

# Chalkboard Heroine

If only a school librarian had her back

by Jennifer Burek Pierce

One might reasonably think I'm beyond having a favorite teacher. Having turned in all my assignments and completed my formal education years ago, such a declaration might seem a tad unnecessary. A note on author Nikki Grimes's Facebook page, though, called my attention to Teacher Appreciation

Day, recognized early each May. Her words, to say nothing of recent media attention to declining education

funds, prompt me to enthuse about a particular teacher.

My gratitude to all my instructors (including Ann and Nancy, who patiently correct my novice knitting mistakes) is boundless. Yet the teacher whose work so awes me isn't someone I've studied with; instead, my longtime friend Laura, now a 3rd-grade teacher in California, reinforces my belief in the power of public education to support literacy and related learning.

Laura calls my attention to the sprawling details of elementary school life, from tracking down parents who'd rather not chat with their child's teacher to researching California's geography. Once she told me what it was like to explain all the intricacies of the use of commas . . . to 25 8-year-olds. "Can you do

that?" she asked. Um, next question please.

**Literature lovers welcome** Reading with her students is one of Laura's priorities. She has had an animal control officer and high school drama students come into her classroom to share favorite stories. "To have someone come in and

make reading a fun and engaging activity is a big deal," she said.

"Only two kids in my room have parents who read bedtime stories. That's the reality of the environ-

ment." Her thank-you notes charm me, too: Her students draw favorite moments from these visits, images she sends to the volunteers. Laura sees reading's rewards when the kids are excited to find now-familiar books at the library.

I'm used to having the resources of a research university at my fingertips, and I sometimes forget that elsewhere such tools are not the norm. When a vendor sent me an e-mail about a new bilingual reference set, I forwarded it to Laura and asked if she had had a chance to use the material with her students yet, eager for her real-world perspective. I certainly got it: She has a 1998 encyclopedia set in her classroom that is missing only a couple of volumes.

We're nearing the end of the school year. In Laura's classroom, that means

a couple of things. One is the annual round of standardized tests. The other is calendar-making, an activity that involves math, language, culture, and art as students construct grids, number dates, identify days of the week and special events, and illustrate each month. This learning experience becomes a gift students take home to their parents, and I want to believe it's something they'll all remember years hence.

## Reading and roses

Every time I hear about this project, I want a school librarian to ply the class with *Chase's Calendar of Events* and other reference works. While the school has a library, it lacks a librarian to shape the collection or even a clerical aide to manage circulation functions. It's filled with donated volumes, many of which aren't the newest, coolest, award-winning titles I tell my students they should promote in the libraries they'll one day run. Stories of this California classroom fill me with wonder every time, because I know it's not all reading and roses.

Long ago, one of my elementary school teachers assigned an essay that asked me to describe my hero. I didn't have a good response, a ready image of someone whose indefatigable creativity and character I idealized. But Mr. Mittenzwei, if you happen to read this, now I do. ■

JENNIFER BUREK PIERCE is assistant professor of library and information science at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. Contact her at [youthmatters@ala.org](mailto:youthmatters@ala.org).



I'm used to having the resources of a research university at my fingertips;

I sometimes forget that elsewhere that isn't the norm.

© Copyright 1997-2018, American Library Association

The American Library Association is providing information and services on the web in furtherance of its non-profit and tax-exempt status. Permission to use, copy and distribute documents delivered from this website and related graphics is hereby granted for private, non-commercial and education purposes only, provided that the above copyright notice appears with the following notice: This document may be reprinted and distributed for non-commercial and educational purposes only, and not for resale. No resale use may be made of material on this website at any time. All other rights reserved.