

Car Parades and Electronic Classrooms

Being a Teacher in 2020

by Diane Huebner

The 2019-2020 school year began with no indication of how it would end. I started my thirtieth year as an elementary teacher, and my fourth as an itinerant. Being responsible for gifted students in Grades K-2, I traveled to five different schools each week. Every day, I looked forward to the enthusiasm and surprising answers of my students.

As the year progressed, I remember driving to school one day, and just feeling grateful that I was able to do that. As I age, I find myself cultivating an “attitude of gratitude.” Teachers and students hope for a Snow Day or two each year, and we received one on Friday, February 21, 2020. We were grateful for the three-day weekend, never dreaming that we only had three more weeks in school this year.

How appropriate that our “last day” was Friday, March 13. The coronavirus was spreading rapidly in our country, and we prepared for a two-week closure by copying paper learning packets for students. Teachers tried to stay calm and answer student questions, but we had more uncertainty than knowledge.

On Monday, March 23, we listened in disbelief as our governor announced that schools would be closed for the rest of the year. I was overcome with sadness and anxiety. How could we as a school district teach electronically? How could our students learn in isolation from each other? How quickly could we be ready?

Thankfully, as administrators scrambled to answer these questions, many elementary principals and teachers recognized the power of car parades. If students could not come to us,

we would go to them! Families were notified within days that their children's teachers would be driving through their neighborhoods, and we couldn't wait to see them. These parades became an important lifeline of connection before any electronic learning happened.

As I drove in a line of 70 cars for three hours, I felt like a grateful hero blasting my horn. The joy on the faces of children and parents brought tears to my eyes. I called as many student names as I could, in the few seconds I saw them. I was reminded of my college days at William and Mary, when I walked Duke of Gloucester Street alongside a Homecoming Parade float. While that was a leisurely stroll, this was a quick drive-by. I realized that many of us were not recognized in our cars, but the message was clear. We love you, we miss you, and we will keep teaching you.

I drove in more car parades before "Spring Break," and each one was emotional. I asked my husband to drive in the last one, so I could stand in the sunroof, yelling and waving to students. Children held signs of love for their teachers, or wrote chalk messages on the street. A father held a small whiteboard, on which he had written "Social Studies," then crossed it out to say "Social Distancing." A grandmother announced that today was the birthday of her first-grade twin grandchildren, so we could wish them a Happy Birthday. Retired couples sat on their porches and waved, clearly enjoying the noise. The atmosphere was like a joyous block party, so desperately needed in a time of social isolation.

Those parades reminded us why we teach. They helped to inspire our hearts and minds to create our electronic classrooms. We knew that we would make mistakes, but we also knew that we would get through this together. I was grateful again, this time that we have the technology to connect ourselves.

After learning the “how” of our lessons, my living room couch became my podium. Because I teach young children, I strongly felt that they needed to see me as much as I needed to see them. For my first lesson, I recorded myself reading a book, and asked for their drawings in response. That was the easy part. The video was too complicated to upload to my electronic page. Thank goodness our adult daughter was working remotely at our house. She showed me how to upload videos on a flashdrive. Then I literally drove the flashdrive to another teacher, whose computer skills far surpassed mine. Once the lesson was opened by students, the email response was overwhelming. I was again brought to tears, seeing their eager faces, and realizing that we could do this.

As April became May, and then June, the student responses declined. I know how hard it is to keep the enthusiasm going. I helped at several of my schools when families came to retrieve student belongings. Now they were in the cars, and we were on the sidewalk. I hoped to see some of my students, and was thrilled when one boy wanted his mother to take our picture together. We maintained our social distance, but all I wanted to do was hug him.

It’s the end of June, so normally I would feel that school is over, and there are home projects to do. But I’ve already done them. Instead, the uncertainty continues. When can we expect a vaccine for COVID-19? Have students forgotten about school? How many students were not reached by car parades and electronic classrooms? Will we be able to go back in September? What will school and teaching look like? Will we feel safe? As we continue to learn about the coronavirus and how to conquer it, we will seek creative solutions to teaching and learning. We will do the best we can, together.