

A Single Drop of Water
by Robert Freeman



A story of how a high school
teacher and his students
set out to change the world,
with a dollar

“Even the greatest waterfall starts
with a single drop of water.”

~ African Bantu Saying

Chapter Eleven—Teacher Heroes

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Have you ever seen a school on fire? I don't mean the fire of smoke and soot. I mean the fire of passion and purpose, with over 1,900 students and 86 teachers burning to change the world.

Well, I have seen it, and it is a beautiful thing.

Gahr High School, where I teach, is one of the most diverse schools in the nation. In fact, if you consult Wikipedia, the second sentence in the article about Gahr tells you that Gahr is “a very ethnically diverse campus, located in the most ethnically diverse place in America.” It is a wild, sometimes chaotic, but always-interesting culture that is bursting its seams trying to express itself. The question is, “What should we be?”

How can we give a singular voice to so many different identities? How can we take the exuberant, centrifugal energies of so many young people and channel them into a choir instead of a cacophony?

Three years ago I found an answer to that question. I found an organization that gives every student in the school a chance to be part of something bigger than themselves.

I went to a conference for teachers. I was late for my workshop, so I ducked into one that was just starting. The letters “ODFL” didn't mean anything to me but the photos of American teenagers interacting with African teenagers were simply unforgettable.

I spaced out for a moment, thinking what a beautiful scene it was — the beaming blonde American girl with the equally beaming black African girl. Then I thought I heard the presenter say that they made this all happen from many students' donations of a single dollar. A single dollar? That caught my attention. I knew right then that this was something that I needed to bring to Gahr High School.

When I got back to school I got together with a couple of our young, energetic, and socially aware teachers to come up with a plan to actually get our students engaged in an ODFL project. We decided that our goal would be to raise \$2,000 to help build an elementary school in Nicaragua. But we needed to come up with a way to get the students as excited about the project as we were.

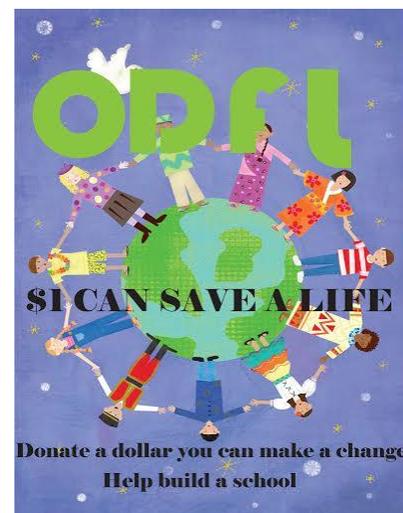
Then it hit me. If we were asking our students to have some ownership with this project, we needed to "put some skin in the game" ourselves. I had an idea.

Now, I've had hair to the middle of my back since I was in high school. This wouldn't be of note except for the fact that I'm 46 years old. I decided that if I was going to ask my students to fully commit to this, I needed to show them that I was just as committed. I told the project planning committee that if we could pull this off, I would shave my head in front of the whole school. Then things got interesting.

Two of the other teachers said that they would dye their hair purple. Our basketball coach said that he would pierce his ears (temporarily). A notoriously bearded English teacher said that he'd unveil his face for the first time. Other crazy offers kept coming in and that's when the art teachers got involved.

They decided to incorporate the Nicaragua project into their curriculum. They had their Multimedia classes create life-sized statues made of packing tape to represent underprivileged students in Nicaragua. The pieces would be displayed all over school during our drive. The students in our Visual and Performing Arts program created personalized papier-mâché collection boxes for each teacher on campus.

Our drama kids put on an ODFL talent show. Our girls basketball team helped organize a basketball tournament to raise funds. Teachers offered to match student donations in their homerooms. Clubs and other student organizations made contributions. Our graphic design classes had a contest to create the most unique digital art to promote the cause. You can see some of them here.



The student council asked if they could go out into the community to share what we were doing. This is what I mean when I say the school was on fire.

It was incredible. And like a fire, it had taken on a life of own. I never imagined we would stir such passion in our staff and students, much less from a project for children in another country. This thing had become bigger than we were and it was all because so many diverse groups on our campus had come together as a single force behind a single cause. It didn't matter the gender or race or ethnicity... everyone was working toward the same goal of helping others, and it was *magic*. Everybody felt it.

Needless to say, we exceeded our goal. In fact, we shattered it. We had raised just over \$3,000. When I reported the amount to Mr. Robert Freeman (founder of ODFL), he said that was the most that had ever been raised by any single school in one fundraiser.



I miss my hair, but when ODFL invited me to chaperone a trip of 18 American kids to help with the construction of the elementary school, I jumped at the chance. I wanted to see how our students' monies were being spent.

Let me tell you, I realized that however bad we may think we have it, **WE LIVE LIKE ROCK STARS** here in the states. Most of the small village where we built the school did not have running water or electricity. People's homes were literally made of mud and rocks and most kids were lucky to have a single pair of shoes.

One lady invited us into her home. She proudly showed us how she woke up at 4 a.m. each morning to grind corn, start the fire in the family oven (made of stacked stones), and hand-make the day's tortillas. The interior walls of her home were made with curtain rods holding up sheets. We all felt a little guilty, thinking of our palatial homes back in the states, filled with things, things, and more things.

The reality is that while we went down to Nicaragua to bestow our gift on that little village, it was we who received the bigger gift. We saw that however little they had in terms of "things" they were a much happier people than we "rich" Americans. They laughed together, played together, went to church together, and they shared such rich family lives. While we were missing our internet and iPhones, these people were actually living.

The last day before we were to return home, we found ourselves in a pick-up soccer match with some of the local kids. Although the teams were mixed, it was not hard to distinguish the American kids from the Nicaraguan kids. Our kids wore designer

soccer jerseys and workout clothes. The local kids sported ripped pants that didn't have both legs still intact.

And then it hit me. At least for that moment, there were no different cultures. All the kids knew this truth, but it came to me last. We were just a mixed up bunch of kids running, laughing, and playing soccer in a Nicaraguan field. Everyone had forgotten that we were different at all. That's what those kids taught us. We had made ourselves bigger people by helping others, but it turned out that *we* were the ones being enriched. *WE* were the ones being helped.

As educators, our job isn't as simple as teaching subject matter. That's important, but our duty to kids encompasses much more than that. Our real job is to grow bigger people. If we do that, the math and the chemistry and the Spanish verb conjugations will take care of themselves. Set them on fire with passion and purpose and our students will show US how to move the world.