

## Linda Cloutier-Namdar: Speech for 2018 UVM Outstanding Teacher Day

Good afternoon. As a UVM graduate, I am particularly happy to have the opportunity to speak today. I look back with great appreciation for my classes with the likes of English Professor Michael Stanton, Religion Professors William Paden and Richard Sugarman, and Education Professor Zac Clements.

Before I begin, I also want to thank my husband, my children and their spouses for their love and support. I am a fortunate woman indeed. I would be remiss if I did not also recognize that it is because of the kindness, generosity and support of my friends, colleagues and administrators at Essex High School and Essex Westford School District that I have had the honor and privilege of serving as the 2018 Vermont Teacher of the Year.

My optimism about education is fueled by a number of experiences, not least among them the fact that I am currently a high school English teacher! That wasn't a foregone conclusion. After a few years of classroom teaching, I took a 20-year hiatus from a job that I love, for another job I loved – raising my children while doing part-time work in an education related field.

In spite of that twenty-year gap, I continued to dream about returning to the classroom. In the end, my dream came true, and I got to get back to teaching.

The icing on the cake? Being hired by an administrator who had been a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student in my very first year, at my very first teaching job, when I was fresh out of college. Thanks, Lauren Kirby. I still count myself lucky every day to be a teacher.

Now, if my story doesn't convince you that building relationships with our students matters, I don't know what will!

Building relationships with students matters.

Speaking of relationships, I should thank my students, who help me to keep it all in perspective. How, you ask? Well, two years ago in September, when I told a group of students that I had been named the Essex High School Teacher of the Year, one of my 9<sup>th</sup> graders asked, "How do they **even know** you should be Teacher of the Year? You haven't even done anything yet!"

There's nothing quite like a 9<sup>th</sup> grader to let you know where you stand.

Let's talk about where we stand, we educators. Those of us here today represent elementary, and middle school and high school teachers, teachers at technical centers and alternative programs. We also represent our colleagues, our fellow educators, and we represent education, the institution upon which our democracy was built.

I want you to know that I see the qualities you embody, the sacrifices you make to nurture your students and to support their academic progress, to build equity for all.

There's the trifecta of optimism, patience and ingenuity – qualities that come in handy while teaching five-year olds how to tie their shoes, shape their letters, read their first words.

Qualities that come in handy while encouraging ELL students to practice a new language and an unfamiliar culture. That come in handy in channeling middle school energy and angst. That come in handy while instructing students with disabilities, building skills and confidence. Or when instructing disengaged high schoolers about quadratic equations or filling out a job application.

As caregivers, you generously provide students with snacks and clothing, school supplies and band aids. You also provide safe spaces, resources and strategies for growth. You take the time to listen, to support students and families struggling with mental illness and addiction, trauma and grief, racism and sexual identity.

As coaches and mentors, you share talents in music, science, theater and athletics, in writing and the arts, giving your students a chance to shine. You show up to theater and music performances, to capstone presentations and job shadows, to rallies and field trips, to wakes and funerals, to games and graduations.

As innovators you try new books and resources, integrate new technologies and create units and projects and clubs and courses and academies that stretch students to grow in learning, in civic engagement, and in confidence.

With courage, you tackle daunting tasks. As union members and union leaders, you work for professional work environments and fair treatment. With courage, you put yourself between the door and your students during school lockdowns. With courage, you speak up. You speak out.

As learners you are working to respond to education initiatives and new opportunities, spurred on by your own learning and for the hopes and dreams of your students now and the students in years to come.

You are dreamers and believers who embrace the quirks and challenges, and joys and frustrations of this profession– from pre-K to alternative programs, from elementary schools to tech centers, from middle schools to high schools. My heart swells with pride and appreciation for all the unsung things you do each and every day to support the children in your care.

These are not easy times to be a teacher, although I wonder if there ever was an easy time to be a teacher. Whether you are a seasoned veteran or a teacher still settling into the profession, I am willing to wager that you see a world teetering on the brink.

As teachers, I don't need to tell you that what lies ahead in the work of education does not look like the road we have already traveled. We are being tossed by the sea change, the swell of

demographic and cultural changes impacting education worldwide, and right here in Vermont. We are called to respond to these changes, because there is a lot at stake in the work of equity.

The Council of Chief State School Officers describes that, *“In an equitable education system, personal and social identifiers such as race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background and/or income are not obstacles to accessing educational opportunities... Within such a system, all individuals attain sufficient knowledge and skills to pursue the college and career path of their choice and become active and contributing members of their communities...”* (Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Chiefs, 4).

According to the World Economic Forum, “One estimate suggests that 65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in completely new job types that aren’t on our radar yet.”

Among the jobs that didn’t exist 10 years ago?

App developer, driverless car engineer, cloud computing, Sustainability Manager, and my personal favorite – Millennial generational expert – training workplaces about the values and expectations of its youngest employees and how to engage them.

At an event in Washington, DC, Dr. James H. Johnson, Jr., from the Kenan-Flagler Business School, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill shared with us six disruptive demographic trends culled from the 2010 U.S. census. I want to highlight three of these trends.

- The Silver Tsunami That’s About to Hit. With the Baby Boomers retiring, and birthrates down, how will employers replace skilled workers? This Silver Tsunami is part of another disruptive trend...
- The South Rises – Again. Population growth within 4 Southern states – Texas, Florida, Georgia and North Carolina – is impacting trends in states like VT. It is reducing the percentage of youth in our state, as well as reducing racial and ethnic diversity. This intersects with the next trend...
- The Browning of America. With immigration and birth-rate driven population changes, our country’s population will have greater percentages of black and Hispanic people, as well as those who identify as multi-racial. Many people in these groups are moving to areas south and along color lines, increasing an economic and political and age divide in many states across our nation.

How will schools, how will WE respond to these trends, and train students for a future that we can’t even imagine, where the jobs they will do don’t even exist yet? How do we prepare students to continue evolving as learners, to collaborate with coworkers in person and from afar, with those who are like them, and those whose cultural experiences differ from their own?

Well, we already knew that education is not for the faint of heart. And we are not without resources! We simply must commit to using them.

Some of the tools we have at our disposal to map out this great unknown can be found in Vermont's Transferable Skills. Our role as educators means we must train students to clearly and effectively communicate, to engage in creative and practical problem-solving, and to demonstrate informed and integrative thinking. We must model what it can mean to live out responsible and involved citizenship, all while working collaboratively for the greater good. These tools will help build the equity we seek.

But we have another tool, one that I think it's easy to forget in the face of technological changes, initiative overload, and testing frenzies. On the first of my many flights over the course of this year, I had a brief encounter which reminded me that there is a strategy we already use to build equity.

I sat next to Matthew, a student from North Country High School. I asked where he was headed, and he explained that he and a few others were on their way with their marketing teacher to a DECA event in Orlando, FL. DECA is an organization with a focus on preparing emerging leaders and entrepreneurs to be college and career ready.

I told Matthew I was heading to an education event myself, and asked him what he thought was the most important take away from his school experience. "The importance of my relationship with my teacher," he said without hesitation. "I wish more of my teachers knew me better."

I wish more of my teachers knew me better. What can we do to know our students better? Let's start by looking around. Look around you. What do you see? Some of you might see former students, now colleagues. You've inspired a next generation of teachers. Thank you!

Please know that what I see is dedicated professionals, good people committed to doing good work.

But the reality is that our experiences don't mirror those our students often have. First, **all** of us are older than our students. Most of us identify as white, most of us identify as cisgender, and most of us speak English as our first language. What most of us experience **is not necessarily** what many of our students' experience.

To work for equity, we must work to get to know our students, and to understand how their experiences might present obstacles we aren't seeing because they haven't been **our** experiences.

By understanding more about our students, we can put what we know and learn about our students into our planning and delivery of instruction and content. We can better understand

their perceptions of themselves and help them to take their rightful place in their educational future.

Change is hard. But I want to share this last story about why we MUST lean into those growing edges. This spring my students and I were reading Night, and studying the Holocaust. Samichhya, one of my 9<sup>th</sup> graders, was also learning story elements in her English Language Learner class with Christine Sealy by reading the Dr. Seuss classic, The Lorax. When I was away in Washington, DC, Christine sent me an email and shared that Samichhya had had one of those lightning bolt moments, seeing the connection between the theme of Night, and The Lorax, and by extension, the connection to her own place in the world.

The theme for both, as Samichhya told Ms. Sealy, is this: “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to change – it’s not.”

Someone like you, and you and you. Like me. We all have to care about equity, because we all care about our kids.

Working in education, we dream that **through** education, our students can make the future they dream and hope and plan for – a working reality.

Our relationships with our students can help to make that happen.

Thank you for your good work. In ways seen and unseen, you are making a difference. Keep imagining and living into the future of what we can accomplish by caring a whole awful lot, by working for equity, together.