Remembering Orlando

During my 25 years as a middle-level principal I encountered thousands of faces that remain vivid in my memory. Some of the images are those of naive and cherubic sixth graders arriving for their first day of middle school, others are those of seasoned eighth graders leaving school on their last day. Within this virtual sea of faces there are those with names, and those without names, who are remembered for academic achievement, athletic prowess, or unusual behaviors. Most are remembered for having brought a smile to my face and joy to my life.

Yet, despite the delight that such memories often bring to the hearts and souls of school administrators, there is a stark exception that pushes happiness aside. The untimely death of a student, whether 25 years ago or two years ago, quickly brings to mind not only a face and memory of that child, but a profound sense of loss.

A Special Kind of Kid

Orlando was one of those kids who touched my life. As a sixth grader, he ventured into a middle school of 1,200 students with some apprehension. Always polite and respectful, his ever-present smile quickly overcame any resistance he encountered and he soon felt comfortable. Orlando made friends easily and his social group widened as the days passed. A dedicated saxophonist, he was welcomed by the school’s musical organizations. As Orlando moved through the middle grades, he continued to earn the respect of his fellow students and the school staff.

After Orlando left middle school, I saw him infrequently. So I wasn’t prepared to read of his death one morning in the local newspaper. According to the report, Orlando was shot in broad daylight during a robbery in Philadelphia and died a day later.

A Promising Career Cut Short

The newspaper account revealed how Orlando had fared after middle school. He had been a drum major in the high school’s marching band, played saxophone in the school’s jazz band for four years, graduated with a 4.12 grade-point average, and was ranked 12th in a class of 322. After high school, he attended New York University and studied psychology in an honors program. He was a tutor in the Philadelphia School District at the time of his death.

Tragically, Orlando’s violent death was not the first of students I had known during my tenure as a principal. He joins Ursula and Debbie, whose lives were also taken from them as young adults. His death, while more recent than the others, was nonetheless just as painful and difficult to accept.

I visited Orlando’s mother on the day of his funeral. Her heart was broken beyond repair by the death of her eldest son, and my condolences seemed so inadequate, so inconsequential. I said goodbye to Orlando, thanking him for enriching my life by being the person he was.

Reflecting on a Tragedy

As principals, we have to contend with hectic schedules and seemingly endless days, addressing crisis after crisis while interacting with students, staff, and parents. We get to know students year after year, but over time their names and faces become indistinguishable in our memories. They resurface only occasionally, usually for engagement announcements, weddings, and other positive accomplishments. That is why learning of a former student’s violent death is so devastating. You think about dreams not realized, goals not attained, families never to be whole again.

Principals and their staffs need to take the time to reflect on events that impact their lives, and the sudden death of a student or former student clearly has a significant impact. The loss of a young life makes us think about whether our interactions with our students are as productive and meaningful as possible. It reminds us to be more tolerant of all students, and to gain a greater understanding of them as they pass through our lives. It encourages us to acknowledge their uniqueness and to record their qualities in our memories. It requires us to put our concerns about No Child Left Behind requirements and state and district standards on hold for a moment to remember the Orlando of our professional lives, and to recall how they enriched us even as we were enriching them.

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