Moving On

"Mister Richman, I did it!" Clementine exclaimed, nearly floating with effervescence. She added a high five hard enough to give me something to massage through the evening’s ceremony.

Every year during my decade at a public high school in Portland, Oregon in the United States, I walked along the line of graduates waiting to process, polyester caps and gowns sounding like deflating tires as bodies shifted, sharing congratulations with those students with whom I worked so closely. Whether students joined me in the resource room or when I supervised a behaviour classroom, their foremost objective was to graduate with a high school diploma. I steadfastly believed then—as I do now—that graduating is an especially impressive achievement, meeting fundamental coursework expectations with the added challenges of learning differences.

After recessing from the theatre and removing my gown and colored hood, I would ride my bike home misty-eyed with visions of students striding across the stage warming my heart. That was usually the last time I saw them. At eighteen years old with independence well within their reach, this is just as it should be.

Being the leaver is a new coat I wear since expanding my worldview to become an international educator. While I intellectually understand the benefit to students of my experiences as a teacher and learner in professional communities in the United States, United Kingdom and the Netherlands, still I find this a bittersweet perspective. Working side-by-side with kids with unique learning profiles often forges formidable relationships due to obstacles overcome, victories celebrated, seemingly-impossible assignments submitted, self-advocacy recognised and passing grades earned. Some journeys have been lengthy epics (that could feel like eons), some were shorter in duration if not intensity. If I were being especially romantic (yet rugged!), I would say that we have battled together.

All this is to say that bidding goodbye to my students has never been easy, nor will it be when this year reaches its denouement. I will miss their self-satisfied smiles when they earn the grade toward which they worked diligently; I will miss encouraging them to ask those one or two important questions of their math teacher; I will miss chatting about the weekend. I will miss being their coach, collaborator, consultant, cheerleader and armchair psychologist. I will miss learning from them: when to walk with a student to seek help from a teacher and when to nudge them out the door so they can do so on their own; how to match students with tools to help them achieve to their utmost. Most of all, I will miss watching these magnificent young people shake hands with our school’s director at their graduation ceremony, smiles wide with deserved pride.

After the chairs are folded and stacked and stray programs picked up, I will pack a box of books, bubble-wrap my framed prints and get ready for August when I will meet a fresh collection of kids at a new school in cheery Londontown. Moving on is melancholy and thrilling all at once—making my feelings not so different from those of Portland Public School graduates. Just as they did, I look forward to embracing the change.