The Real Story of Urban Teaching: Anne Burns Thomas

Last month, SUNY Cortland’s Student Activities Board hosted a presentation by Erin Gruwell, the teacher immortalized in the movie *Freedom Writers*. As the C.U.R.E. students and I watched the presentation, I couldn’t help but compare the words of this “famous” urban educator with the experiences shared by so many of our C.U.R.E. students and alumni. There is no doubt that Ms. Gruwell cared about her students and inspired many of them to greatness, just as there is no doubt that many of our C.U.R.E. alumni continue to teach and inspire students living in poverty, students faced with failing schools, and students who bring heavy burdens to the classroom. One difference that stood out to me, though, was made stark when Ms. Gruwell shared that she exhorted her students to “Leave who you were behind when you come to the classroom door.” I was deeply troubled by the idea that, for urban students to be successful, they somehow need to leave their identities, their families, their cultures and histories behind.

Advice from Current Student Teachers: Jennifer Petrosino

Senior year I struggled with the decision of whether I should student teach at home, in NYC, or upstate at Cortland, but nothing has been better than feeling like I am making a difference back home. At first I felt very overwhelmed as I looked across at my 11th grade, very tall, very mature looking students. They wanted to know how old I was, how long I’ve been teaching and honestly all about my life. I struggled, especially in my Regents prep "Writer's Workshop" class to do what we all must, ultimately do: prepare students for a standardized exam while engaging them. How could I possibly teach a student to write a critical lens essay when they tell me "they've never read anything in High School?" It was preposterous, but it was also the reality of the situation. I prepared a short story unit complete with my favorites: "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Story of an Hour," and "Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?" We used these three short stories to write a developed critical lens essay. I brought in stories about myself-- the time I got into a car accident with the Cortland bus, my five kittens-- and in the process I found my students liked me more than I initially thought possible. Now, when I walk down the street to catch the L train and run into these same students that "hate" to read and write, they tell me how they miss me, Perhaps the most validating feedback I received was from a student who criticized me for being way too excited about teaching. He said, "I give all the new teachers and substitute teachers hell. I obviously gave you hell but I stopped because I got to know you. You tried to tell us about yourself, Miss and you tried to make class fun."

Advice from Current Student Teachers: Davon Clarke

Like always, C.U.R.E. has been extremely supportive of all my endeavors and frustrations, even though I’m over 3.5 hours away. That goes to show you that C.U.R.E. is indeed a family. Sometimes it was as simple as seeing Anne on my Facebook feed, or seeing an e-mail from her. (Story continued on back)
If I had to sum up my student teaching experience in New York City into one word, it would be AMAZING! This experience has truly provided me with a preview to my future as an urban educator in the big city. Whether it's the everyday adventure of taking the subway to school or grabbing a coffee with friends at a neighborhood café, nothing beats the hustle and bustle of NYC. One particular story that has truly made this experience worth it was during my fifth formal observation lesson with my fourth graders on Christopher Columbus’ encounter with the Taino Native Americans. This lesson was particularly special to me because I was able to teach about this topic from a non-Eurocentric view that we often hear. Being of mixed-race, Puerto Rican and African-American, I was able to show Columbus’ interaction with the Natives of my culture; therefore, this meant a lot to me! The responses that my students provided me with during our discussion, truly demonstrated that they could understand the importance of looking at history from multiple perspectives.

The C.U.R.E. Program has helped me look at education through a culturally relevant approach. I make sure that I hold my students to high expectations and never allow them to aim for anything lower. I encourage them to take risks and try their hardest to do well! I have built and maintained close relationships with my students to the extent that when I see them outside of school they are extremely excited to see me. In addition, I have made connections with their parents and caregivers, many of which approach me each day to tell me how much their child adores me. Lastly, I make sure that my lessons are exciting and engaging so that my students develop a passion for learning!