

TURNING POINT



Free Education for the Willing
PAUL RALLION AND CHUCK WONG

Turning Point

Free Education for the Willing

Paul Rallion and Chuck Wong

Turning Point

Free Education for the Willing

Copyright © 2012 by Paul Rallion and Chuck Wong

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

iUniverse books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

iUniverse

1663 Liberty Drive

Bloomington, IN 47403

www.iuniverse.com

1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher, and the publisher hereby disclaims any responsibility for them.

Any people depicted in stock imagery provided by Thinkstock are models, and such images are being used for illustrative purposes only. Certain stock imagery © Thinkstock.

ISBN: ISBN: 978-1-4697-3913-7 (sc) ISBN: 978-1-4697-3914-4 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America iUniverse rev. date: 01/27/2012

Dedications

To the Native Americans

I dedicate this work to the Native Americans and hope that people are inspired to improve the state of public education by this book.

—Chuck

To All Teachers: Past, Present, and Future

I dedicate this book to all the teachers in history: past, present, and future. Their work has helped, helps, and will help shape future generations.

—Paul

Contents

I. Being an English Learner	1
1. Starting Middle School	2
2. Stuck as an English Learner	18
II. Being Determined To Succeed	32
3. Getting in Trouble	33
4. More Challenges Ahead	52
III. Turning Point	71
5. Getting Back On Track	72
6. Culmination	84

Introduction

One day, while having lunch at a local restaurant, the authors came up with the idea of writing a book in which to explore the journey of several middle school students, but more importantly, to study what would be a turning point in students' lives and their school.

The goal of this book is to take a look at public education from two teachers' points of view, in the shoes of a few middle school students. The authors examine the idea of social promotion, which allows students to move on to the next grade level without much effort. The authors develop alternatives which could work in some schools.

As you read these stories, consider the following:

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

Does this story resonate with you? What's your school like? Has your school improved or worsened? How so and why? We shared with you tips and techniques that may be of help to you, embedded in the story.

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

You can see what goes on in a public school, which is bound to resemble many. Is your child having trouble in school? What could be his/her turning point? Does your child identify with the characters of the story? How can s/he be a better student?

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

What kind of student are you? Do you have friends who goof around? We have tried to present the journey of middle school students from a different perspective. *By the way, please don't try the mischief described here!*

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

School administrators are the leaders of the school. We hope that this thought-provoking story brings about ideas to improve public education. In supporting teachers, what improvements to education can be done together as an educational team?

- **If you're an education professor:**

This book could be added to your reading materials in your secondary education courses. Some great discussions and alternatives in education can emerge from reading *Turning Point*, hence its value in teachers' reading groups.

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

Did you have a Turning Point when you were in school? If so, what was it? How can you make a difference in public education?

Disclaimer:

The story told in this book is 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 this book. 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. Although there is a chance that this story could resemble the life of a student, it has been entirely developed by the authors based on their experiences working with thousands of middle school students.

Part I

Being an English Learner

Chapter 1

Starting Middle School

“STUDENT DOWN, STUDENT DOWN!” I heard after falling onto the filthy blacktop with the most incredible, shocking impact you can imagine. I felt as if a bomb exploded in my chest. I was thrown about three feet, as my legs gave out on me. I then felt like everything went into slow motion. Bright red blood rushed out of my body. I lay flat on the ground. My blood flowed away, taking my life with it. Breathing shallower, I clung to my life!

“Call 9-1-1, call 9-1-1!” I heard people scream as two adults with radios rushed to see what was going on.

“We have a student bleeding, call 9-1-1, call 9-1-1!”

Moments later I heard a siren. I felt weaker and weaker. Everything blurred. My eyelids were too heavy to keep my eyes open.

I woke up in a hospital bed with a sharp pain in my back, as if my right arm was detaching itself.

“Luis, we removed a bullet from your right upper back. It damaged your lung lightly, but you’ll be OK in a few weeks. You’re going to have to stay in the hospital a few days for observation,” said a young Asian lady doctor, in her blue surgical wear, pulling her light blue mask down under her chin. “Nobody knows exactly what happened. The police think that it was a random drive-by shooting. There will be an investigation. Let’s hope for the best and see what happens.”

“I hope they catch the shooter,” I said still waking up from the anesthesia. Flashing back to the shooting, I remembered seeing the shooter riding in a red car that zoomed past the school. I can’t put together the facial features of the shooter, but somehow the face looked familiar. As I tried to wrap my mind around this incident, I asked myself, “*Why? Why me?*”

Everything has its turning point. Water turns into ice at its freezing point. Then it turns into steam at its boiling point. And there is even a melting point when ice turns back into water. So when was my turning point going to be, I wondered? Everything started three years ago at about 7:15 on the first Monday of September at my new middle school: Middleshots. I don't know why they call it Middleshots, maybe because we'll give middle school a shot. I felt like an ant hurriedly and awkwardly crawling among a large crowd as if we were all ants. Almost the entire school population is Hispanic, English Language Learners (ELLs) —count me in that group. My name is Luis Paredes. I am 12 years old, 4' 9" tall, my mom is Mexican and my dad is Salvadorean.

My father lived in Mexico and my mother met him when she was vacationing there. I was born in the United States. I went to one of the local elementary schools, but I was placed in the Bilingual Program because my parents answered "Spanish," to one of the questions the clerk asked them in regards to the language we speak at home. In kindergarten I knew mostly Spanish, so, I've been in the Bilingual Program ever since. My friends tell me I need to get out of the ESL (English as a Second Language) program so I can take elective classes such as computers, art, or music. Both of my parents are fluent English speakers and both went to College, but didn't finish.

I was being crushed in the middle of a blue and white uniformed crowd. This school was larger than most high schools in America, with over 3,000 students. The grass area is big enough for four baseball diamonds but the students mostly play soccer on them. The main building looks like an old gray warship with its paint peeling off and stuck in a sea of black top. There's a smaller building that looks like another ship sunk down to its weather deck. Seagulls and pigeons fly around and land on them. But since we are in the middle of a three-year drought, the playground looks more like a dry ocean floor.

I tried to see which classrooms I was assigned to on this first day of school. Kids and parents pressed up against each other to see the rosters posted outside the gym in small print. There was no respect. An Asian teacher carrying a black guitar case passing by pulled out a silver whistle and blew it loudly. "Back off!" he said in a firm, deep voice behind the crowd.

"Hey Daniel!" I said, as I spotted my friend from elementary school. Daniel Suarez had his nerdy, thick, black-rimmed glasses on and his equally nerdy, school-boyish, over-sized, brown

back pack hung over his shoulder. He looked more like he was going camping and it was just the first day of school.

“What homeroom did you get?” I asked him. Daniel chewed a big wad of gum like a cow or camel chews its cud.

“Room 257. Do you know where that is?” responded Daniel in his high-pitched lisp.

“Alright! I got the same homeroom,” I said, relieved because I found company.

“That’s cool, but, do you know where it is?” Daniel asked again.

“Why don’t you ask that teacher that’s coming,” I suggested.

“You ask him,” said Daniel.

“Hey mister, do you know where room 257 is?”

“What?” asked the short, blond-haired man in a raspy voice. It sounded like he had laryngitis; a rough whisper.

“Where’s room 257?” asked Daniel.

“Let me see,” said the man in his soft voice. He looked around for a moment. Then he looked up into the clear blue sky. “Hmmm.” Then he paused and made some strange faces and rubbed his left hand over his mouth. “Ah, yes,” clearing his throat. “Just go through those double beige doors, turn left, go up the cold, concrete stairs, and it’ll be the first room to your left,” as he limped away.

When Daniel and I arrived at room 257, a teacher stood by the door. He was young, in his late thirties, with a receding hairline, and a neatly groomed black goatee. He was about 5’ 8” tall. We found out his name was Mr. Ram; the computer technology teacher. He wore carefully pressed khaki pants and an equally ironed maroon polo shirt.

“Come in and take a seat,” said Mr. Ram in his quiet, articulate tone as he sat in his rolling chair at his perfectly organized desk and typed something into his laptop; maybe he took attendance by computer. Then the ear-splitting five-second bell rang and we waited attentively for what would happen next. We looked at the Apple iMac computers in front of us. The room was very clean and cool. There were about thirty other boys and girls all dressed in white tops and blue bottoms. A couple of students were texting. Mr. Ram put his right index finger up to his lips signaling for us to keep quiet as the Public Address (PA) announcements came on. Mr. Ram finished writing on his neat agenda and homework assignments for his students on the white board on the front wall.

A man’s voice said, “Good morning all you Middleshooters; welcome to Middleshots School. I’m your principal, Mr. I.M. Ghone.” After she had a student say the Pledge of

Allegiance, he continued, “Now your teachers will hand out to you a packet we have prepared for you. Welcome again to your school.”

After some ear-piercing feedback noise, we all covered our ears and as soon as it was quiet, Mr. Ram said, “Good morning again; my name is Mr. Ram. We are going to be together as a homeroom for the next three years. We have homeroom first and once again after sixth period.

“What’s in there, Mr. Ram?” asked Daniel, pointing to a stack of letter-sized manila envelopes.

“I’ll tell you in a minute but first let me tell you that you are not allowed to use cell phones in class, so please turn them off now.”

“But what if my mom wants to call me?” asked a girl.

“It is school district policy not just here at Middleshots that cell phones cannot be used in class; not my rule. However, if you text in class, I’ll confiscate the cell phone. Your parents will have to come to claim it. Anyway, here I have very important documents for you: a school map, letters going home, and your lunch tickets. You need to get your parents to sign some of the documents, so listen for your name so you can get your packet.” A huge, fat kid in the back smacked his lips eating a chocolate bar; he munched like it was nobody’s business. A thin bald kid with a diamond earring said to another kid,

“Hey, make sure you get your own lunch tickets. That fat guy might want to steal them from you!”

After Mr. Ram passed out the lunch tickets, he said,

“That’s all I have for you today. Once again, welcome to middle school. Before the bell rings, I have a quick story for you. Last semester I had an eighth grade homeroom. At the last culmination ceremony there were a few students who didn’t make it to the ceremony because of their failing grades. On the day of the ceremony my homeroom and I lined up to walk across the stage. Through the fence I saw a student who didn’t make it to culmination. He was watching from outside. What do you think the look on his face was like?” Mr. Ram had us in the palm of his hands, all listening attentively.

“Sad,” said someone in our homeroom.

“Disappointed,” said another.

“That’s right,” said Mr. Ram. Looking at the clock on the wall he asked,

“So, who do you want to be in eighth grade: Part of the group that walks across the stage, or the student outside watching, leaning on his bike?” No one said anything.

“Make sure you place yourself in the group who walks across the stage. Your opportunity starts today. If your grades have been low up to now, make this your turning point. The student behind the fence didn’t find his turning point in middle school.”

The dismissal bell rang, and Mr. Ram let us go. As everybody exited the classroom, Alfredo, another ELL (English Language Learner), asked me in a shy tone,

“Where is room 116?”

“We’re going that way,” swinging my finger back and forth pointing to Daniel and to myself.

“My class schedule says Mr. Wrong. He’s cool, my older brother Jesse was in his class,” said Daniel. So we walked in that direction together.

Mr. Wrong was the same teacher that blew his whistle earlier; the one with the guitar!

“Come on in and take a seat,” said Mr. Wrong in Spanish. This sounded strange because Mr. Wrong looked Asian.

“Good morning, everybody.”

A few kids said good morning but most of us just sat there in silence. “Buenos días,” Mr. Wrong said after our dismal initial response.

“Buenos días,” we all said. We sounded like a bunch of happy and innocent second graders. I sat next to a really pretty girl with big green eyes and long eyelashes. She looked older. I knew this because she had the body of an older girl. Her name was Valeria.

Mr. Wrong told us he was fifty-five but everyone said he didn’t look that old. Mr. Wrong wore round, silver glasses. They made him look like somebody’s grandfather. Anyway, Mr. Wrong spoke mostly Spanish that first day. He told us he had taught at Middleshots for over twenty years. He sounded nice and I liked him from that first day. I was sure I was going to learn a lot of English in his class. I found out that I was in E.S.L. 1B. That’s the third class for beginning students of English. In this class there were twenty-two students. I got to sit right in front of the class; in front of Mr. Wrong. That was really cool because later Mr. Wrong explained a few things about the guitar. He played it and sang us a couple of songs; one in English and one in Spanish.

Mr. Wrong also explained the E.S.L. Program to us. Then he talked about the rules in our class and how he expected us to work hard. He also passed out our Nopoint Books —a book series that was supposed to help us learn English. Mr. Wrong made us sign our initials next to our names in a black notebook. A skinny girl with big eyes who followed me wherever I went sat to my right. She talked a lot. She even talked to me. She asked me,

“What’s your name?”

“Luis,” I said in a kind of rude tone.

“My name is Ana,” she said coquettishly with a smile that revealed her pink braces.

Then the fat girl next to her said something to Ana and she turned away and forgot about me. I guess she's not so bad. After two hours with Mr. Wrong, the bell rang and everybody got up and hurried out.

"Go to Nutrition. See you tomorrow," Mr. Wrong directed us as we walked out. Outside, I met up with Alfredo and Daniel. They were running like bulls, just like everybody else. They both yelled,

"Run Luis!" So I ran with them. We ran in and out between the many kids that ran like a blue and white herd of cattle.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"We're going to eat, but we have to get in a long line," Daniel answered. So I ran lugging my back pack now heavier because of that Nopoint book that Mr. Wrong gave us. Suddenly, a kid in front of us tripped and fell right in front of us. We barely missed crashing into him but kept on going. I looked back at him and saw blood on his lower lip and chin.

We made it to one of the food lines. Then some big eighth graders with huge white shirts came and got in front of us. I wanted to say something but they were too big and they looked mean. All we could do was hold our places because other kids were coming behind us.

Everybody pushed and shoved. Then, a tall 'Gringo' with a USC baseball cap and a bullhorn came. He blew a whistle and talked through the horn,

"Everybody settle down." No one paid attention. He blew the whistle again only louder! This time everybody stopped.

"Juan, you and your friends know better," he said to the eighth graders. Get out of the line and go to the end."

"Why? We were here first!" they yelled.

"No they weren't!" yelled a whole bunch of us.

"Get out of the line now!" yelled the man with the cap and they got out.

"That sucks," we heard them say as they gave us the "You're-gonna-get-it-eye!" and left. We only had fifteen minutes for nutrition and wasting a good ten minutes in line is really not a fun way to spend nutrition.

"What's for nutrition?" we wondered as we approached the serving station.

"Let's get a tray," said Daniel.

"Thank you," I said to the Hispanic cafeteria lady in a white apron, yellow dress, and a hair net, as she handed me my food.

"Do you want to sit there?" asked Daniel, pointing to the second row of red, orange, and blue littered tables.

"Yeah, sure."

“Hey, you were the ones who told the dean we were cutting in line,” said the mean-looking, eighth graders, as they passed by.

“Don’t mess with us, or we’ll jump you, scrubs!”

We just looked at each other, eating our coffee cake and chocolate milk.

I looked across the lunch area. It was loud and buzzing with movement. I looked left and right and when I turned I saw Valeria walking right in front of me! Wow! She was beautiful. She didn’t see me looking at her but when she sat down, she looked up and smiled.

“Which class do you have next?” I asked the guys.

“PE,” said Daniel and Alfredo as they put their class schedule cards back in their front pockets.

Nutrition ended with another deafening bell. The sea of blue and white attired kids flowed back into motion. Sixth graders ran to class. Out on the basketball courts, kids went on shooting baskets, ignoring the bell and the approaching supervision personnel. Pigeons and gulls swooped down to get the food kids left on the tables and on the ground.

A big African-American woman in a white cotton dress blew her school yard whistle and yelled, “You heard the bell. Go on to class!” A small kid with soda bottle glasses ran up to the woman.

“They jacked my back pack!”

“Who stole your back pack?” she shouted.

“I don’t know!”

“Well then, how do you know they stole it?”

“Because it’s gone!” the kid said looking around frantically.

“I know that! How do you know a friend of yours isn’t messin’ wick you?” Where was it when you saw it last?”

“I left it on the ground next to the basketball pole.”

“What you shoulda done is left it with a friend; someone you trust.”

“My friends were all playing too.”

“Maybe one of your friends took it.” Just then, a purple-haired kid up on the second floor yelled,

“Jose, here’s your back pack!” Then he let go of the backpack and it fell down and slammed onto the asphalt, almost hitting a cute eighth grade girl who screamed. The vice-principal blew her whistle, but the kid took off!

“Shooter 14 to Shooter 7.”

“Go ahead 14.”