

Nearly 10 years since leaving the classroom, I've returned home to New Haven Public Schools (NHPS) to teach at Wilbur Cross. I'm happier than I've been in a long time.

I started teaching in 2006 at Fair Haven, then middle school in New Haven. Here I am, this white, wide-eyed, ambitious 20-something. I was fortunate enough to work as a tutor in the building before coming on full time to fill an 8th grade language arts position, so I had enough exposure to know generally what I was getting into. I spent the summer making copies and getting ready for my students. On my first day, I got a box of red pens and a ream of copy paper and cursory good luck and a brusque wave from the school secretary (one whom I would inevitably come to love and respect deeply). Despite working there for a few months the previous school year, I didn't know what to expect, not really.

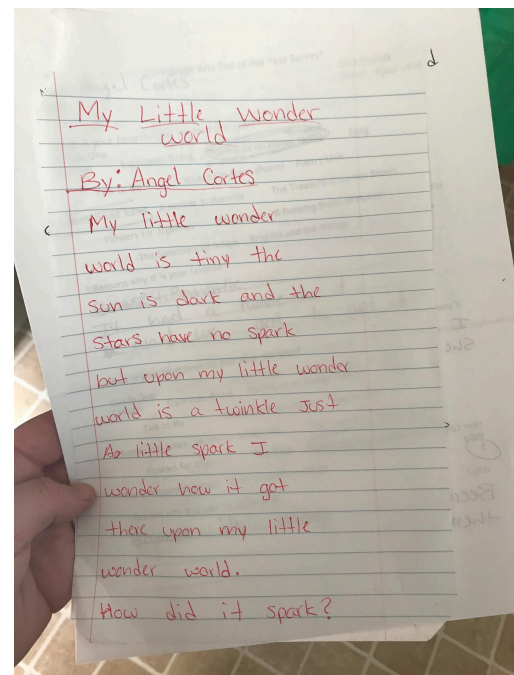
The 8 years I spent at Fair Haven were truly formative years both as a teacher and a person. I didn't come easily to teaching. There are some people who are naturals. I was not that. I had plenty of ideas—many of which did not pan out. It was because of my school and wider NHPS family that I not only survived, but thrived. I could rely on my colleagues to help me grow. Eventually, I learned how to establish clear boundaries, protect my sanity, voice my opinions at the right time, work in cross-generational teams of adults, listen more than I talk, find ways to be a leader in my own role, allow space for other voices, and accept rejection. I had to learn those lessons over time, and sometimes over multiple experiences.

Yes, I had my own horror stories—finding drugs on the stairwell, breaking up fights, students living in poverty and fear of street violence and immigration policy. These were all realities, sometimes stretching too wide for my wide-eyed ambition. When I stopped trying to 'save' my students from their circumstances, and instead learn from them and how to open pathways to their learning, I found a peaceful rhythm. I learned Spanish—fluently and attained my second Master's degree in TESOL and Bilingual education through the Training for All Teachers

(TAT) grant at Southern CT State University for free, got trained in the Comer Model, the NAATE Teacher Leader program, Understanding by Design curriculum model, the SIOP model, Fred Jones' Tools for Teaching, Restorative Practices, became a mentor to new teachers, and participated in book studies, and countless professional conversations about equity and access, due only to the fact that I taught in New Haven.

At Fair Haven, my students grew with me. We crafted our learning experiences together. They became true readers and writers. We read classics and young adult literature and wrote with broken pencils swept up from the floor, until I got a set of ancient, yet functional laptops refurbished by an organization in Massachusetts. Four years ago, a student from my first or second class of 8th graders showed up to my house by coincidence for an electrical job. I dug through my trunk of papers I'd saved over the years to find a poem he'd written in 8th grade. It was a reimagining of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." While he re-read his own creation penned by a goofy, slightly immature 8th grader, Angel's eyes welled up. He couldn't imagine why, after all these years, I'd kept something of his. If you're a teacher, you know that there are certain assignments that stop you in your tracks. Certain pieces and projects that just let you know that not only do they 'get it,' but they also have expanded their view or knowledge. It's a leveling up of sorts. This was that for Angel.

When I left Fair Haven, I did so to grow my practice and expand my reach as an educator. Because of the rich assets my students brought to the classroom, I was able to understand the processes of cultural and linguistic acquisition—not just blending in. Linguistic and cultural



exchanges were authentic. We once spent 30 minutes in class talking about the different ways to talk about a grass lawn in Spanish, which led to further conversations about using the right words in the right order in any language. Through my work at ACES as a professional learning specialist focusing on multilingual learners, I was able to partner with over 20 school districts to assist them with developing their programming for their multilingual students and influence policy and practice for the more than 40,000 multilingual students in CT who have yet to attain English proficiency. Thanks to my colleagues at ACES—mostly former NHPS teachers—I learned to balance my fearless advocacy with inquiry. I tamed (most of) my hubris.

After a tumultuous and beautiful time of being an assistant principal for 11 months in another district, I longed for the opportunity to return home to my own community. My own children proudly attend NHPS and will through their senior years. I chose to live in New Haven with my sons. (I was able to buy my first home with the First Time Homebuyers program and a Downpayment Assistance Program because I am a teacher.) In November 2022, I rejoined my community as an English teacher at Wilbur Cross High School. I feel whole again. I am able to balance my family—being a new parent to my partner's three year old, as well as an 'old' parent to my 9 and 11 year old boys—with my responsibilities as a teacher. As I put my admin hat aside for now, not collecting dust, just giving me room to breathe and grow a bit, I am finishing out my 17th year in education and onto my 18th year back in my happy place.

This past school year has been curative. Wilbur Cross is a sanctuary. I have been in and worked with high schools across the state, and Wilbur Cross, despite its aging infrastructure and challenges of working in the most populous school in the district, is safe and warm. There is space for all voices, even though we are bursting at the seams. There are on-going challenges of truancy and other struggles associated with poverty and the pandemic. I know I can depend on

my colleagues to work through most any challenge. We are family at Cross, and everyone's invited to our table.

Teaching isn't for the faint of heart. I don't have to stay after school reading and grading and researching until 6:00PM anymore; I've learned to work more efficiently. I sometimes miss the conversations with our night custodian, Mr. Campbell who walked me to my car each night. I've amassed enough strategies and approaches that my toolkit needs some thinning and refining. Teaching takes balance of head and heart—the art and science of education. It is believing unfailingly that ALL people have the capacity to learn hard things. I keep my eyes wide enough to ensure I'm not missing the whole story. Most of all, I am full of gratitude to come home to NHPS and continue my learning journey.