

I've always known I wanted to teach. Well, "always" has some gaps. For a while, I was thinking I could be a graphic designer, or maybe a screenwriter, even a journalist at some point. But no matter what, I always came back to the idea of teaching. I knew I was smart enough, and that I was patient enough, and that I cared enough.

Nothing could have prepared me for *how much* I cared.

I left my stable, guaranteed hours, work from home customer service job so that I could get experience as a substitute teacher before I get my credential. It definitely was not the smartest financial move, especially when you consider the lack of work in the summer, but it was the best decision I have ever made in my life.

It was scary at first... Being the only adult in charge of 30 kids at one time. And these kids will test you. I have been regularly lied to, gaslit, and called less than savory names. But would you believe me if I said that even those days were good days? Because even on those days, I made at least one kid smile.

I cried in the parking lot after school one day. I wasn't sobbing, and I wasn't bawling. I was just... crying. And I couldn't stop. Because on that day, I taught at a middle school. On that day, I received my first drawing from a student. I always make it a point to be present in the classroom, let the students know that I am there for them. I talked to them and joked with them. And this quiet little girl took her time to draw me a sunflower. When she handed it to me, I almost cried right there on the spot. I put it in my folder for safekeeping, and it is still there. It will be there for as long as that folder stays together, then I'll put it in a new folder. But that wasn't the reason I cried in the parking lot that day.

The last class of the day was so incredibly small, about 13 kids. It was an elective class of some sort, and the lesson plan was for the kids to play Uno. It's not the most conventional lesson

plan, but I went along with it! And as class was starting and I was telling the kids they could play Uno, this little 6th grade girl came up to me and shyly said she didn't have anyone to play Uno with. I immediately knew this girl, because I was her. She was quiet, and reserved, but she had the most colorful bracelets made of braided pipe cleaners adorning her arms. It felt like I was having flashbacks right then and there. Because mind you, I went to this same middle school. I was called "weird" by my peers and always picked last in dodgeball. I spent my lunch time reading because no one wanted to talk to me. And I was the quiet and reserved girl with the colorful pipe cleaner bracelets that didn't have anyone to play games with.

I was her.

So for a moment, I was *there for her*.

I told her that I would play Uno with her. In fact, two other students ended up joining our game. And I spent the entire hour of class playing games and chatting with this girl, letting her know that she was more than worth my time. Because oftentimes, when I was her age, I felt like I was worth less than the gum under the desks. She deserved someone to just be *there* with her, give her the time of day. I didn't know how much she needed it.

Class was ending and kids were about to get let out of school. I make it a point to give stickers to the classes that do a good job, and I decided why not give this class some stickers? The girl with the pipe cleaner bracelets was the last to pick her sticker after the bell rang. And as I was packing up my sticker box, she came up to me, and in my head, I can still hear her exact words.

"You're, like, the best sub I've ever had."

I said that was very sweet of her and I appreciated it.

"Can I give you a hug?" she asked.

I have never felt a hug like hers. She wrapped her arms around me so tightly, with so much necessity, that my heart shattered. I knew when she approached me at the start of class that she needed someone. But it wasn't until that hug that I realized how much my attention meant to her. This girl, with so much love and kindness in her heart, needed someone that day. And I was that someone.

When we ended our hug, I told her to have a great day. Then she walked out of the classroom, I finished packing up my stuff, dropped my key off at the office, walked to my car, and tears started to roll before I even closed the door. I wasn't a sniffing, sobbing mess. I was just so overcome with emotion that I couldn't stop the tears. I stayed in that parking lot for five minutes waiting for it to stop, thinking about how many more kids are out there like her, wearing their own pipe cleaner bracelets. And I realized that I might never see that girl again, that I might never get to know if she found the friendship and love she deserves. The only thing that comforted me was that I was there for her for at least *one day*. I don't think one day will ever be enough, but it sure as hell made a difference.

When I'm teaching in my own classroom, I'll be seeing those kids *everyday*. And who knows? Maybe she'll end up in my class. But even if she isn't, I'll have so many students that need someone, whether they are looking for someone to be in their corner or just need someone to listen to them for a mere five minutes. I'll be there. Because damn it, they're just kids. They need to feel loved and deserving, and if I'm the only one around to provide that for them, then I'll be there.

So to the girl with the pipe cleaner bracelets, thank you. Thank you for helping me realize just how much this all means to me. You are the reason I know one hundred and ten percent that I am where I need to be. No matter where my life leads me, I'll always remember you as the girl

that I cried for in my car in the school parking lot. And if we do meet again, maybe you could make me a pipe cleaner bracelet.

B.L. Tucker