

# Teach For America

By MOULIK D. BERKANA

An American diplomat in India recounts his stint at a New York school.



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Even before I joined the U.S. foreign service, I had already served for two years in a “hardship post”—a junior high school classroom at Theodore Roosevelt Gathings Middle School in the Bronx, perhaps the grittiest of New York City’s five boroughs. After earning my Bachelor’s degree from the University of Oregon, I was selected by the Teach For America program to teach English in an underserved, under-resourced, understaffed urban school district for two years. I earned a beginning teacher’s salary which, in New York, sometimes made it hard to make ends meet, even living in Spartan frugality. Each school day I taught English to more than 30 seventh and eighth grade

students for 90-minute class periods. Challenging? Clearly. Difficult? Immensely! So, why did I, and thousands of other recent college graduates, forego more lucrative and immediately attractive career options?

In my own case (and I believe for a good many of my Teach For America peers), the answer can be encapsulated in one word: José. All teachers have had a José in their classrooms. The progress José made over the course of nine months was impressive. A 14-year-old in seventh grade (about two years behind the average age of his peers), he had difficulty reading and initially dismissed the class and my efforts as “mad wack.” Months of

effort finally resulted in José becoming a better reader, and even enjoying expressing himself through his journal.

I wanted to make a positive difference in a very challenging work environment, and José’s turnaround was inspiring to me, personally and professionally. Practically, and with keeping in mind a host of future career options, the teaching profession has many transferable skills: public speaking, planning, even diplomacy! Before I began my work as a teacher of English, I imagined I would spend my days explaining the parts of speech, how to write a paragraph, how to read and respond to a text. However, it quickly became clear that classroom management was my biggest challenge: If the classroom environment is not conducive to learning, educational goals are difficult to achieve. During my two years, I struggled to become a good teacher, manifesting the right combination of substance, discipline, bluff and compassion. I am not sure if I ever attained this lofty goal, but I am convinced that through the Teach For America program, I made a positive difference in the lives of some, and perhaps most, of my students.

Core Teach For America values hold that a good education levels the playing field of life, and that every student deserves a quality education. In its own way, Teach For America is a success story in educational reform in the United States, and stands as a model to be emulated. Since its founding, Teach For America has become one of the most sought after postgraduate programs for students of America’s top universities.

What makes the program so popular? Idealism is a prime motivator of American youth; a commitment to give back to the community is strong. In the United States, 62 percent of college students are involved in some kind of volunteer work. Teach For America represents an ideal venue to channel this energy and enthusiasm. The challenge of the difficult, if not the impossible, is very real.

The program sends enthusiastic young college graduates to underserved districts throughout the United States where they work to inspire students to learn in spite of the many hurdles they come across in their personal and academic lives. In fact, many Teach For America alumni continue teaching beyond the two-year commitment, while others have gone on to be administrators or open their own schools.

Learning is not a one-way process, and I also discovered a lot from my firsthand experiences in the Bronx. I learned about the challenges facing America’s educational system, the day-to-day difficulties of the urban poor, and how a spirit of service or volunteerism can make a positive difference in a needy community. Perhaps most importantly, from José I learned more about how education can foster social justice, empowering young people with the skills they need to succeed. I will carry that lesson with me the rest of my life.



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*U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings and first lady Laura Bush visit first grade students at the Martin Luther King Elementary School in Washington, D.C. to mark the 10th anniversary of Teach For America Week in April 2008.*



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