

**The sun said to the tree, “You have survived the winter because you are, and were, and always will be, very much loved. For that small place deep within you that remained unfrozen and open to mystery, that is where I have made my dwelling. And long, long before you felt my warmth surrounding you, you were being freed and formed from within in ways so deep and profound that you could not possibly know what was happening.”**

I am that tree. The tree that survived a long, long winter. The tree that was sustained by the unconditional love of so many, including a group of five year olds and one special school in West Hartford, CT.

To quote Lance Armstrong, “When I was sick, I saw more beauty and triumph and truth in a single day than ever before...cancer was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I still don’t completely understand it...all I can do is tell you what happened.”

It was February of my 29<sup>th</sup> year. The phone rang and life as I knew it ended with the 3 words “You have cancer.” During my year long illness, life slowed down and I had the opportunity to reflect on where I had been and where I was going.

At 29, I had already been some amazing places. I began my career at 22, in what is, in my opinion, the best preschool in the state. It was at the Early Learning Center at Whiting Lane School that I developed myself both as a person and as an early childhood educator.

During my 5 years at the ELC, I learned....

- That EVERY child can learn- even those with the severest of disabilities
- That INTENTIONAL, appropriate, and comprehensive early intervention can make a difference
- That preschoolers are COMPETENT and the work of preschool is real-exposure to literacy and math concepts, the acquisition of language and vocabulary development, making friends and learning social skills-preschool really does lay the foundation for a LIFETIME of learning

In 2006, I began my career as a Whiting Lane kindergarten teacher. I quickly learned....

- That upon entering kindergarten, the achievement gap is already present among students
- That students who had a preschool experience are MORE ready to learn than those who did not
- That even with the gap, early intervention and effective teaching strategies CAN make a difference

And then the diagnosis. And to quote Lance again, “If children have the ability to ignore odds and percentages, then maybe we can all learn from them. When you think about it, what other choice is there but to hope? We have two options, medically and emotionally: give up, or fight.” Like Lance, I chose to fight. And for me, that meant staying in the classroom and finishing the school year that I had started.

Throughout this year, I was slowly being changed and influenced by the gifts of cancer. In my darkest hour, the children of Whiting Lane sustained me. Their desire to learn, their boundless energy and enthusiasm, and their unconditional love for me, their teacher, pushed me further than I thought I could go. It was during this long year that I learned...

- That you can lose all your hair, but to a 5 year old it only matters what color bandanna you choose
- That there is real value in children learning about and discussing with one another their feelings
- That character education is crucial- and even a 5 year old can know what it means to Pay it Forward
- That Whiting Lane students really do learn to live our school code- “always take care of each other-” even when the “other” is their teacher

And then, treatment ended, the universe righted itself, and life came back. I became fearless and more of a risk-taker in my classroom- after all, what did I have to lose?

I began last school year as Whiting Lane’s kindergarten special education teacher. It was a new adventure for me, and I was desperate to give back to the school and community that had given me so much. For the first time in 2 years, I was looking forward to the possibilities that lay ahead. I imagined a kindergarten where the lines between general and special education are blurred, and teachers work together for the good of ALL students. I

imagined the achievement gap closing, with the implementation of specific, individualized interventions for students at risk. And I imagined our kindergarteners practicing yoga to gain better self-control, improved attention and focus, and stronger bodies.

I am proud to tell you that what I imagined became reality. It was during last year that I learned...

- That the lines in education can be blurred.
- That the achievement gap can close.

AND...

- that 5 year olds are natural yogis.

**Profoundly humbled, the tree bent low, grateful for the obvious gifts she had to share, but even more grateful for the less obvious- the scars that produced an unspeakable solidarity. And the tree exclaimed eagerly to all who would listen, "Have you seen? Have you heard? I am needed! I am wanted! I am sharing my life at a whole new level."**

**So this year, I return to regular education to resume my role as a kindergarten teacher, healthy, happy, and achieving in what I know how to do best- teach young children.**

**I want to thank the town of West Hartford for providing me with 10 years of enriching experiences and amazing support. I want to specifically thank my principal, Dr. Nancy DePalma, who is a leader of both the mind and of the heart.**

**Thank you to the Teacher of the Year committee, Commissioner McQuillan, Dr. Gary, and ING, for honoring me, my story, my work, and the school that I am so very proud of.**

**And finally, I want to thank my family. To my parents for encouraging my growth as a person. To my aunt who is my inspiration not only in education, but in life. To my 4 childhood friends who are the sisters god has given me. And to John, whose love has been the greatest gift of my life.**