

Jay Rehak

I used to think I could solve every student's problem just by listening intently and then coming up with magic words that would help them realize the folly of their ways. Then I became a teacher. It was three years into my career; I was teaching 7th grade at a Catholic elementary school in Chicago's Uptown. The school had very limited resources, accepted anyone, and had no special education teachers to serve the emotionally and behaviorally disordered children that flocked to its doors. Perhaps because I was six foot three and two hundred and twenty-five pounds, my female colleagues would occasionally send me their "problem" students.

I never minded the extra student because he/she provided an evidentiary sideshow while I taught. When bored, my students could look at the offending pupil and see that "Mr. Rehak was tough." I enjoyed the reputation.

One day, a fourth grade student came running, announcing, "Vernard is out of control." Evidently, "Vernard" was zooming around his class, randomly hitting people, and threatening his teacher. Reputedly a black belt in karate, Vernard intimidated older students as well as his classmates. A frequent "guest" of my class, Vernard got along with me. I was proud of my ability to "control" him.

I told my students to stay in the room and quickly advanced towards the fourth grade class. There was Vernard in the hallway pushing Ms. S.

"I've got him, Susan," I said egotistically. "Vernard," I said firmly. The little boy squirmed violently, and ran down the hallway. I met up with him just outside my classroom. He gave me a look that seemed distant and yet immediately threatening. He tried pushing me away.

I positioned myself between him and my classroom, with his back immediately to the corridor wall. He started swinging wildly at me. "Vernard," I repeated more assertively. "Stop it." He swung at me again. This time I grabbed both of his hands by the wrists and held him against the wall. "Vernard, stop it!" I yelled.

He spit at me, hitting me in the face. I squeezed his wrists harder. "Vernard, stop it, man." I pleaded as I closed my eyes. He gulped hard and repeatedly spit at me, as much and as fast as he could get out of his mouth. I tightened my grip and turned my head, yelling louder, "Stop it!"

Suddenly, I became aware I was not alone. I looked over my shoulder and saw that my entire class had come out to watch. "Get back in the room!" I bellowed. No one listened. Vernard tried to find more spit in his throat but his mouth was dry. He went limp. I released his wrists and he stood there, as if nothing had happened, a vacant look on his face.

Satisfied that the spitting was over, my students all pushed back into the room. I turned to Vernard. "Let's go." I said exhaustedly. Silently, without resistance, he followed me to the principal's office. I pointed at a chair next to the counter that

separated the principal from the outside world. He sat. I turned and said, "You all right now?" He gave me a look of triumph and confusion, as the Principal said, "I'll take it from here, Jay."

"Call me if you have any problem with him." I said shakily. When I returned, the room was abuzz. "Mr. Rehak's afraid of Vernard, too!" someone shouted.

"He got you good, Mr. Rehak."

"Why didn't you beat him? You afraid?"

I stood there momentarily speechless. "I wasn't afraid of him." I said, as if I were back in 7th grade and had just gotten stared down by a bully.

"Yeah, sure." A few mumbled.

I put my thumb and forefinger to my eyes and momentarily shut the world out. My fists clenched, I wanted to tell everyone how much I wanted to punch Vernard not as "payback" but as a way of "fixing him." Yet, at that moment, I realized nothing I could say or do would "fix" Vernard. I wanted to explode in frustration, but instead I said, "Whatever. Just open up your math books and let's get back to work"

I spent the rest of the day sneaking looks at the classroom door, wondering if I would see Vernard back in class. Just before the bell rang, the Principal brought him into my room, and he took his seat next to mine. He put his head down and went to sleep until school was over. When he woke up, I hoped he would leave and never return.