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Victoria John of Dallas: Teaching teenagers

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Victoria John is a middle school Latin, drama and musical theater teacher at Lakehill Preparatory School in Dallas. She is also a Teacher Voices volunteer columnist. Her e-mail address

When I tell strangers I teach middle school, they respond with praise or pity. They either call me a saint and tell me there's a special place in heaven for me – or they say I'm crazy and a glutton for punishment.

"How do you deal with all those raging hormones?" "Young teenagers are disrespectful and unruly." "They are belligerent and rebellious."

The comments echo the ancient orator Cicero's words regarding corruption during the Roman Republic: *O tempora o mores* –translated as, "Oh the times! Oh the customs."

Too often, the news today regarding teenagers is negative. However, experience has taught me that when you seek the best, you find it. It's not always easy, but teaching middle school students is most worth it.

As a Latin, drama and musical theater teacher at Lakehill Preparatory School in Dallas, I enjoy variety each day.

As individuals, my students are insightful, interested, motivated and full of rewarding surprises. As a group, they cooperate with respect and eagerly volunteer for significant community service projects, including a monthly trash cleanup at White Rock Lake.

Recently an eighth-grade Latin, drama and musical theater student brought his prized cowboy hat, a special gift from his grandfather, to my classroom for safekeeping prior to his performance. I thought back on the four years I had known him, and a kaleidoscope of his unique qualities swirled into view – joining younger students at lunch just because he enjoyed their company, sharing heartwarming family stories, offering math tips to a friend in the hall between classes. Moments of kindness, respect, honesty and tolerance.

As he turned to leave, I called his name and shared, "You are such a neat and thoughtful young man. I have really enjoyed knowing and teaching you." He turned, and with his familiar smile responded, "Thank you. I love Latin and drama." He paused and added, "It's because of you. You make it fun."

"Oh the times! Oh the customs."

In drama class, a first-time performer walked hesitantly onto the stage to present a pantomime for 19 of his peers. Reaching the center, he looked at his audience and froze as he quietly mused, "So this is what stage fright is."

He then launched into one of the best pantomimes I have ever observed. It even brought to mind the exceptional skill of the famous mime artist Marcel Marceau. With creativity and humor, this student

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morphed into a prehistoric man attempting to start a fire. He communicated the essence of his story through silence and well-executed movement. It was amazing. His supportive classmates responded with a standing ovation. How many people spend a Friday afternoon being entertained by talented young people?

"Oh the times! Oh the customs!"

Last year the seventh- and eighth-grade drama class performed a one-act version of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the annual winter program. The actress playing Quince had been reluctant to perform her character as directed. When she finally complied at the performance, she experienced audience revelry and applause.

Later, she shared: "Ms. John, at first, I didn't want that part. But I didn't complain and gave it my all. Now I'm so glad I had the part of Quince. I really enjoyed it and learned a lot!"

"Oh the times! Oh the customs!"

These are not isolated cases. I have taught at Lakehill for 10 years, and students still surprise me. In the words of American composers George and Ira Gershwin, "Who could ask for anything more?"

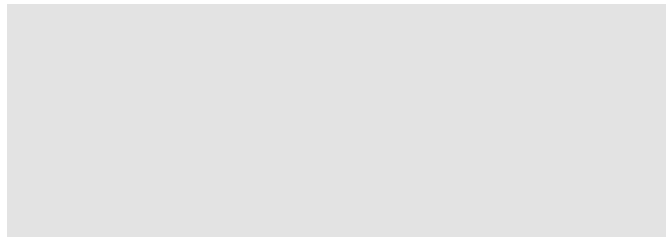
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Posted by **GaryH** | 2 days ago



That's great! Some middle-schoolers are very bright, enthusiastic, eager to learn, and fun to teach. I just have a feeling that you see a larger percentage of those types than are found in most typical public junior high schools.



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