

Discovering Strength in Tough Times

Excitement was in the air among our small administrative team as we entered August 2016 and the beginning of another academic year. Mulberry Elementary School is a small gem within the large, bustling Gwinnett County, Georgia, school district. Principal Jonathan Day first came to Mulberry Elementary in 2006 as a fifth-grade teacher, and later moved into the role of assistant principal, then principal.

The close-knit community consists of individuals, young and old, who are proud to be a part of the Mulberry family. Each morning Mulberry Elementary's 750 students are welcomed with handshakes and hugs from Mr. Day, who truly admires this community and the families he has grown to love over the past 10 years.

On Sept. 30, 2016, Mr. Day's youngest son, Owen, was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, an aggressive blood cancer. The diagnosis was shared on a Friday night, and he was hospitalized and began intense chemotherapy within 48 hours.

To say that the news of Owen's cancer hit the community hard is an understatement. The 12-year-old had been a Mulberry Meerkat all of his elementary years. With talent in drama and art, Owen lights up every room he enters. His contagious spirit continues to inspire each one of us, even in a small hospital room in Atlanta.

As Mr. Day's assistant principal, my heart ached for his family. There were many hard days that began with the hope for positive news but ended in silent tears.

There was only one constant that could be controlled: striving for excellence day in and day out at Mulberry Elementary. This was the greatest support I could offer, and weathering this storm has led to some important realizations.

Relationships are key. Investment in humanity is the most important value we can share as leaders.

Tears might flow one minute, but would be wiped away to greet a classroom full of students who are worthy of the very best instruction. Keep the focus on teaching and learning.

Be visible and take time to greet students by name. Laugh. We are honored to work in schools, where children give us something to smile about on a daily basis.

Ups and downs are normal.

Through the good days and those days when teachers felt broken, our staff continued to exhibit true resilience. Tears might flow one minute, but would be wiped away to greet a classroom full of students who are worthy of the very best instruction. Keep the focus on teaching and learning.

Raising leaders from within is vital.

When a principal steps away both emotionally and physically, the true test of a school is whether the work continues despite the absence. At Mulberry Elementary, we learned to better delegate tasks in order to share the load. We tapped into

future leaders to take on new roles and responsibilities. Teacher leaders within each grade continued to focus on intentional collaboration with the same goal in mind: for all students to learn effectively.

Community investment will pour back into you. Within hours of Owen's diagnosis, the community had stepped into action to support the Day family. Hundreds of mothers, fathers, students, community stakeholders, and even dogs turned out for a prayer circle led by local church officials. Families decorated the Day home for the holidays, they continue to maintain the lawn, and they have provided endless meals to show their love for the principal and his family. When the local Chick-fil-A restaurant hosted an evening of support, lines of patrons wrapped around the store. Supporters are wearing orange bracelets and shirts in honor of Owen's fight. As a leader, I admire that Mr. Day has allowed the community to walk with him in this journey. His openness has brought everyone great hope.

A solid school culture can carry staff in the hardest of times. Climate might change, but culture is the foundation for success. Take time to invest in a clear vision and mission, and make sure everyone is on board.

Owen's fight against leukemia continues. The Mulberry staff and community are hopeful for healing, and they are strong. We will keep supporting the Day family, the school, and each other.

My advice: Never take for granted the family members who greet you at home each night. The role of school leader can take every ounce of your energy if you allow it to do so. Find balance. Spend time with those who matter most. Take time for yourself, too. We will only be our best at school if we feel effective at home. 

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