

It's so easy to send poor kids to college for free

“I



just wanted to wish you a Happy Father's Day since you are the closest thing to a father that I have." My mentee, age 16.

This simple note, sent via e-mail by Z (not his real name), punched me in the gut, unleashing simultaneous sorrow and gratitude. Sorrow that bad things happen to good people. Gratitude for the love and respect I feel for this amazing young gentleman and the sense that I may actually help his climb from desolation to success.

I've had the privilege of being Z's mentor over the past three years via a Miami-Dade County Public School program, "Take Stock in Children." This is a volunteer organization that guarantees free college tuition to underserved teens who work hard and deserve it. For an hour of my time each month, Z gets a ticket out of the barrio and a chance to make a life unrecognizable from the one he's grown up in.

The amazing thing is that my life is radically improved in process. For as Buddha said, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." And Z is constantly teaching me the true meaning of no-whining fortitude and hope.

Despite being raised without a father and in poverty, Z is upbeat, optimistic, earnest, and determined. He bears none of the elitist cynicism and arrogance that I display regularly. His

Child as Teacher

Written by Stuart Sheldon, BT Contributor
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father disappeared a few years ago, leaving his mother to raise four children in a cramped Section 8 apartment.

She speaks no English and, until recently, didn't work, resulting in the need to move no less than four times since I've known them, for lack of rent money. Who knows if a so-called deportation squad will show up in the middle of the night one day and ship her off? They have no car, have never been on a vacation, and have never eaten in a restaurant. Yet Z is one of the richest people I know. Ebullient. Humble. Eager. Truly righteous. He is the young man I pray my privileged children will become.

It has been particularly thrilling to watch Z's evolution as a musician, for I was with him when he took his first middle school piano class. I was only half kidding with him early on when I told him of the John Cougar lyric "Forget about that macho shit, and learn how to play guitar." And I encouraged him when he switched from piano to trumpet after one semester.

Z discovered and began seeking out jazz trumpeters on the Internet: Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Al Hirt. And one day I scored us tickets to see Arturo Sandoval at the Arsht Center. It rocked his world and showed him what musical success looks and sounds like up close.

Through hard work, steady practice, and an evolving love for the creative power of song, Z kept upping his game. One of my proudest moments for him was the day he was invited into a local jazz conservatory whose sole focus is maximizing the potential of enthusiastic young players. The program teaches sight reading, improv, rhythm, repertoire knowledge, and performance skills, as well as jazz theory, jazz history, and studio musicianship.

To do this, Z takes the bus from Little Haiti to Coral Gables twice a week. Often the head of the conservatory gives Z a ride home. He too appreciates the heart and soul of this young man and shares his own stories about music and life, broadening Z's horizons and taking him that much farther from a life lost to poverty.

Z is smart. I share his love for good books and history. He often brings me up to date on just-learned historical points in America's journey, dusting off things I learned long ago, while informing our talks of the political process these past six months.

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At the end of the day, Z is the quintessential “good kid” who deserves success, and who will work to achieve it. Whether he’s helping his mother around the modest apartment or studying in the library with his girlfriend, he is wholesome and directed. His is a life lived with purpose, dignity, and commitment.

We live in deeply troubled times, and the divide between rich and poor is one of our greatest problems. It’s up to us, the privileged, to reach out. And it takes so very little effort to change a life. I urge you to step up and be that change. You will make a stunning difference in the existence of a good kid like Z, with just one hour each month.

Reach out to “Take Stock in Children” to learn how to send a worthy child to college for free. Trust me, the person you’ll be helping most is yourself. Visit www.takestockinchildren.org , or call 305-237-7522.

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