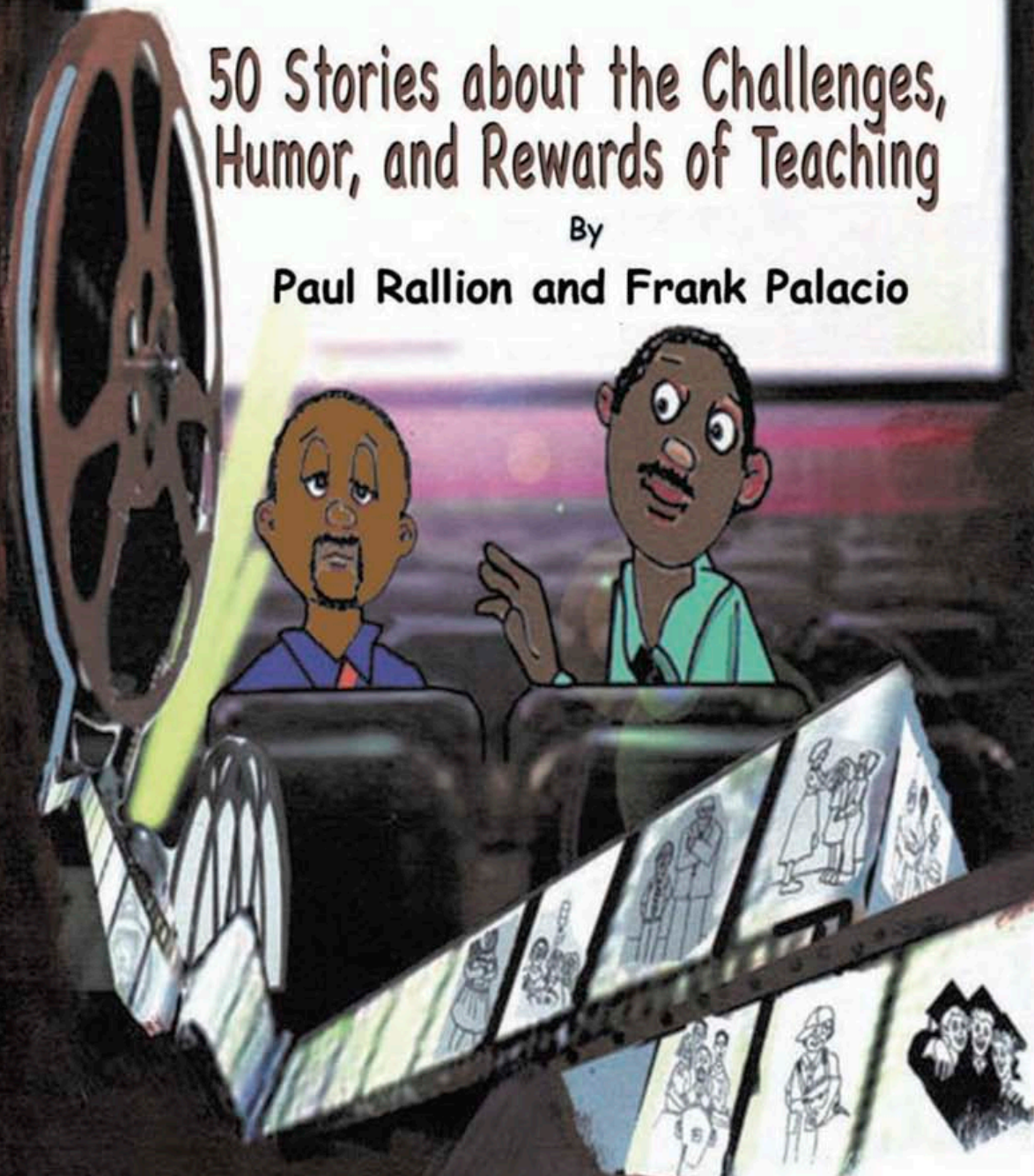


Middle Schoolin'

50 Stories about the Challenges,
Humor, and Rewards of Teaching

By

Paul Rallion and Frank Palacio



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Humor, and Rewards of Teaching

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Illustrated by Robert M. Henry

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Dedications

Many Thanks.

I would like to dedicate this work to everyone who helped to make it become a reality. First, thanks to my good friend and co-author, Paul Rallion, for his tremendous work ethic. Special thanks go out to my wife, Glendarice, and children, Victoria and Jeremy, for their encouragement and patience during this project, which took away countless hours of family time. In addition, I would like to thank my dad, Theodore Palacio, a retired educator who was instrumental in proofreading, editing, and critiquing early drafts and who was always available to give me advice.

—**Frank Palacio**

In memory of my father ...

I dedicate this work to my father. I would like to thank both my parents for the high value they placed on education. In addition, I dedicate this book to my wife, Mary, and my daughter, Anaïs—the happiness they bring me cannot be put into words. I wish to thank them for their patience and the long hours Mary spent proofreading the manuscript.

I wish to thank my friend and co-author, Frank Palacio, for accepting the challenge to write this book with me, for his support as an English language major, and for being a terrific person.

—**Paul Rallion**

Both authors would also like to thank Robert Henry for drawing the cartoons for us, as well as designing the book covers!

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Introduction

When two or more teachers share their stories about their classrooms, there is a high likelihood that they will find many similarities. The stories told here are no exceptions. We discussed many incidents that occurred in our classrooms and decided that publishing some of them might have both educational and human-interest value. Our stories are based on our interactions with students, parents, and other education professionals. Combined, we have over twenty years of teaching experience. Paul has taught science, then math, and now computer technology, and Frank teaches English.

One of the highlights of our teaching careers has been to form a partnership, which started back in 1996 when we took our first class together toward our teaching credential. We got along so well that we decided to take most of our other classes together. We remained friends throughout the credential program, and then decided to continue the Master of Arts in Education (MAE) program together. We became study buddies and a support system for each other. As new teachers at the time, we shared many ideas, strategies, and war stories that came out of our classrooms. After working a full day, we would meet at night school by about 4:30 pm. We would have time to chitchat and unwind after a hard day, before evening classes started at 5:00 pm.

A typical conversation might start with the usual, “How was your day? How is the principal at your school? Are your students motivated? How do you discipline your students?” Other times, “Guess what happened in class today? Do you call your students’ homes when they misbehave? My principal came by my room today to observe my lesson in order to evaluate me—I was sweating bullets!” Some of the stories were moving and poignant, while others were filled with frustration. We thought it would be a good idea to document some of the more interesting stories.

It was, therefore, easy for us to conceive of this project and put pen to paper to share some of our experiences. In creating this book, we were able to reflect on the reasons we became teachers, how we stumbled along in our first

few years, how we improved with each mistake, and most importantly, how we have grown and tried to help our students. Although we do not consider ourselves expert teachers, it is our hope that this book will teach and entertain as we tell readers what our individual experiences in the teaching profession have been.

The goal of this book is to provide you with valuable moments in teaching. Whether you are a teacher who currently practices the art of education, a parent, a student, a professional in another field, or an ordinary citizen, these stories provide a real picture of public education in an urban setting, particularly Los Angeles, California. The stories told here describe interactions between students and their teachers, as well as a student's way of thinking and seeing things.

This book includes our real-life experiences. The anecdotes included here have a personal touch—the human part of education. Some of these stories may be funny, but ultimately they are about interesting students and teachers we have met. In all of them, we are opening our classroom doors to you.

Please note: while these stories are based on true events, certain details of the actual events, locations, and names of characters may have been changed for the sake of anonymity and to enhance the plot of the story.

As you read these stories, consider the following:

- **If you're a teacher:**

Have you had a similar situation in your classroom? What would you do in that case? What would you have done differently? Teachers entertain each other when they share stories about their classroom environment. Through the stories told in this book, we hope to entertain, as well as share our experiences with other teachers.

- **If you're a parent:**

You can see what goes on in our classrooms. How can you prevent your child from getting in trouble in school? This book can also serve as an icebreaker to start a dialogue with your children: How would you or they handle a situation like this?

- **If you're a student:**

You can see your class through the eyes of the teacher. You might also see things differently; you can understand why other students act the way they do, sometimes. *By the way, please don't try the mischief described here!*

- **If you're a school administrator:**

You will see several different classrooms throughout this book. While you examine what goes on in some of them, you can ask yourself, "How would I

handle the situation better?” In evaluating teachers, you can take into account other factors (students with special needs, etc.), and with that knowledge, support your teachers better.

- **If you're a professional in another field:**

How is school different now than it was when you were in school? How can you make a difference in public education?

Disclaimer:

The stories in this book are for informational and educational purposes only. Nothing herein should be interpreted as personalized advice. None of the information in this book is guaranteed to be correct, and anything written here should be considered subject to independent verification. The authors do not take any responsibility for any opinions or ideas expressed in these vignettes. We do not assume any liability as a result of the use of the information presented herein. Under no circumstances will the authors be responsible for incidental or consequential damages or direct or indirect damages that result from your use of the information in this book.

Part I

Human Interest

Chapter 1

Alarmed Paul



We value some possessions for how they make our lives easier.

I have the habit of wearing a Casio watch. It has a black plastic wristband, calculator functions, and several alarm and telephone-number storage capabilities. In class, I would set an alarm one minute before the bell rang for nutrition (recess) and lunch, to allow students enough time to save their work on their computers before the end of the period.

One day, I decided to wear another watch, and set my Casio on my desk. It was one of those days when the paperwork didn't seem to end and

the classroom telephone rang constantly. One of the phone calls was from a counselor who contacted me about a student's academic progress. I stepped outside to gain some privacy. The call was brief, but when I returned to my desk, my multifunction watch was missing!

At first, I couldn't believe it, and thought, *Did I lose my mind or did I lose my watch?* It had been just minutes since I had seen the watch. I searched the top of my desk, the drawers, and the floor. There was no sign of my watch. I even looked up to the ceiling, hoping for a miracle! I was sure I had set it on top of my desk. Yet, the watch was nowhere to be found. I then realized someone had taken it. I felt my blood starting to boil. I was shocked. I felt betrayed. I had been robbed.

I'd had the watch for about four years and wore it almost daily. It had some nice features, such as the capability to set alarms on multiple days and times. It had ample memory storage for telephone numbers. I had several alarms programmed into the watch, and had set up a phone list of personal contacts. The worst part was that the manufacturer had discontinued this particular model. The watch was important to me. Losing it was like losing an expensive tool.

I stood at the front of the room. "Stop what you are doing. I need your attention. My watch has just been stolen, and I want to get it back before the end of the period."

Everybody was so quiet that we could hear the air conditioner kick in. I warned my students that there would be no consequences if the watch was returned immediately. There was still total silence and still no watch! I was determined to get my watch back, yet no student stepped forward to claim responsibility or to disclose the name of the culprit.

Then it occurred to me to have them write an anonymous note with the name of the person who they thought had taken the watch. They all wrote on a small piece of paper, and covered what they were writing with the other hand.

Before I could have the students pass in their anonymous notes, I heard my watch beeping. "Nobody move!" Guided by the sound of the beeping alarm, I found it hidden behind some books on a student table. There it was! I felt very happy, as if I had been reunited with an old friend.

The period ended before I had the chance to collect the students' anonymous notes. It didn't matter—I had my watch back.

The following day two students, Ruben and Erika, approached me before the period started. While curving their right hand to cover their mouths, they said softly, one whispering a few words, and then the other, "Mr. Rallion, we know who took your watch. It was Marcos, but don't tell anyone we told you."

“Thank you, Ruben and Erika. You guys are great! Don’t worry, he won’t know you told me,” I assured them.

A few minutes into the period, while the class was working independently, I took Marcos aside. Marcos was a dark-skinned and dark-eyed boy with the beginnings of a mustache. I asked him if he had taken my watch.

“It wasn’t me, Mr. Rallion,” said Marcos, while raising both hands with his palms facing me.

“Two students told me you took the watch. I just want you to be honest and tell me if you did,” I persisted.

“It wasn’t me,” he said. This time he sounded less convincing, as if his honest side was winning.

“I found it on the table next to you, and two people saw you.”

As soon as I said that, Marcos lowered his head and put his hands behind his back. “I’m sorry, Mr. Rallion, I did take your watch.”

“Let’s do this. I am going to send you to the counseling office, so they can guide you on this. Maybe we can have a meeting with your parents,” I told him.

He seemed to be torn emotionally, and dragged himself to the counseling office.

The next day, Marcos came up to me with an expression of humility as he handed me the slip that served as his return pass to my classroom. “I’m sorry, Mr. Rallion, for taking your watch. It won’t happen again.”

I offered my hand for Marcos to shake. “Apology accepted, Marcos.”

Marcos shook my hand. He looked down and went on to take his seat. I got the impression that he wouldn’t do this again.

Moral of the Story:

I couldn’t ignore my watch being stolen because that would have sent the wrong message. Furthermore, stopping this student from taking my watch created two opportunities: to correct negative behavior and to form a relationship with a troubled student.

Chapter 2

A Sharp Threat Paul



Have you ever feared for your life? How about when you were 12 years old?

I stood at my classroom door, greeting my students as they filed in after lunch. It was Tuesday, which meant pizza, and I was stuffed. Just as I was about to discreetly rub my stomach, Grace and Maritza, two girls from my class, waved their hands to catch my attention. They looked upset.

I walked over to where the girls stood by their lockers. “Good afternoon, girls. What’s going on?”