# Melinda

Greg Peters, California

*After recently crossing paths with a former student, I recalled this reflection written in November of 2003.*

On Thursday, November 6, 2003, DeShawn was shot on the #14 Mission bus at 3:37 pm. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time – too close to a gang-related incident.

Noting helicopters circling overhead had become all too "noninterruptive" for me. It was just before 4:00 that I first noticed them. They weren't over the highway, so I ruled out an accident or traffic. Moments later, I received a fax from the district informing me of the shooting. The next morning, the school car from our neighborhood police station visited and informed our dean, Betty, about the details of the shooting and the potential impact on our community. Our school had faced crises before and we knew we had to respond.

To some, the shooting of DeShawn would not be considered a "crisis" for us. He was not our student. However DeShawn was a student at our neighboring school, which resides on the same block. The shooting itself was gang-related (even though DeShawn was not in a gang); this always risks further violence. He was shot on "the 14," a bus many of our students take home. He came from the same neighborhood as many of our students and was known by them. DeShawn was an African-American public high school student in the same city as our students. Our students are deeply connected to the reality of their peers – especially when their reality is one of life and death – a topic our urban youth know far better than they should.

Advisory – our most personalized class – stays together for a student's entire four years, has the lowest student–teacher ratio, and is the vehicle for our schoolwide communication. I wrote a letter to distribute to our Friday morning advisory classes in order to share the essential information about the shooting and a related school message – just enough facts to inform everyone and demystify the many rumors that come with any media-glorified event. We offered pragmatic guidance (advising students to go directly home using alternative routes) as well as coaching with a more personal touch (encouraging parents to talk with their children about what it feels like to hear of another shooting… another person of color… another youth…). I also challenged parents not to assume there was no connection between their own children and those involved in the shooting.

Gang issues have been hot in San Francisco lately. In part due to our local gang issues, our school has a dress code. Recently, Betty had been experiencing recurring acts of disrespect from our students around our dress code. Students who normally had little issue complying were now coming to school out of dress code and displaying defiance when addressed about it. As a community, we knew there was a correlation between the rise in such infractions and the extent to which students felt (or did not feel) safe in their community. As individuals and as organizations, I think we are slower to respond to our local context than our students are because it is their home.

That Friday, Melinda (an African-American female) walked by Betty (a white woman) sporting a prominent red hat (hats and the color red, a gang color, are not permitted.) Betty addressed Melinda and her hat – Melinda blatantly ignored Betty and continued on to class. As Betty pushed the issue, Melinda vehemently pushed back, telling Betty, in so many not nice words, to back off and keep to herself because she intended on wearing the hat. I love our students, and so I draw a line with them when they show blatant disrespect and defiance even when I agree with their reasons as I believe they need additional tools and strategies for when they leave our school site. I followed Melinda into her class. Late to this first class, she sat and began to eat her lunch. I leaned close and in a voice both hushed and

unwavering instructed her to go sit in my office and wait for me. She did, with only a little attitude.

Melinda fully acknowledged her behavior and took responsibility. She did not try to find an excuse – and she did not seem to offer any sense of remorse. She simply acknowledged it was wrong. She also expected and accepted suspension as the consequence for extreme defiance. By this time, she was communicating with me very respectfully. Our quick transition to dialogue allowed me to ask Melinda to consider Betty's perspective – it seemed to be an easy task. I asked her to consider an apology after she returned from her suspension; she said she would.

I called Melinda's grandmother, who was apologetic and supportive of both the rule and the consequences. My students' parents and grandparents have consistently taught me a vital lesson… our students are not our kids. Our students come to us with the values and morals of their families deeply imbedded in their being. I find that our schools' expectations of our students often fall short of those of their families. After hanging up with her grandmother, I had a knot in my stomach at the thought of sending Melinda on a bus alone after the recent violence.

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Turning to face her I stated, "Be careful, there is a lot of shit going on…" Immediately, it hit me. The challenge from my letter popped into my head and I asked, "You knew him, didn't you?" Tears welling, she responded, cold and yet soft, "He was my friend for the past eleven years. He is going to die."

I asked her if my letter had been respectful. She said yes. I thought of her consequences for a second. I was challenged by the paradox of being both consistent in providing the message that consequences come from our actions and also being compassionate. I noted that I wanted her to know that I BOTH understood how her actions could result from her pain AND ALSO felt obligated to continue to demonstrate that consequences still follow our actions. She respectfully agreed. I told her that I did not want her to be home on Monday if she was going to be alone without support. I wrote my home number on a piece of paper and invited her to call me if she wanted to be around her school community on Monday. If so, I noted, her suspension could be in-house and she could sit with me or with her counselor. She took the number and got up to go home.

As she walked out of my office, I noticed her backpack. In bold black marker it read, "Fred - October 10, 1999 - RIP". She had been here before.

DeShawn died later that afternoon. Melinda chose to stay home on that Monday. She never apologized to Betty.

My heart aches. It aches for Melinda; it aches for all the "Melindas" of whom I am unaware. Most of all, it aches at the recognition that alone, I am not enough: I will need the "Melindas" and their grandmothers before me to keep educating me. I will need to listen more and when I am done, I will need to listen harder – for alone, I am not enough.

I sat with many unanswered questions – questions that make me wish to rethink other ways I should have engaged with Melinda:

- What was the role of race for this African-American woman dealing with two white administrators at a time when the black community of San Francisco is being killed off – literally – every weekend?
- On a similar note, what was the role of authority? More than just the authority of an administrator, what is the authority of a school, a family or the street? Which authority takes priority for which students and under which circumstances? In the service of our students, how can we bring all of these together for consideration?
- Finally – what of this "disrespect"? We are quick to cry foul when we feel "vulnerable" or disrespected, but I cannot help but *(continued on page 18)*

work. These relationships and alliances provide me with the support I need to maintain the strength to continue this work.

**Tanisha, you mentioned CFEE and I know Kim is involved in that work as well. How is CFEE the same as or different from your work as facilitators of new coaches' seminars?**

Tanisha: CFEE provides the tools, definitions, and support needed to lead for educational equity. Personally, I see this as differing from coaches' seminars because it creates the space for the emotional, realistic and appropriate "self-work" needed to lead for educational equity.

When I am facilitating a traditional CFG Coaches Seminar, as opposed to a seminar focused on equity, I do not always have the support I need from my co-facilitators to be able to speak my truth. When I am involved in CFEE work, I know that my truth, and the truth of the participants, is needed and supported by my colleagues. In traditional seminars, I have been asked to lead the "equity day,"or the "equity exercise." With CFEE, I know that equity is at the center of our work, and that we are ALL responsible for it; it's no longer the special responsibility of colleagues of color.

Kim: For me the difference between a CFEE and a CFG seminar lies in its primary goal. Very briefly, a CFG seminar gives you the skills and tools to run a CFG– with all that entails. The goal of a CFEE seminar is to come out prepared with tools and the disposition to use them to challenge, interrupt and transform the status quo. CFEE uses some CFG processes, but also many others. I have come out of CFEE with a heightened awareness of my privilege as a white woman and a deeper understanding of where I need to take my facilitation in order to challenge and support others in this journey. I've gained a new understanding of what it means to work across difference with colleagues who look and think differently from me.

**As NSRF continues to evolve and grow, what are your greatest hopes and fears for our work?**

Tanisha: I hope that we continue to grow by cultivating increasing numbers of thoughtful, critically thinking educators. I fear that as we move forward with the CFEE work, we may become more divided into two groups: those of us who see CFEE as an intricate, essential piece of all CFG work, and those who see it as a separate entity that we should be able to "choose" if and when we incorporate it into our curricula and work.

Kim: My greatest fear for NSRF is that we will allow ourselves to be immobilized by the discomfort that comes with unpacking and addressing our own biases and assumptions around equity work, and that this will block our ability to hold ourselves accountable for moving forward in our work.

My greatest hope is that as an organization, we will be able to develop the processes we need to engage in dialogue and reflection to strategize where we are in our mission and what our next steps are so that we can have a decisive impact on the enormous gap that exists between who achieves and who does not. ■

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## *Students at the Center...*

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wonder what respect looks like in the eyes of our students – especially those students whose lives are defined by race and authority and family and the street.

Melinda attended school through her senior year but did not graduate. Her relationship with me through that time continued to be "cold and yet soft."

I recently ran into Melinda – three years later – while walking downtown; she gave me a big hug and proudly proclaimed that she had earned her diploma and was working for social justice at AmeriCorps. She said she'd stop by to see me soon. I still find myself questioning the inequity embedded in the ways we define respect.

I look forward to exploring my questions with Melinda in the struggle for equity. I still have much to learn from her. ■

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