Why I Teach For America

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Why I Teach For America

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Teach For America (TFA) is and has been the most rewarding, inspiring, and exhausting experience I have had in my life. I first heard about TFA at the beginning of my senior year at Lake Forest College. Though it sounded interesting, I was so stressed with my thesis, exams, and commitments with Eukaryon and several other organizations that I missed the Teach For America presentation on campus. At the last minute, I decided to make a run to the auditorium and try to meet with the presenter. I made it, and from that moment on, I was hooked.

Teach For America was created in 1990 by Wendy Kopp, who presented the idea for her undergraduate thesis at Princeton University. She believed the gap in education between low income and higher income students in the United States was unacceptable. She also believed that, given the opportunity, top college students could and would want to make a difference. It was then that I realized that too many children are currently trapped in an education system that limits their dreams and future and decided to embark on TFA’s ambitious goal to make a difference and eliminate the educational achievement gap.

Amid my several other commitments, I decided to start the application process. My first step was to decide which out of the four available deadlines I would apply for. This is a crucial decision, because applying takes approximately four months, and each deadline has various deadlines within it for different requirements, including submitting personal, academic, and professional information, having a phone interview, and going in for a full day interview. After choosing the second deadline in October, I sent in my required materials, which included my resume, letter of intent, and an essay describing a challenging moment in my life. Three weeks later, I was informed that I had been selected for a phone interview with a Teach For America representative. In preparation for this interview, I had to read three articles that would be discussed at some point within the one hour phone call. Another three weeks passed as I anxiously awaited my final invitation to the in-person interview. When that invitation finally came, I was both ecstatic and extremely nervous; I had to read two more articles, prepare myself to give a five minute lesson, take a test, engage in problem solving activities, participate in a group discussion with fellow applicants, and finally wow the Teach For America representative during my one-on-one interview at the end of the day. Needless to say, by the end of the day, I was beyond exhausted. Luckily, all of my preparation, worries, and excitement paid off. On January 20th, I was invited to become a 2009 Teach for America corps member.

The moment I was accepted, I was assigned the subject, grade, and state I would be teaching in for the next two years. As an international student, I had only one option, and it was to teach in an inner city school in Houston, Texas. I did not know, however, that my placement was high school science; this, I found out later. Although I thought the application process was complete, I realized that I had to interview with principals to get a position at a school. I was accepted to the Teach For America movement, but I had not yet been given a job. During the summer after graduation, each TFA corps member embarks on a rigorous and grueling period of preparation called institute. The five week period of institute, also known as the “weeks from hell” or “teacher boot camp”, was my first experience teaching biology to high school students, summer students to be exact. During this time, I barely slept, read all the time, frequently wrote, researched endlessly, worked, worked, worked, and then worked some more. I woke up every morning at 5 a.m., went to school, taught students, set up labs, cleaned up labs, went to sessions, observed other teachers, went back to class, went back to sessions, went back to the dorms, prepared my lesson for the next day, created exams, created worksheets, went to evening sessions, graded, and went to bed around 2 a.m. This was a typical schedule for all corps members. At times, I was sure I could not go on: I would collapse, give up. But then I would find strength in places where I did not know I had any. I would find motivation in a student’s smile and desire in a dream of making a difference in the education of one child, and I would go on. The challenges, such as preparing lessons and working with children who were 3 to 5 grade levels behind, were myriad and the heartbreaks many, but the satisfaction was greater. At the end on my institute experience, all of my students passed, even those who had never dared to dream of achieving a D or above.

The first moment you step into a classroom, you feel an indescribable emotion. Elation, fear, hope, joy, and apprehension mix up to propel you to action. From that moment on, you are captivated and your passion just grows as you face difficulties and challenges. I am currently in my 3rd month of teaching, and I still say that the hard days greatly outweigh the easy ones, but everyday is a memorable learning experience with my students. I still struggle everyday to teach my students respect and the importance of communication without profanity. I struggle to maintain an orderly classroom, to keep my students out of gangs and trouble. Yet my biggest challenge is to motivate my students, who are 3 to 5 years behind, to want to work hard and to believe in themselves, to help them all realize education is a privilege that will truly make the difference in their lives and that the hard work is worth it. I am constantly worrying about my students; every night I go home and wonder how I can make my class better, how I can reach my kids, or how I can help them achieve success. As I have stated before, everyday is a challenge. Yet, when a student who used to sleep in class all the time because on the first day of school he said, “Miss, I don’t wanna be in this
class, I'm just not good in science and everybody knows it," raises his hand and says, "Miss Ayala, I finally got it. I actually understand!" I know why I Teach For America.

When I think back on the whole process, I cannot but thank my involvement at Eukaryon and various other organizations at Lake Forest College. Being part of Eukaryon demanded serious commitment and respect for deadlines. This rigorous yet rewarding program helped me to be ready for the arduous application process and to successfully face the challenges I meet each day. Today, I am a science teacher at Jack Yates High School, a college student getting teacher certification, a Houston Independent District employee, and I am part of an inspiring movement trying to erase an injustice and better the education of all children. For each one of these roles, I meet weekly, work with a team of people, and set goals that, together, we are able to achieve.

There is no doubt that becoming a member of TFA is a difficult process. I believe that challenging yourself to do your best, being involved, working hard, listening to feedback, accepting help when needed, and being passionate will allow any candidate to stand out in this process. Perseverance and a genuine desire to help others is also a must.

TFA has allowed me to see another reality, another world. It has shown me hardships and resilience, fear and hope. It has taught me that this is not about me and that the only way I will accomplish something and make my stay at TFA meaningful is to make it about others. The measure of my success, and my most profound hope, will be seeing my students' success.

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