

Janine Leong

Mr. Greco

English III

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A Life of Growing

The outside of Mrs. Terry's house is light yellow, but when I step into her living room the walls are a rich ruby red. The bookshelves and gold framed paintings and photos lining the walls make the room feel like a cozy royal library. Mrs. Terry has been my neighbor for over a decade and she has been living in this neighborhood for around 34 years. When I was in elementary school, I walked past her garden everyday on my way home from school. She would let my brother and I take lamb's ears from her garden to stick onto our shirts. I vividly remember making trips to the little free library in front of her house to exchange books I had read for new ones.

Mrs. Terry is a resilient and passionate teacher who continues to better the community after many meaningful years as an elementary school teacher. Though not always easy, her efforts to improve Oak School and the community have defined her legacy.

Amanda Terry was born in Maldon, England, a small town in Essex northeast of London, to an American mother and English father where she grew up and attended boarding school. College wasn't much of an option for girls in boarding school. Rather, they were expected to get married and become wives.

"I had some pretty mean teachers. I had an art teacher that tore up my paintings, and the teachers were these unmarried women who were kind of depressed and there were these young girls that had futures ahead of them, and they didn't, so they weren't very nice to us." (Terry)

After high school, Mrs. Terry moved to Boston to live with her aunt. She started off as a cook and caterer for a restaurant, but got laid off. Someone suggested she volunteer at a daycare center, but Terry was doubtful.

“Why? Why would I do that? I don't know anything about children, but I did. And I turned out to be really good at it” (Terry).

She got hired at the daycare, part of Tufts University, shortly after. She got to take a few free child development courses at the university before deciding to go to college to get an education degree.

Terry's encounters with teachers at university was a refreshing departure from what she experienced in boarding school: “I think that it was more my teachers that I had in university, that really made me understand how exciting [teaching] could be.” Her teachers were “really good, young and exciting people, and they made you realize what you could do for students” (Terry). Mrs. Terry fell in love with teaching and felt lucky that she fell into it.

“Once I started, I never wanted to do anything else... When my son was three, he needed me to be patient with him in his life, so I quit teaching for about a year and a half, and I tried to think of other things to do and nothing worked. So I went and got a master's in reading and went back to teaching” (Terry).

Mrs. Terry has always loved reading since she was young. “My husband used to say he could feel this wind coming from the other side of the bed as I was flicking through the pages.” (Terry). She has a little free library in her front yard filled with books because she wants other people to have access to books. “It's so great to see all kinds of people out there. There was a little girl that lived on the corner. She used to come and clean it out for me all the time. They also used to take a lot of the books out and then bring them back.” (Terry).

“The development that kids made in our classes just made me so happy. And I'm really proud of that” (Terry). Mrs. Terry recalls how much her kindergarteners grew throughout just one year. They would draw self portraits on the first and last day of kindergarten and one student in particular matured a lot.

“He drew this picture and it was yellow crayon so you could barely see it and it was this little tiny round circle with some sticks coming out. I mean, you could barely tell what it was... At the end of kindergarten, it was this beautiful, smiling boy, big smile, hair, eyelashes, clothing, fingers, I mean everything. So it was partly that he matured, but also he just changed the way he felt about himself. And, you know, we did that for him, really.” (Terry).

Mrs. Terry's journey did not come without challenges. After she met her husband, she moved out to California from the East Coast without knowing anyone there. However, Mrs. Terry states, “I think the hardest thing that happened to me was that [my husband] died very suddenly. He had cancer and he was only sick for two weeks. It was just a huge shock.” Her husband died when her kids were still young, so she had to become parents for them. “I don't really remember a whole lot of the first year or two after he died, but again, I had this community of people, the Oak teachers. During that year, people just got together and they helped me raise [my daughter].” (Terry).

Even though Mrs. Terry was so passionate about teaching, it was not always easy. As much as Mrs. Terry loved working with kids, being a kindergarten teacher required a lot of patience with both the kids and parents.

“Parents can come in and just rip you up one side and make you cry and feel horrible and you have to go back in the classroom and face children, and that's really hard” (Terry). She states that teachers have to consider the parent's point of view and empathize with their concern for

their children. “Young teachers going in, they’re 25, they don't have any children. They think they know, but they don't really have a clue what it's like to be a parent” (Terry).

As she got older and became a parent herself, she began to understand why parents acted this way. “They really care about their children. They don't really care about anybody else” Though Mrs. Terry understood where the parents were coming from, she says, “You can't just roll over and let them tell you what to do” (Terry).

Despite the difficulties, Mrs. Terry persevered and never lost her love for teaching. “It's a really hard job and it's not paid as well as it should be”, but there are still dedicated teachers out there who really care about their students (Terry).

Teaching is not an easy job, and especially in the wake of the pandemic, more teachers than ever have been leaving the field. Surveys show “55 percent of educators are thinking about leaving the profession earlier than they had planned” (Walker). Distance learning made teaching even more difficult, and in-person teachers risked their health. Furthermore, both distance learning and in-person teaching were compromised by barriers such as video calls and masks. Recently, more teachers have been leaving the field, but this is nothing new. Prior to the pandemic, the amount of teachers leaving was trending up, and the pandemic only accelerated the trend. “Underlying factors have been corroding the stability of the profession at least since the economic crisis of 2009-10 and the staggering education budget cuts that emerged in its wake” (Walker). Teachers have always not been paid enough for the difficult job. Becky Pringle, president of the NEA, traveled around the country to see what challenges teachers were facing. She observes, “Without exception, every stop I made, from Kentucky to Oakland, I heard those similar stories of educators who were exhausted, overwhelmed, feeling unloved, disrespected” (qtd. in Kamenetz). According to the Brookings Institute, “Higher levels of job dissatisfaction

and intentions to leave could affect teacher effectiveness and could harm students' academic progress" (Zamarro). Additionally, the shortage of teachers forces the few teachers left to endure more stress to cover more work.

I visited Mrs. Terry's house to interview her for this project and she showed me around her house. Now that she's retired, she spends her time painting, playing mahjong, and gardening. Before the pandemic, she traveled to England for a painting trip with a group of friends. Mrs. Terry shows me the paintings of flowers and Beatrix Potter's house. She hopes to travel more soon when the pandemic dies down. She used to visit England once a year and she's been to places like Vietnam, South America, and Russia. Now, she spends time learning and getting better at painting. She opens up her box of paints with mixed colors on the side. Sentimental photos are framed on the desk and past paintings are on display on the walls. She has drawers of supplies and paintings in progress on the desk. She still continues to teach, volunteering a few days a week at Bubb Elementary school teaching first graders reading.

Mrs. Terry loved teaching so much, it was hard for her to retire, but teaching became too physically demanding and she had to switch to part-time. Eventually, she fully retired, but Mrs. Terry continues to teach children, volunteering to teach reading to first graders a few days a week at Bubb Elementary School. Now that she is retired, she wants to travel once it is safer and see her grandchildren and family grow up. In terms of goals for the future, she says, "I think I just want to be a good person and keep going and not give up. I'm not going to be one of those old ladies that just sits down and doesn't do anything because that's no fun. And, you know, I want to have fun, and I do have fun, and I plan to have more fun" (Terry).

Mrs. Terry continues to tend to her garden even out in the hot sun. Her roses have just begun to bloom and her blue little free library painted with stars completes her front garden. She

refills the birdfeeders and shows me the hummingbird nest that has appeared in her backyard. She lives by herself and her home is welcoming and warm. Seeing from the way Mrs. Terry interacts with others, it is clear she is a special teacher and person that the community is very blessed to have.

“I just hope that people will continue to go into teaching...I think there are still people that are dedicated and want to do it” (Terry).

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