

We'll Stand Behind You

She was scared to give her report. How the class supported a nervous student is shared in the **Going Beyond** folder for Chapter 10 at EffectiveTeaching.com.

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Stand Up

by Amanda McKnight

It was one of those days that you dream about as you wonder what the next year and next group of students will bring. It was one of those days that will be remembered for your whole life—not because it was something that you, the teacher did, but because it was something that they, the students did. And you, as the teacher, could never have taught them to do it.

We had been working on our speeches for about a week when Cassandra came into my class. I had been told about Cassandra, told that she had severe anxiety problems that forced her out of general education and into a one-on-one tutoring situation, told that she would require extra attention and care, told that it might not be easy to have her as a student. When Cassandra entered my class for the first time, though, I discovered that Cassandra was simply a young lady trying to cope with some difficult situations. Her difficulties were evidenced by a forearm riddled with fresh scars from cutting and a wardrobe of nothing but black. So she stood, ready to walk through the doorway of my room, with a shaky voice and fidgeting hands.

Cassandra adapted to my eighth-grade classroom fairly easily. All was going well; our speeches were to be presented during the last week of school. Cassandra turned in everything on time and seemed to be getting along with the other students. I knew that she was nervous about presenting the speech, but I encouraged her to do her best. Somehow, though, it seemed as if the “I know you can do it” and “I believe in you” just weren’t enough.

Speech day arrived. I knew that Cassandra could do it and was ready. This was it—the last day of school, the final opportunity. I suddenly felt like Cassandra did on the first day of my class. I asked Cassandra, “Are you ready?”

At that point, Cassandra’s face became flushed and her mouth formed a “No.” After uttering the word, Cassandra, ashamed, looked down at her desk, realizing that she had given up on herself again. And, as I wondered whether this day might be chronicled as one more scar on her forearm, something amazing happened.

I noticed a flicker of movement from the rear left corner of the classroom. It was Chandler. Chandler, the tall young man who ran track and came to class daily with flushed cheeks, who excelled on the field but struggled in the classroom, was making his move.

Chandler walked to the podium. He looked at the class, made determined eye contact with Cassandra, and said, “**Cassandra, you can do your speech. I’ll stand behind you.**”

And, one by one, they came. Each student stood, walked to the front of the room, and echoed Chandler’s words, “I’ll stand behind you.”

We'll Stand Behind You (continued)

Cassandra stood. She walked to the podium and gave her speech, with 16 determined young people—having more maturity it seemed at that moment than I—standing behind her.

On that day, Cassandra won a battle, maybe the first one in her life. If it erased one possible mark from her arm, she made progress. And what's better is that we, as a class, as a group of people united for a cause, truly learned. We learned a lesson that a textbook could never have taught.

It was a lesson about the heart. It was a lesson from which 18 people learned that day—17 of them eighth graders—and one of them me.