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FIRST PERSON**A Teacher's New Year's Resolution: Brag More****By Julie Conlon**

Last month, I joined a friend for dinner and drinks after her Chamber of Commerce "Wednesday Friendsday." Sitting at the martini bar amidst real estate agents and financial advisors, all of whom were strangers to me prior to that evening, I found myself continually excluded from the conversation. When they found out I was a high school English teacher, they realized I had nothing to offer them—no contacts, no business, no money. All they had for me were sympathetic shakes of their heads and a few patronizing quips.

"Not a lot of money in that."

"Ninth grade? I remember what I was like in 9th grade."

"I don't know how you do it. You're a much better person than me."

I found myself making excuses and jokes. *"It's nice to have my summers off. Why do you think I'm at a bar on a school night? When it comes to 9th grade boys, it's not me you should feel sorry for, it's the girls in my classes; At least I've learned to laugh at the boys' antics. The girls are still crying—and will be for the next 10 years."*

All the while, I was thinking to myself, *I may not get paid as much as you guys, but at least I don't have to put up with the fake smiles, half-hearted handshakes, and bar tabs of people I really don't like.*

The next morning, I found myself in an English department meeting. Other than the topics of discussion and lack of refreshments, it was very much like the martini meeting the previous night—everyone was more interested in his or her own agenda than the companionship. Two teachers shared a best practice, a union rep asked us to wear red on Friday to show our support for contract negotiations, and the department chair reminded us to emphasize grammar instruction in preparation for the writing assessment. I looked around the room and saw the same nodding heads and fake smiles I had seen the night before. This time, however, instead of checking their phones and texting under the table, the



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teachers were grading papers.

At 8:30 a.m., though, the bell rang. Meeting adjourned. I was back in my classroom, facing 21 kids who would anxiously try to beat their time in a "Who's Who of Mythology" activity—high-fiving each other as if they'd won a championship when they cut three seconds from their previous best. One student couldn't wait to tell me he saw a reference to Achilles' heel on "Fear Factor" last night. And then, in an hour, 17 more kids arrive—looking forward to 30 minutes of silent reading time, genuinely sad we weren't going back to the library. In another hour, we're debating the pros and cons of Odysseus' decision to forego immortality and a beautiful goddess in return for his old life and older wife.

I find myself wishing I could revisit the table last night and tell my Chamber of Commerce acquaintances about Carlos, who shows up at my classroom door—more than an hour before school starts—to report a sighting of a vocabulary word on the 10 o'clock news. I would brag about Shauna, who read a Louisa May Alcott novel in a day, and about Roberto, who wants to start a student book club. If they would give me five more minutes, I could tell them about Kimone, who raps her poetry to applause from the class, and about Tiffany—with the nose ring and eyebrow piercing—who scored a perfect six on her timed essay test. All of them are students in my remedial English class, all classified as "the lowest 25 percent," and all are rallying.

I don't deny the importance of the stock market or current real estate trends—but at the close of day, I believe it is my job that will bring about the greatest dividends. Teachers' investments in the futures of our students have the potential to outperform even the strongest portfolio. Unfortunately, the negative stereotypes of teachers as professionals will prevail until we convince others that our job is about a lot more than low pay and summers off.

'We Must Tell Our Stories'

I received an advertisement for a magazine in the mail today. It quoted novelist Arundhati Roy stating that change is possible, and that to achieve it, we must tell our stories. "Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe."

Each January, I am one of the millions who set goals—saving more, eating less—to improve myself. This year, instead of just trying to make myself a better teacher by grading papers sooner, I resolve to improve the image of my profession by bragging more. Focusing on the positives, I will share my stories with family, friends, and strangers. I challenge you to do the same.

The people we meet in a bar or those we sit next to on a plane cannot see into our classrooms to witness the daily flashes of brilliance, inspiration, and enthusiasm that fuel our fires and give us the energy to teach. Instead, they hear the stories on the news and believe them. We need to invite them into our world and tell the stories about the students and the teachers we work beside everyday. Let's show them that what happens between our opening and closing bells is just as significant as what happens on Wall Street. When they hear about what we really do—rather than our complaints of low pay, unfair testing, and kids who really are just kids—maybe then we'll start to see some changes. Changes in the conditions we work in, changes in the pay we receive, and changes in the future for our students—which is really what it is all about.

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years.

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