

## **“Teaching Tolerance”**

The directions were for the students to listen and sit patiently, at least as patiently as a room full of antsy elementary school kids could sit at the end of a long day. I carefully studied them as they fidgeted, eager with anticipation, creatively demonstrating every possible way to sit, stand or squat on a chair without falling off. My gaze settled on Sandra, who flashed me one of her goofy, toothless grins and went cross-eyed. In a few minutes, the after-school literacy program would conclude, and like any other children; they would zip up their book bags, meet their parents in the halls, and head home. The only difference was that home was only a staircase away, where everyone lived in a large room on the second floor of the shelter where thin metal dividers give each family some privacy.

I stuck my tongue out in response to Sandra, who was still making faces at me from across the room. Through Sandra, I had witnessed the difficulties and prejudices families at the shelter had to face from a new perspective. In her childlike innocence, she would share with me the hurtful jokes and condescending comments directed towards the people at the shelter by others. As single mothers dragged shrieking toddlers through the halls, I felt rather alien, aware that this lifestyle was a tragic, yet somewhat normal, reality for these children.

While most of the kids bond easily with the numerous volunteers circulating throughout the shelter, Sandra and I became particularly close. Originally, I worked with her mother during GED study sessions; however, when I was relocated to the children’s program, Sandra and I were paired as study buddies, though today we’ve accomplished much more than just multiplication tables.

I often sported wacky earrings and colorful florescent scarves to diminish the dreariness of our under-funded classroom. Sandra loved my crazy clothing combinations, but the main appeal may have been the courage I seemed to display by wearing them in public. My jewelry and clothing seemed out of place in her culture where fashion and image were important, but it had never been a problem until this afternoon, when I arrived to find my little spelling buddy in tears. She claimed that after proudly showing off one of the colorful rainbow bracelets we made together, the older kids had begun to taunt her, calling her names she did not understand such as “gay” and

“faggot.” Sandra and I discussed how appropriately to respond to the ignorance these children had displayed, and how unfortunate it was that no one ever bothered to teach them tolerance. When she marched off, perhaps a little too eager to give the next name caller an explanation of why people should be respected regardless of their differences, I overlooked the fact that one little girl might not change the opinions of her gravely-misinformed peers.

Perhaps, armed with respect and on her way to acing tomorrow’s spelling test, she might not allow her children’s generation to go uneducated.