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Attention: Newsday Viewpoints - Noel Reubenstein

From: Alan Singer is a member of the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Hofstra University.

For Jonathan Levin, Teacher

Jonathan Levin was a popular and respected English teacher at William Howard Taft High School in the Bronx, New York. Taft is a large inner-city high school with a student population that is largely Latino/a and African American. Many of its students are from families that live on the economic margins of our society. Levin, who came from an affluent family, chose to teach in the Bronx because he wanted to have an impact on the lives of young people. He was found dead in his apartment in Manhattan on Monday, June 2, 1997. A former student, with a history of drug use, criminal activity, and incarceration, was one of two men arrested and charged with his murder.

I did not know Jonathan Levin, but I feel that in many ways we were brothers. I am also a white, Jewish, middle-class professional, and I spent 15 years as a teacher in New York inner-city junior and senior high schools before becoming a teacher educator at Hofstra University. From what I read about Jonathan and his work as a teacher, I believe we shared a commitment to rethink what is possible in education and to struggle, along with others, to change schools, communities, and lives. I am writing because teachers in the metropolitan area who disagree with Jonathan's expansive view of the job of the teacher as a caring and connected human being, are using his death to undermine his vision. I am also concerned that newly licensed teachers, many of whom live on Long Island, will be afraid to work in urban or minority communities because of Jonathan's death.

The week after Jonathan died, I visited schools, teachers, and students in Crown Heights and East New York, Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Cambria Heights, Queens, introducing preservice teachers from Hofstra University to the world of urban education. We met with young teachers, alumni from our program, who chose to work in city schools out of a sense of mission and of possibility.

We spoke with Christina, who grew up in Cold Spring Harbor, attended an Ivy League university, and currently lives in Valley Stream and teaches social studies in a Bronx high school. Christina regularly stays after school with the community service club and takes her students on weekend trips to museums and the botanical gardens. Last June, she brought thirty-five students and their parents to Washington DC for the Stand for Children rally. Christina could teach anywhere in the metropolitan area, but she chooses to remain with her students in the Bronx. She told the visiting preservice teachers that "my students need and value me. Working here means I can do something important with my life."

We visited Howard, a graduate of Lawrence High School, who teaches social studies in a high school in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. This semester one of his students was arrested and Howard posted bail. Howard believes that "people are innocent until proven guilty, and I could not allow one of my students to remain in jail just because his family is poor."

We also met Stephanie, who grew up in Brooklyn, but moved to Uniondale as a youngster because "it was safer and because my mother wanted me to attend better schools." Stephanie teaches English and social studies to sixth graders in a middle school in East New York, Brooklyn, and wants her students to have the same opportunities that she had. On Friday afternoon at dismissal, she lined her class up in the stairwell and had each student explain the weekend assignment before they could go home. At the foot of the stairs,

teachers from her carpool kept on calling her, but Stephanie would not leave until every child was finished.

Many young teachers, and preservice teachers I work with at Hofstra, were worried by the news reports about Jonathan Levin's death and the police search that targeted one of his former students. Older, discouraged colleagues continually warn new teachers that they cross some mythical line of professional propriety if they treat their students with respect and show concern for the problems in their lives. Jonathan's death was cited as final proof that teachers must remain aloof, transmit information, but never, never, show students their humanity or vulnerability. When the barrier is broken, "just look what happened to that guy from the Bronx."

Christina, Howard, Stephanie, and thousands of other teachers do not recognize a barrier between students and teachers and they know that Jonathan Levin did not die because he crossed it. They believe, and think Jonathan believed, that inner-city kids and teens are the victims of inequality, injustice, and abandonment by our society, and that the only way to change conditions is to empower young people, through education, to build a better world. Until that happens, our society will continue to create alienated and angry young men and women like the people suspected of killing Jonathan. According to their police records, Jonathan was not their only victim, and they didn't target him because he was a teacher. He was someone with money, and they needed money.

Jonathan Levin died because of the conditions in our society he was trying to change. To pull back from his struggle, to surrender to cynicism and despair, is to dishonor Jonathan and abandon the young people about whom he cared. Jonathan Levin's dream continues to live in the life of every student he affected. Jonathan Levin was a teacher.