

Jason Wetzler

“Teachers Change Lives”

You ever look at a picture of yourself from elementary school and wonder, “Why in the world did my parents let me out of the basement looking like that?” Just me? Cool. The way we look changes so much from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school and from high school to college. While I know there is a lot more to life beyond that, it’s strange just trying to think about the changes that occurred in our life between those stages. There’s one thing that stays consistent though: our teachers.

It starts way back when in elementary school. Times were good man; you got recess, snack time, scholastic book fairs with cheap captain underpants books... at that age, what else matters?! Stuff was easy enough and even if it wasn’t, there were teachers there to make sure you didn’t get behind. It was those teachers that set us up for success, starting in elementary school. It wasn’t until a chapter visit this past spring that I realized how much my elementary school teachers still mean to me, and are a reflection of the person I’ve become.

The first thing we noticed when we walked in to Emma Donnan Middle School last May was the police officer standing at the door of the cafeteria... for a school of 350 middle schoolers? We spent a few minutes talking in the cafeteria before the ag. teacher, Mr. Davies came and found us. First impression: this guy

was cool, rockin some classic bifocals and a neatly manicured comb over. We noticed two things: this Caucasian 30-something year old definitely stood out from his surroundings and his students LOVED him. We heard multiple kids yell, “What up Mr. D!” as he took us to his classroom right before lunch ended, smiling at the confused look on our faces. He told us Emma Donnan was a turnaround school, taken over by the state the previous year for a fresh start. We learned that Mr. Davies was from a small farm town in Indiana and taught at one of the top high school agricultural programs in the state, and left the comfort of his small town roots to try and change lives here in inner city Indianapolis, knowing that his new place of employment had been previously run by gangs and was so impoverished that 100% of the students had free and reduced lunch. There were kids with phonetically spelled names on their birth certificate because their parents are illiterate and simply cannot read or write, and who think bonding with their child means doing drugs with them after school. Kids who are 17 years old reading at a 4th grade level and just starting the 8th grade and who needed Mr. Davies back in elementary school when the rest of us were learning how to read, write, add and subtract. Kids whose lives would be drastically different, had they simply had good teachers.

Mr. Davie’s students are kids who now have smiles on their faces and a respect for themselves because of the time and heart Mr. Davies pours into their

lives, every single day. He's nothing more than a teacher by profession, but to those kids, he's a life changer. Thank you, Mr. Davies of Indianapolis, IN for choosing to be a light in a world of darkness for your students.

Teachers change lives... and Mr. Davies isn't the only teacher changing lives in this country. A few months ago I sent out a request to hear some stories about teachers and within hours I received hundreds of responses flooding my inbox. Mr. Heuett of Castle Rock, Washington: you give Megan an extra hour of your time every morning just so she can pass math class. Mrs. Killion from Land O' Lakes, Wisconsin: you encourage students like Matt daily to pursue dreams bigger than what their own ambition can afford. Mr. Nicholson from Lynn, Arkansas: you transformed Bekah from a student who took your class to get out of the classroom into a student who now wants to spend the rest of her life working inside a classroom. Mrs. Bascom from Dover, New Hampshire: YOU are the reason students like Jasmyn even show up to school. Mr. Ross of Brooks County, Georgia: your commitment to student development and personal growth has allowed people like Callie to become the leader in our organization that she is today. Mr. and Mrs. Mayfield of Clackamas, Oregon, or to me, Mom and Wynn: you chose to invest money, time and love in me even when I didn't want it or feel as if I deserved it. Thank you—thank all of you for changing our lives.

Teachers change lives... Even after growing up in a home with two parents as teachers, it wasn't until I had Mrs. Lute for 7th grade leadership that I started to realize what it was about teachers that made them such life changers. She celebrated students daily, promoting community service within curriculum and consistently tutoring before and after school. Mrs. Lute ensured that *selflessness* was embedded in every aspect of her career at the most molecular level. It's pretty simple when look at the facts: \$49,000 average annual salary of a teacher. 12- The number of month's teachers work a year. 9- The number of months most teachers are actually paid to work. 10.5 hours- average workday for a teacher. 9-11- the number of weeks a year a teacher works outside of the classroom just to prepare for what they'll do inside of the classroom. And how can anyone begin to quantify the hours of personal sacrifice that accompanies the career, comprised of hours spent with individual students that could otherwise be spent with family and friends.

All I'm simply trying to say is that when you say "I want to be a teacher" you are saying "It's not about me." They are required, written between the lines of their job description, to make their life about others; about their students, about their parents, about their co-workers, their administration. They are required to be selfless. Teachers change lives. Teachers are selfless.

As I look back at the stages of my education, I realize that the curriculum taught in the classroom was not the only thing I was learning.

I found this to be particularly true in high school. I entered into the 9th grade just like everyone else does, awkwardly. At this point in my life I was 14 years old, I still didn't have a regular shower routine, I had an awful haircut and had no idea how to talk to girls ... speaking of girls, all the ones I was awesome friends with in 8th grade had somehow transformed over the summer and into an intimidating species that went to the bathroom in packs of 40 and limited communication to purely texting. However, even my extreme fear of the female species couldn't stop me from wanting what every other freshman boy wanted... a car. So two years go by and it's finally time for to get my license and a driving machine. My parents immediately shut down my idea of them of buying me a car and I was... broke... so I quickly moved to plan B, AKA Grandma. After some back and forth with Gram Gram she proposed a deal: I work 75 hours in her garden and she would give me a "very special" car. At this point, some of you are like, "What kind of car is it?!" I didn't care I was getting a car! The next weekend I started my work in the garden and shewww it was tough; Grandma Green Thumb is not going to let you take any shortcuts. This lady could grow oranges in Antarctica alright. For her, perfection wasn't a goal it was an expectation. After what seemed like 1000 hours, I had held up my end of the deal; now it was time for Grandma to come through.

She led me out to the garage and as the door swung up, I saw her in all of her glory. 4 cylinder, 104 horsepower, speedometer topping out at 75mph, rusted burgundy paint job, complete with manual windows and locks, AM radio and a pack of feral cats (3 dead) in the back, was my 1987 purple people eater Plymouth Voyager Van. It was love at first sight.

Out of all the lessons I could have extracted from this story, none are as important as the realization that came to me while preparing for this talk. If you've been listening to me for the past 10 minutes and thought to yourself, "Yeah teachers are great that's awesome, I'm not a teacher how does this relate to me?" 1: I don't know why you jump around when you think thoughts inside of your head. 2: if you thought that, these next few sentences are for you. None of the learning that occurred to me while I earned my car happened in a classroom. If learning doesn't have to take place in a classroom, and, if some human beings don't ever get the opportunity to be inside of a classroom but they still learn, then one thing must be true: Everyone is a teacher. Everyone. You, me, my grandma, your brother, his best friends, Miley Cyrus, Mickey Mouse, the valedictorian, the dropout, the fry cook at McDonald's, the Queen of England, EVERYBODY. Miley Cyrus? She taught us to not write break up songs and combine them with demolition equipment. My grandma? She taught me the value of working hard for something you want. Everyone is a teacher and everyone is a teacher all the time.

Knowing this, it becomes our responsibility to be aware that we're teaching people. It becomes our responsibility to teach people good things. One of the most effective, surefire ways we can do this is to be selfless, because it's not about us. And when it's not about us, we're changing lives. Teachers change lives. Teachers are selfless. Everyone is a teacher.

I have two younger siblings who you met when they introduced me and I was told when they were little that they learn from me more than I realize. FFA members the same goes for every one of you. It could be your younger siblings if you have them, but maybe its other chapter members, businesses or individuals who have invested in this organization, your parents, kids you pass in the hallways at school or random people who see in and out of this blue jacket. Other people are learning form you way more than you realize. Everyone is a teacher. Including each and every one of you. So what are you teaching? What lessons are others learning from you? Are your actions truly what you want future generations to replicate? "Whoa Jason that's a lot of responsibility. I'm only 14 I don't know about all of that." You bet it is! But guess what? A few years ago you were nine and looking up to people who were your age now and thinking, "I wanna be like them!" This isn't a responsibility that we choose; we're simply born with it. Teachers are selfless. Are you teaching others selflessly? Are you making life about other people? If we're not deliberately selfless in our actions we are teaching

those around us, it is okay to be selfish. Teachers change lives. Are you making people's lives better or worse? Every action you take is a lesson for someone else to learn. Teachers change lives. Teachers are selfless. Everyone is a teacher.

I struggled a lot with the topic of teachers as my retiring address. I mean how effective could it be? For those of you already planning on teaching I'm just preaching to the choir. For everyone else you may already be set on doing something else. But after years of traveling with the FFA and hearing over and over and over again how gravely serious the shortage of ag educators has gotten ... I mean it's estimated that over half of the states in the U.S. are experiencing a critical shortage of Ag. Educators. I had to try, I had to say something... After saying all this I think it's only fair that I'm honest about my intentions with this speech. My goal in saying all of this is not to change your life. I say this, praying that you leave here, teach, and change someone else's life. Teachers change lives. Teachers are selfless. Everyone is a teacher.

There is a need for teachers. There is need for life changers. FFA members, if you want to wake up every day knowing you'll be given the opportunity to change someone's life, be a teacher. If you want to fall asleep every night reassured that what you're doing does matter, be a teacher. If you want to provide students with the same opportunities you've had to learn, grow, compete, achieve, fail and achieve again, be a teacher. If you want to be the difference between a kid

signing up for unemployment and a kid signing their paycheck, be a teacher. If you want to take a student who gets D-'s, but believes they're worthy of an F and transform them into a student that gets B+'s, but now believes they're worthy of an A, be a teacher. If you want to take a kid from a family that fulfills a drug addiction and give them a family that fulfills their potential, be a teacher. If you want to be a role model, a hero, an inspiration, the difference between a kid making the right choices and the wrong choices, the reason why your students may one day want to become a teacher... if you want to become a life changer, be a teacher. Teachers change lives. Teachers are selfless. Everyone is a teacher. So go be one.

