khris and her Kids 4 Afghan Kids project continue to fund and nurture the enterprise. Over the years, their efforts have led to the construction of two elementary buildings, one secondary school, an orphanage, and a health clinic. They also have an orchard, stables, and livestock as moneymaking resources for extra needs that arise.

Khris has an uncommon spirit and drive. She didn't listen to the monotonous negativity of those who tried to make ugly

her students' beautiful acts. Khris showed inspirational ability to influence others with love, generosity, and kindness. And her journey in teacher leadership stands as an exemplar of how to lead change at the most significant levels.

A fifth-grade teacher in an unexceptional classroom, Khris emerged as an exceptional and transcendent school leader. While Khris came into the profession with a unique notion of service and contribution, her impressive actions in connection with this project redefined her vision of herself as a teacher leader. She also raised the bar for all of us, in redefining what is possible in a classroom.



### HER QUIET DILIGENCE

Three decades ago, Mary Ann Nowacki began her education career while teaching in a prison in Cleveland, Ohio. If you met Mary Ann today, you wouldn't be surprised at her ability to deal with the prison environment. Her toughness is unmistakable, yet her compassion and love for teaching are undeniable.

It was at this first job in the prison that she realized the quiet, reserved young woman she was could only emerge as a teacher if she learned to connect with others. The new teacher she saw in the mirror also needed a certain toughness she hadn't discovered. Mary Ann's tenure as a teacher in the prison helped her acquire a thoughtful confidence that would serve her well in the decades to come.

After leaving the prison job in Cleveland, Mary Ann was hired at the biggest high school in Ohio. She joined a department with twenty veteran math teachers who had the strength and confidence needed to survive in a large, urban setting. Working in this environment represented yet another challenge for Mary Ann. She was still new to teaching and students and teachers alike have a tendency to get lost in these large environments. Mary Ann knew she would have to be special to make her mark with colleagues and learners. While there are many

ways to stand out in a crowd, Mary Ann decided to distinguish herself by becoming an amazing classroom teacher.

Mary Ann buckled down and honed her craft. Year after year, she adopted new strategies to connect with her students. Her colleagues began to notice her energy, passion, and dedication. Her high school had an active teachers' association and union leadership encouraged Mary Ann to serve on various association subcommittees. She was an ideal choice because she was young, energetic, and increasingly confident. Furthermore, she loved her profession and didn't mind advocating for the teaching colleagues she was growing to care about more with each passing year.

The teachers' association gleefully used her as their voice during difficult moments because of her outstanding reputation. It was impossible for detractors to claim that Mary Ann's union advocacy was based on laziness or a desire to simply coast. Everyone knew about the long hours she worked and her unbelievable diligence in the classroom. When she spoke out for the union, it was impossible not to listen. Mary Ann realized that her diligence and dedication to her craft had allowed her to succeed in ways she hadn't imagined.

Many teachers would have been satisfied with this image of excellence in the mirror each morning. But not Mary Ann. Her efforts to search out new instructional practices were never-ending. At the time, the idea of cooperative learning was surging in popularity. Mary Ann decided to get some training in this approach; she was hooked after day one.

Mary Ann became an impassioned advocate for cooperative learning and began researching everything she could find on the subject. For her, this model created energy, connection, and focus in her classroom and allowed her to strategically differentiate instruction without halting progress for the rest of the class. It gave her students a chance to lead, learn together, collaborate, and develop skills they would need as adults.

Colleagues who did not know Mary Ann very well looked at her endeavors and said, "There's no way you can use cooperative learning for every class, every day.



It's impossible." Winking and smiling, Mary Ann replied, "Oh yes you can. Come by my room any day of the week, any week of the year. You'll see." Her determination and conviction were hard to resist.

Mary Ann's reputation as an outstanding instructor made everything she said important to her teaching colleagues. Her failure rates were extremely low and students in her class showed a unique affection for math, their classmates, and Mary Ann. Soon, she became the local expert in cooperative learning. Then, teachers throughout the Toledo area saw Mary Ann as the regional expert in cooperative learning and she happily gave her time to help teaching colleagues learn what she knew.

Mary Ann eventually developed a statewide reputation for classroom excellence. She spoke at state conferences and shared as much expertise as her energies allowed. As Mary Ann's expertise increased, she could have launched a website, written a book, and made a reputation in the industry as a high-powered consultant. Instead, Mary Ann kept her focus where she wanted it: in the classroom. Her life's work was to ignite her students' passion for math and to help them strive toward excellence.

Mary Ann knew that her highest achievement as a teacher wouldn't result in a standing ovation at a conference or a publisher's report on book sales. She was wise enough to know that it would come in quiet moments when she knew her efforts had made a difference in her students' lives. For a teacher leader, this is professional satisfaction at its best.

One afternoon as Mary Ann was busy in her classroom, she noticed a well-dressed young man standing in the doorway. It was Donte, one of the most difficult students the school had ever known. After multiple suspensions and what seemed like an inability to get along with any teacher, it appeared he might become another dropout statistic in a large, urban area.

When he joined Mary Ann's class, she, too, experienced his challenging ways. He struggled with the content. He did everything he could to disrupt his classmates and his teacher.

But thanks to Mary Ann's wit, grit, and strategy, Donte survived the year in Mary Ann's class. In fact, he had unusual success working with her. It was not surprising, then, that Donte was placed in her class for his sophomore year.

After two years with Mary Ann, Donte had discovered that he could be successful academically and that he could get along with his teachers. On his last day with her, Mary Ann wished Donte well and watched as he disappeared into the vast sea that was her high school. She had not spoken to Donte since, so Mary Ann was shocked to see him back at her door.

"Donte! Welcome back!" Mary Ann said with a smile. With a look of shock, Donte replied, "You remember me?" In her sly teacher voice, Mary Ann said with a wink, "Now, Donte. How could I forget you?" Donte looked at the class of students in front of him. He probably saw himself in a few of their faces.

Donte had been a loud, wisecracking student who always took the joke too far. He had been a constant distraction to those around him and his actions made him difficult to work with. Now, to Mary Ann's surprise, Donte's voice was sweet, quiet, and humble. Donte said, "I came back to see you, Mrs. Nowacki. I wanted to tell you that I never would have made it through high school without you. You believed in me and you didn't give up."

Mary Ann hugged Donte before he left the room in an emotional moment between a teacher leader and a student she loved. There were tears in her eyes as Donte thanked her again and walked out the door.

At the end of the hour, Mary Ann's class had moved on and she was busy grading papers in the solitude of her room. A smile came across her face as she thought about Donte and how far he had come. No placard was issued and no lengthy soliloquy was delivered. She didn't get a raise in pay, but in that moment of solitude, Mary Ann experienced the most profound satisfaction that a teacher leader can have. She knew that her teaching had made a difference in the life of a student. She knew that not every student would come back to thank her, but

the confirmation she had received from Donte was what this teacher leader had been searching for.



## THE MASTER MOTIVATOR

When Jim Mayzes became a physical education teacher, he brought optimism, fitness, and focus to his job. He had worked as a manager in one of the largest health clubs in the city but decided that his true calling wasn't going to be measured in the number of sales he generated or the amount of money he made. Instead, he decided, teaching physical education and coaching football would be his destiny.

When Jim was named the high school football coach, he experienced an unforgettable greeting in the teachers' lounge. Renee, a fellow gym teacher, chirped loudly in front of the room, "Hey, Jim! Did you really take the head football coaching job?" With a quick smile, Jim said, "Yes I did, Renee." She went on, "You should have waited for the golf coaching job to open up. This school has never won a league championship in football and never will." Although her statement wasn't all that funny, the lounge exploded with laughter. Several of the staff's most disconnected teachers were particularly appreciative of Renee's attack. Jim just smiled. "We'll see."

Despite the inappropriateness of Renee's caustic attack, there was good reason to be skeptical of Jim's capacity to be successful in the position. Their town had never embraced football and the school's team had never won more than six games in a ten-game season.

There were many theories as to why the team had never been very good. Some said the community had too many wealthy parents who weren't tough enough to get their sons and daughters to compete. Others chalked it up to several decades of poor performance and an inability to adjust expectations. A number of talented athletes were lured away from Jim's public school and went instead to highly competitive

private high schools. To some, Jim's first coaching job didn't seem like a very good opportunity because there appeared to be so many factors working against him.

Jim's fire, optimism, hard work, and dedication were evident from the first moment of his first season. Local fans noticed a significant change in the intensity of the players. Each week, the team became a more competitive adversary. Going into the tenth and last game of the season, Jim's team had already won six games. They had tied the team's record for the most number of wins in a season. But Jim and his team weren't satisfied. They thought that winning that seventh game would put them in a special category and would explode the myths about what was possible for their football team.

That tenth game, however, was being played on the road against a team that was unbeaten in nine games and was counting on one last win to vault them into the state playoffs. It was a cold, rainy midwestern fall night. Jim's team was outmatched and observers in the know were predicting a blowout. After three and a half quarters of play, however, there was no blowout. Jim's team had fought fiercely and, heading into the last half of the fourth quarter, was only down by a few points. But Jim's players did even better than that. With just a few minutes to go, they took the lead by four.

This great moment was short-lived, however, as the championship team was not to be denied. Powered by one of the top offenses in the state, the home team's quarterback drove the team downfield and with a minute remaining, was only a yard away from scoring the winning touchdown.

Jim's fans in the bleachers were heartbroken. The team had fought so hard, but at this point it seemed inevitable that they would lose in the final minute of play. Jim, however, wasn't finished yet. With rain dripping off his hat, Jim ran onto the field and implored his players to stand their ground, fill their gaps, and prevent an enormous push on the part of the offense.

On both the first and second downs, the running back crashed into the line and tried to drive into the end zone. Despite being smaller than their opponents, Jim's team fought

with tenacity and held their ground. On the third down, the offense again pushed toward the goal line only to be stopped in their tracks.

Exhausted, covered in mud, and having pushed themselves to the limit, team members huddled for their final time out. Jim asked his team to hold their ground one last time. The final snap came almost in slow motion. The quarterback rolled to the left and dove for the end zone. The defense met him head on and drove him into the backfield.

The game was over. Jim's team had won their seventh game of the season against an undefeated team, broken the record for most wins in a season in the history of the school, and proven what is possible with motivation, energy, belief, and passion.

It was tempting for Jim to go back to Renee and the others and say, "I told you so!" Instead, Jim spent the next seventeen years continuing to transform the program. His teams won the league title eleven times, were undefeated during the regular season twice, became regional champions twice, and appeared in the state championship twice, winning it all in 2008.

Jim's passion as a teacher leader helped transform his team, his school, and his community. Jim has spent a generation building an example of what is possible when you believe. As Jim looked in the mirror as he readied himself to teach and coach each day, he was the only one who saw the future that would unfold for him and his students. Certainly, that image of teacher leadership is now recognizable to everyone.