

Life Lessons

Teacher Rafe Esquith and the Forces at Work in Room 56

by Ruth Eckles

In the audience tonight at Quail Ridge Books & Music in Raleigh, North Carolina, you'll find seasoned and fledgling teachers, parents who care about education, and the just plain curious. Shakespeare is being performed here this evening, but from where I sit I see microphones and amplifiers, an electric bass, a Fender Stratocaster guitar, and a full drum kit, all at the ready. Off to the side, a cluster of well-behaved grade-schoolers—the stars of this evening's show—sits on the floor.

Kids, guitars, and the Bard? Yes. We're here tonight to meet a world-famous, inner-city teacher who has made it part of his life's work to teach elementary school students to perform Shakespeare that is reputed to make audiences weep. Rafe Esquith leads The Hobart Shakespeareans, a traveling group of his fifth graders, on tour from Room 56 at Hobart Elementary School in Los Angeles. And by the time these pint-sized Shakespeareans are ready to recite and rock and roll, it is standing room only.

Esquith is here to give a short talk on his recently published second book, *Teach Like Your Hair's On Fire: The Methods and Madness Inside Room 56*, a follow-up to *There Are No Shortcuts*, published in 2003. Both books focus on Esquith's teaching experiences, his unique classroom persona, and his views on today's elementary classroom culture. However, Esquith makes it clear that his students, not he, will take center stage this evening. They certainly do.

Sandwiched between sensitively and humorously done Shakespeare excerpts, The Hobart Shakespearians play and sing spot-on versions of modern rock/pop songs by U2, R.E.M., Nirvana, Radiohead, and the Beatles. The emotional lyrics blend seamlessly with the Shakespearean themes, and the performance is made complete with choreography. Audience members, visibly moved, exchange glances. This is not your average kids' performance. This is extraordinary.

But maybe we shouldn't be so surprised. After all, Esquith isn't. He says, given the chance, all kids can be as sharp and accomplished as his. And when you consider that his students are from an area of Los Angeles where drugs, street violence, and school lockdowns are part of the landscape and where, in most cases, English is their second language and rarely spoken at home, his message resonates much like the guitars at tonight's performance.

But Esquith, fifty-two, is quick to emphasize that there is more than Shakespeare and rock and roll going on here. His students are part of a total classroom experience he has cultivated over his quarter-century teaching career: one of learning, respect, and values, where his students are challenged daily to expect more from themselves than they ever thought possible. How many fifth graders do you know who have reading lists that include Orwell and Malcolm X? For Esquith's students, this is standard.

His classroom credo is simple—"Be Nice. Work Hard."—

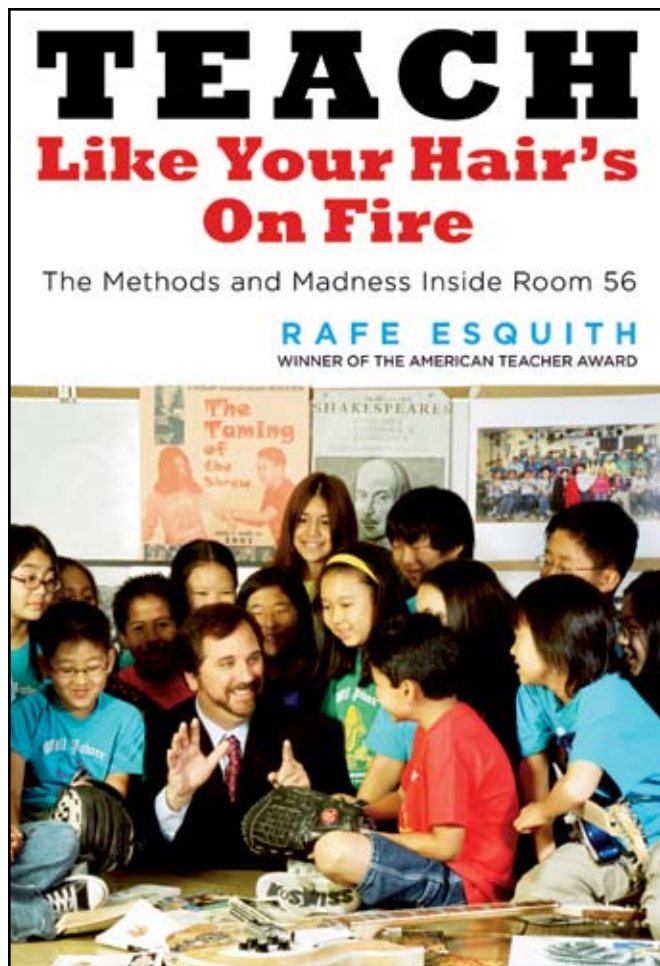
and accurately depicts the atmosphere he has created in Room 56. Esquith teaches the importance of humility and mutual respect along with standard subjects such as writing, science, and math; he also devotes time to music, art, and even baseball (one of his passions). Learning happens here not only by

rote memorization, but also on a deeper level: problem-solving, critical thinking, seeing the different angles of and possible solutions to a problem. He teaches his students to be in touch with how they *feel* about a subject, a book, a character, or a political issue and encourages them to realize and understand their own personal value system.

Results don't lie. Esquith's students score in the top percentages on national standardized tests, and many go on to achieve at higher levels of education, some winding up at the country's top colleges and universities. Yet Esquith feels the most important lessons they learn have nothing to do with test scores, which he believes are a poor measure of success. "Tests are important, but nowhere near as important as helping children grow into strong, decent human beings," he says. And while he admits to being a tough teacher, it's not in the way that people might think. In fact, he rarely gives homework.

"The work I do give is at a much higher level of thinking," Esquith says, "and I expect of their behavior much more than most people do. One of the reasons my kids are so sharp is because they spend their time differently. Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings* advises young Frodo, 'All you have to do is to decide what to do with the time given you.' And like Gandalf, I try to present the kids with a different option of how to spend their time. It doesn't have to be in front of the television set. Most of my kids don't play video games or own Game Boys. And when people say, 'Oh, that's ridiculous!' I don't think it is ridiculous. That's why they're so sharp."

And for cynics who may be wondering: yes, the kids in Room 56 do have fun. In fact, they like being there so much



that many of them start their day in the classroom at six-thirty in the morning and stay until dinnertime. “I’ve created a classroom that is so much fun that it’s their favorite place to be in the world,” Esquith says.

Esquith, who receives numerous requests from fellow educators wanting to make pilgrimage to his classroom, has achieved honors and awards that are, for the most part, out of the norm for a fifth-grade teacher. He’s the only teacher to receive the National Medal of Arts. He was made a Member of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth, and he received the Compassion in Action Award from the Dalai Lama. Along the way he has also earned The Disney American Teacher Award, *Parents* magazine As You Grow Award, and Oprah Winfrey’s Use Your Life Award. Legendary Shakespearean actor Sir Ian McKellen, a regular visitor to Room 56, calls Esquith his “only hero.” Yet despite all this, despite the hit 2005 PBS documentary *The Hobart Shakespeareans* that introduced Esquith and Room 56 to the mainstream public, and despite a tour schedule that takes him and his students all over the world where they perform for foreign dignitaries and VIPs, Esquith says his proudest achievement is the fact that he’s still teaching in Room 56 after twenty-five years.

When I finally meet Rafe Esquith in person, he radiates kindness and humility. He seems genuinely embarrassed by all the fuss that has been made about him and does his best to convince me that he is nothing special, just an average guy doing his job the best he knows how. His is a teacher’s life, after all, where fanfare and accolades aren’t what’s important. Especially not in Room 56.

RUTH ECKLES: Rafe, you’re a rarity in that you’re a nationally recognized schoolteacher. How do you feel about your fame?

RAFE ESQUITH: Sometimes I think being a nationally recognized teacher was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I’m very content just hiding up in Room 56. That’s where I spend most of my time. I’m nervous right now talking to you because I really see myself as an incredibly ordinary guy. But back in ’92 there was a child that nominated me for Disney’s National Teacher of the Year and I actually threw the application out. My wife Barbara said, “You know, Rafe, you may not be the national teacher of the year, but you hurt her feelings. She had great faith in you, and she was trying to pay you a compliment and you didn’t consider that.” And my wife, as usual, was right. So I fished the application out of the garbage, it was all crumpled up, and I answered all the questions. That way I could tell the little girl I did the application and thank you very much.

So the Disney people called my school and they talked to my principal and said, “He doesn’t really come into school so early in the morning, does he?” and she said, “Well, yes, he really does.” “Well, the kids don’t really do Shakespeare.” “Well, yes, they really do.” And there is a really good story in that the guy who filmed me, who was the head of the Disney teacher awards, after he filmed me, he went back to his office and said, “I just saw the winner.” He knew there was something magical going on. Not because I’m such a good teacher but because there are a lot of forces at work in Room 56.

So what normally happens is you’re Disney’s National Teacher of the Year and you get your five minutes of fame. And then everybody moves away. But when people come to Room 56, it is different. I don’t think it can be replicated. I’ve written this book [*Teach Like Your Hair’s On Fire*] because I think you can get ideas from Room 56. But I think there are forces at work there and that I’m just lucky. I’m in Los Angeles, where you do tend to get noticed. I’m sure there’s a great teacher in a small town in Ohio who’s probably better than I am.

ECKLES: You talk about the “forces” at work in your classroom. Could you be more specific about what you feel those are and how they make your classroom special? It sounds as though what you have created has taken on a life of its own.

ESQUITH: The forces in my classroom are a classic situation where the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The driving force is that of the former students. Every day kids return from middle and high school. The college alumni are there all the time. These heroic kids are heroes to my new students. My young kids have a vision of what they want to be one day thanks to the former students. The old gang is fanatically devoted to Room 56. I am not important in Room 56. I am just the lucky guy who works there.

ECKLES: What kind of fifth grader were you?

ESQUITH: I was a very average fifth grader. I was a very lonely fifth grader because of the loss of my father. He died when I was in the fourth grade and I had great difficulty coming to terms with the unfairness of it all. I saw men who were mean men or dishonest men who were alive. And my father was a good man. We all learn at some point in our lives that life isn’t always fair. I *just* couldn’t come to terms with it. I had an ulcer as a fifth grader because of the pain I was in. I loved my mom, but she’s not my dad. It’s different. I missed him *terribly*. I had no one to talk to about it. I didn’t want to talk to my mom about it because she was crying every night because she missed him too. So I was a lonely fifth grader. I didn’t know it at the time, but I think that loneliness had a lot to do with why I try so hard as a teacher because I don’t want the children to ever feel as lonely as I did.

I am very in tune with the pain that some of my students are in. I’m not their father, and I wouldn’t want to be their father, but I will tell you that a lot of my kids do call me a father figure. It’s good to have a guy in your life that you can talk to, who you can play catch with and who can be as silly as I can be, because I can be outrageously ridiculous. And that’s OK. Even in the early years of my teaching, I didn’t make the connection with my childhood experiences. When I became a famous teacher people started to ask me questions that I had never thought about like, “Why do you work so hard?” And I realized that a lot of it had to do with the loss of my father.

ECKLES: You’ve said that you were raised in a home where the most important thing was to make a difference. What did that look like?

ESQUITH: My father was a social worker. My father was also called by the Un-American Activities Committee in the McCarthy era. He would not name names. I learned early on that sometimes you have to walk to the beat of a different drummer.

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