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ABSTRACT

This teaching case was written by "Neil," a student teacher who tried to teach brilliantly, who put himself to the test, and concluded he failed. Neil uprooted his family to move to Alaska to reenter school in order to obtain a teaching certificate. He also wanted to escape the fast-paced life of California and a stagnant job. Neil believed teaching would allow him to spend more time with his family, to pursue personal interests, and enable him to be creative. Neil's student teaching experience at the Vonnegut Bay School in rural Alaska did not meet these expectations. First, the same social and economic problems he had encountered in California were also prevalent in rural Alaska. Secondly, his experience as a teacher was not what he expected. Neil confronted conflicts between sports and academics and issues of teacher responsibilities besides instruction. He was overwhelmed by trying to meet the needs and expectations of students, other teachers, his family, and himself. Near the end of his student teaching experience he lost his enthusiasm and resigned himself to the fact that he could not meet his expectations for a career in teaching. Although Neil viewed himself as a failure, his cooperating teacher saw him as an asset to the classroom. This story was selected as a case study for teacher education, not because it is typical of what happens to student teachers, but because it portrays problems of teaching that students will benefit from reflecting upon. Discussion questions for this particular teaching case are included. (LP)

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# On a White Horse

by Neil Steiger

Edited by Judith Kleinfeld

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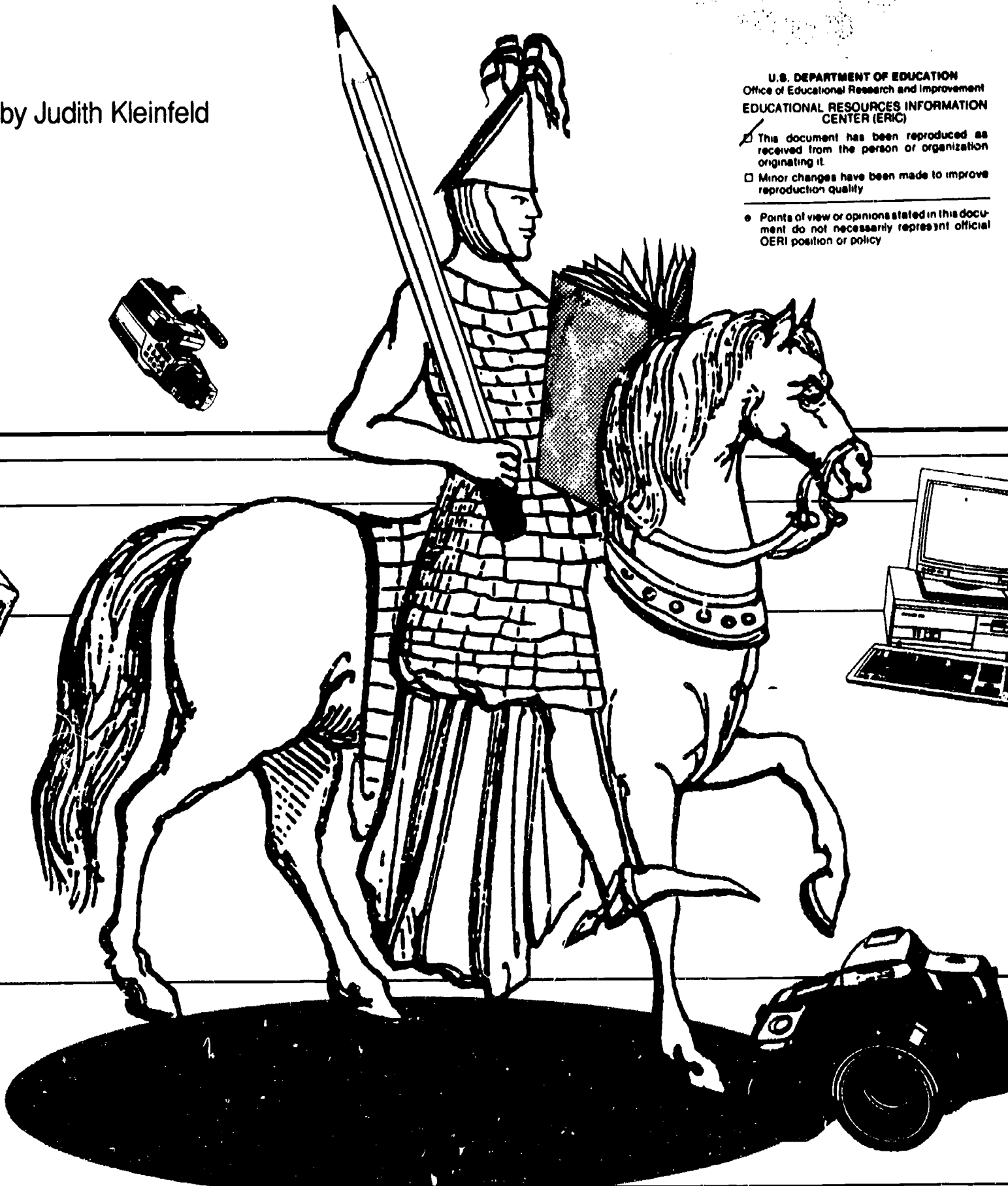
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## **On a White Horse**

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Edited by Judith Kleinfeld

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*To Monica,  
who has sustained me with her love and steadfast support.*

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## Introduction

*On a White Horse* tells the story of Neil Steiger, a student teacher who tries to teach brilliantly, who puts himself to the test, and concludes he has failed it. This case is a cautionary tale. It invites you to consider the question of what went wrong in this teaching situation and how these problems might have been prevented. It invites you to think as well about standards of judgment, about what you should expect from yourself in the first stages of your own teaching career. Neil's cooperating teacher, for example, did not agree with his pessimistic assessment of his performance.

One of the uses of such stories about teaching is the development of self-knowledge. Are you yourself likely to act as Neil did? Why? How can you control or at least channel inclinations that may get you into trouble? What are your motivations for entering teaching and your passions? As you try to understand Neil as a personality, you will better understand your own personality and how someone with your inclinations will fulfill the role of teacher.

*On a White Horse* is an authentic account of a student teaching experience, written by the student teacher himself under a pseudonym. Identifying details have been changed to protect confidentiality. This case was not published because it is representative of what happens to student teachers. Many student teachers come to a conclusion opposite from Neil's—that they have done well, that they and their students have flourished. Neil's story has been selected as a teaching case not because it is typical, but because it portrays in a concrete and dramatic way enduring problems of teaching that students will benefit from reflecting upon.

### Purposes of Teaching Cases

Teaching cases like this one have long been a cornerstone of professional preparation in schools of law, business, and medicine. Only recently have educators begun to appreciate their value in the preparation of teachers (Doyle, 1986; Shulman, 1987; McCarthy, 1987). Teaching cases present real-world experiences that raise representative and significant problems. They provide crucial vicarious experience,

an opportunity to learn from other people's errors and a chance to anticipate these difficulties.

The teaching case is not merely a narrative, one student teacher's autobiography. Nor is it a research case study, a detailed description of a particular issue accompanied by explication and theoretical interpretation. Rather teaching cases leave the interpretation to the student. The case presents a complex professional problem and asks the student to figure out "what is really going on here?," "what went wrong?," and "what could be done about it?"

In the teaching case, interpretations are left open and loose ends are not tied up. Relevant information is not always known, and known information is not always relevant. The teaching case demands interpretation of problems and the design of plans for action on the basis of inadequate knowledge. Professionals often must act in circumstances of ambiguity and uncertainty.

The kinds of problems teaching cases present are not merely technical issues, problems of time management or classroom management or teaching methods. The cases—and teaching problems themselves—also center on questions of feeling and values, on matters of the spirit as well as of the mind. The cases provide emotional preparation for teaching, an education and refinement of feeling.

Teaching cases like *On a White Horse* give prospective teachers experience with significant professional problems before they live them. They have the luxury of time to think through the problems, colleagues to think with, and, most of all, freedom to think clearly, without the distorting involvement of their own egos.

In sum, teaching cases are valuable in increasing teachers' abilities to:

- identify the issues in a troubling situation and frame these problems in productive ways,
- understand the complexity of professional problems and the way ethical, interpersonal, and policy issues may be contained in what may seem to be routine classroom decisions,



- apply relevant theoretical concepts and research findings to concrete situations,
- appreciate how a situation may look from the perspective of different participants,
- go beyond the immediate, surface problems to the identification of more fundamental, underlying issues,
- identify a number of possible strategies for handling problems, and
- recognize crucial decision points and the likely consequences and potential risks of different courses of action.

A good case, like a good story, also gives pleasure. Students typically enjoy reading cases and thinking about these human dramas.

### **Studying and Teaching a Case**

In reading and teaching a case, it is helpful to keep in mind the following general kinds of questions. Most have been culled from the instructor's guide to *Teaching and the Case Method* (Christensen, Hansen, & Moore, 1987) and from discussions about case method teaching (Christensen, 1987).

These questions are:

1. What are the central issues in this situation? Which are most urgent? Which are most critical?
2. What, if anything, should anyone do? Who? When? How? Why do you think so?
3. What did the principal characters actually do? With what results? With what potential long-term consequences?
4. How does this situation appear to other participants? The students? Faculty at various points on the ideological spectrum? The principal?
5. How did this situation develop? What, if anything, might alter the basic conditions which created the present difficulties?
6. What, if anything, have you learned from the case?

In teaching a case, we typically ask students to prepare for class discussion by writing a two-page paper outlining what they see as the major issues in the case and appraising the actions of the principal character. After the case discussion, we ask students to write another short paper on what they now see as the fundamental

issues in this case, what actions they would advise the teacher to take, and what they have learned or come to appreciate as a result of the case discussion.

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# **Part I**

# **Background and Context**

## Neil arrives at Vonnegut Bay

As Neil threw the U-Haul truck into reverse, he nervously glanced at the rear-view mirrors. As the truck, as big as the Hindenburg to Neil, crunched over the snow-covered driveway of the modern, two-story log cabin, he alternately cursed his situation and prayed for divine intercession. It would take an act of God to help him unload his twenty-four foot U-Haul truck in thirty-five minutes—that's when the ferry would sail back to the mainland. If he failed to get the truck back on the ferry in time, he would have to pay an eighty-dollar-a-day fee until the ferry returned two weeks later. Neil, who was good at calculating the bottom line, shuddered at the thought.

Bathed in the truck's red brake lights, the courtyard suddenly came to life. Eight down-clad angels scrambled out of the cabin and one of the figures began guiding Neil in his efforts to dock the truck next to the back porch. Once parked, Neil sprang out of the cab and joined the people who had already opened the cargo door and were hurriedly passing his family's possessions into the cabin. This was not the time for introductions. Those formalities could wait. Everyone knew what was at stake. The truck had to get back on the ferry. Despite his single-minded purpose, Neil couldn't help being a bit curious about the kind of people who would generously come to the aid of a total stranger in the middle of a teeth-chattering December night. Three of his helpers were high-school-aged students. The other five were adults; possibly teachers and their spouses.

Neil felt silly about the misgivings he had about coming to this community to student teach. Though his first phone conversation with the school's principal had been a little like the Spanish Inquisition, now he was overwhelmed by the kindness shown him by these folks, these members of his school family.

In a scant twenty-five minutes, Neil found himself navigating the unloaded, cleaned truck back into the vehicle bay nestled inside the ferry. As he emerged from the cab, Mrs. Bell, the school secretary approached. Neil had met her earlier that day when he had flown over to make the preliminary arrangements for the move. Upon learning

of Neil's plight, Mrs. Bell had rounded up the heavenly host who had descended upon Neil's truck moments earlier.

"Ma'am, I really appreciate all the help you gave me! I just couldn't believe how many people showed up to help! I'm so relieved that's done."

"I'm just glad it all worked out okay. Y'know, a couple of us have been in that bind ourselves so we know what it's like. Say, I've got to take the ferry on over, myself, because I've got to run up to the city to do some shopping tomorrow. Want me to turn your truck back in for you?"

Neil breathed a sigh of relief. By this time, it was midnight and he was dead tired. He wasn't looking forward to the drive back to the city and the prospect of sleeping in the dealer's parking lot didn't appeal to him in the least. He gratefully accepted Mrs. Bell's offer. After giving her another round of heartfelt thanks and all the paperwork for the truck, Neil quickly walked back to his new home.

Later that night, in the dark, warm comfort of his bed, Neil began playing back the mental tapes that had been accumulating. Things had to be sorted through and put into perspective. A little rationalization here, a little introspection there, maybe some self-castigation, and before long, he could sleep.

First, he reflected on his initial conversation a month earlier with the principal of Vonnegut Bay School, that unpleasant conversation which seemed to foreshadow a troubled student teaching experience. During that phone call, the principal, Peter Strauss, seemed to challenge Neil's student teaching qualifications by questioning whether or not Neil was truly capable of teaching language arts. Strauss even stated that if an English teaching job became available, he would be reluctant to hire Neil because he didn't feel that Neil had taken enough composition classes in college. Then he grilled Neil on his knowledge of learning styles and his motivation for teaching. Battered but determined not to let the placement wither, Neil finally sensed an opening and simply stated, "Mr. Strauss, I would really like to do my student

teaching at your school. I hope you will consider me for the placement despite the fact that I might not be qualified for regular employment at your school.”

“Well, I think things would probably work out if you came down. Please don’t be put off by how direct I was with you. That’s just my style,” Strauss explained. After pinning down dates and discussing the housing arrangements, both men said they would be looking forward to meeting each other. As Neil quietly replaced the receiver, he felt himself growing angry.

Monica, Neil’s wife, was seated at the table during the phone call. She sensed the tension and waited for the usual tirade.

“Jeez, you’d have thought I’d asked him if I could take his wife out on a date or something!” Neil exploded. “I wasn’t asking him for a job! I just want to student teach at his school! I know I don’t know everything about grammar and stuff, but isn’t that one of the purposes of student teaching? To figure out how to teach? I’ll do whatever it takes to get the job done. I just can’t understand why these jerks take themselves so seriously! If you have to go through this kind of crap to get a regular teaching job, I probably ought to go back to work for Sledge!” Neil failed to understand how asking Strauss for a student teaching placement at Vonnegut Bay School was, in fact, akin to asking his wife out for a date. Strauss, a veteran principal and an administrator who had a reputation for putting schools back on track, was very fond of this school and he didn’t want some educational pip-squeak in there gumming up the works. Out of his sense of commitment to the teaching profession, though, he felt compelled to give the young man a try.

### **Deciding to become a teacher**

Prior to his decision to become a teacher, Neil had worked for eight years as an electronics technician for Sledge Well Services, an oil well service company located in Long Beach, California. Though his salary averaged around \$48,000 a year (about as much as an Alaskan teacher who had spent many years in the system), he felt stifled because he couldn’t find an outlet for his creative energy within the context of his job.

Further, he was tired of working sixty-hour weeks and felt he needed more time to spend with his family. He had recently remarried and Neil, with his two children, and Monica, with her son, were still struggling to get it right as a contemporary “blended family.” But what really galvanized his desire to move was his growing disenchantment with the decadence prevalent in southern California. He longed to return to Alaska where he had been temporarily assigned while working at Sledge. It was so much nicer there. The kids would grow up with the right values, and Neil and his new wife could enjoy Alaska’s wilderness together.

While struggling to live in California, Neil and Monica continually brainstormed, trying to figure out how they could relocate to Alaska. Finally, it occurred to Neil that becoming a teacher in Alaska would be just the ticket. They’d have summers off, which would be great because then they could build their own cabin (one of Monica’s fantasies) and maybe work a placer gold mine (one of Neil’s fantasies). Teaching couldn’t be that time-consuming, could it? After all, didn’t teachers knock off at around four in the afternoon? Sure, they had papers to grade and lessons to plan but just how long can that take, anyway?

The more they talked about the idea, the better they liked it. Neil started checking into the possibility of becoming an electronics teacher in Alaska. Though his B.A. was in social work, he thought his experience as an electronics technician would qualify him for employment as an instructor at a vo-tech or community college. As he began checking into the certification requirements for a Type D teaching certificate, however, it became apparent that he would have to take some education classes to supplement his expertise in his subject area. Neil and his family rejoiced when they learned that he had been admitted into the teacher education program. Monica even bought him a dozen roses. With the kids and Thunder, the family dog, in tow, Neil and Monica headed up the Alcan.

As Neil progressed through his education program, his grand illusions of the life of an Alaskan teacher were replaced by some hard realities. For one thing, when the family arrived in Fairbanks, they realized that many of the things they hated about

California were just as prevalent in this subarctic community: substance abuse, materialistic values, spiritual and intellectual poverty, shallow human relationships, and, more practically, low wages and a high cost of living. And teaching was not a nine to five proposition, as Neil learned while teaching a mini-unit in an English class at a local middle school. He also learned that in many of the communities where he might wind up teaching, he and his family members might not be treated well because they were Caucasians. Their dream of owning a little log cabin in the wilderness faded when Neil learned that in many instances, little or no private land is available in or around the Native village. He had even heard that some village school districts make it a policy to transfer teachers after several years, in accordance with the wishes of the local residents. This really cut him to the core because, more than anything, Neil felt that he and his family needed roots. He really wanted to find a place where he and Monica could settle down until the kids were grown.

Nevertheless, Neil persevered with the program. Though he was disillusioned by the realities facing Alaska's teachers, he admonished himself to be satisfied with the path he had chosen. Sure there were challenges. Maybe it wasn't going to be like in "The Wilderness Family," but wasn't teaching in Alaska still better than going through the motions of a meaningless job like the one he had before? Wouldn't living in a little rented house in a Native village beat the hell out of living in a crackerbox condo in mind-numbing Californicate? Couldn't he acquire the skills necessary to mitigate the social problems he and his family would face? Wouldn't there still be ample opportunities for fishing and gold prospecting? And, who knows, maybe there would be a place for them somewhere in Alaska where they could settle down and build that little cabin. They just had to pay their dues first. Neil knew that after he had a couple of years of teaching experience under his belt, he'd get a shot at the kind of life setting he really wanted and the kind of habitat that he knew existed for him somewhere in Alaska. He just knew that things would work out fine, somehow. Neil's care-worn features relaxed and he finally drifted off to sleep, secure in the knowledge that he had done the right thing and that he was where he should be.



## **About Vonnegut Bay**

The following morning, Neil and Monica awoke to the sounds of their children gaily exploring their new home. After a hasty breakfast, the couple set about the task of settling into the beautiful cabin Mr. Strauss had arranged for them to rent. Later that day, as the need arose, they ventured into town for cleaning supplies, groceries and to pick up their mail. During their forays into town, they remarked at the beauty of the community they would be living in for the next few months. The town was situated on a bay surrounded by mountains jutting straight up out of the water. Though a small network of roads connected the town to another small settlement, the only way to reach Vonnegut Bay was by ferry or plane. Through their discussions with Vonnegut Bay's residents, they learned that the city's primary economic mainstay was the fishing fleet based there. However, due to over-fishing over the course of the last ten years, local fish stocks were slowly being depleted and the town's economy was growing more heavily dependent upon tourism. At one time, logging had also been a major industry; but, for a variety of reasons, it was no longer profitable for the logging companies to operate in the Vonnegut Bay region. The city government and Vonnegut Bay School were also major employers.

The local Native association was very active in this town. About 20% of the town's residents were registered as shareholders. Soft-spoken, elderly Leo Beck, the Native association president, labored ceaselessly to use the resources at his disposal to create benefits and dividends for the shareholders. Many of his efforts also yielded benefits for the town's Caucasian citizens. For example, some of the medical equipment at the local clinic had been purchased by the Native association. Nevertheless, despite these efforts to be a good neighbor, the local Native association was still regarded with jealousy and suspicion by many Caucasian residents; jealousy because they envied the dividend checks the Natives received, and suspicion because they knew the Native association owned much of the land surrounding the town and they feared the association would develop it (or not develop it) in ways which might harm the community.

At the end of that first day, over coffee, Neil and Monica Steiger discussed what they had learned about their new home. Smiling at each other, they both agreed that despite these problems, Vonnegut Bay was probably one of the best places they could have chosen for their mission in the Bush.

Several days after their arrival, Neil noticed a sign posted on the wall of the community center inviting everyone to the New Year's Eve potluck that night. Though Neil still felt like an outsider, he realized that going to this party might make some kind of a statement about what kind of folks the Steigers were. After some coaxing, Neil convinced Monica to go to the potluck because not going to the party might convey the wrong message to their neighbors. So, that evening, they bundled up the kids and walked over to the community center. Tucked safely under one of his arms, Neil carried over a batch of Monica's scrumptious lasagna; a dish guaranteed to wow everyone who tasted it.

Upon their arrival at the community center, they noticed that everyone was talking and having a great time. Almost all of the teachers were there. So were the mayor and most of the other city employees. The town doctor was there, too. But where were the Natives? Neil panicked a little bit. Was the racism problem worse than expected? As his eyes furtively surveyed the crowd, he only noticed a couple of people who appeared to be Natives. Where were the others? Did they feel unwelcome here? Uneasy, Neil felt a growing sense of shame that he might be participating in an event that really wasn't meant for everyone and he pondered this situation for the rest of the evening. Incidentally, the lasagna was a big hit and it established Monica's reputation for being a great cook. The Steigers' participation at the party was duly noted. Neil looked forward to the start of school.

**Part I**

**Spring Semester  
at Vonnegut Bay School**

## Observations

Two days later, the spring semester began at Vonregut Bay School. After getting their children enrolled in school, Neil sat down with the principal and discussed his student teaching program. The principal suggested that Neil assist in the seventh and eighth grade language arts class, the ninth and tenth grade writing class, the junior and senior American Lit class, the photography class, and AppleWorks, a word processor class. During this meeting, Neil's attitude toward Mr. Strauss softened, and he could see that Strauss only had his school's best interests in mind when he grilled Neil on the phone earlier. Neil left the meeting with the feeling that Strauss was really a pretty good guy.

After meeting with Strauss, Neil quietly slipped into Olga Traven's classroom and seated himself in an unobtrusive spot. Olga, Neil's primary cooperating teacher, had taught in Wisconsin for about fifteen years prior to her move to Alaska in 1984. Neil's first impressions of the classes he observed that day were generally positive. The young people seemed like a friendly bunch, but when Olga introduced Neil to them, they looked at Neil skeptically. Later, Olga explained that she was the only English teacher many of these students had ever had, so they didn't quite know what to expect from Neil.

As Neil continued observing in Olga's classes throughout the first week, he concluded that Olga had good rapport with her students; they seemed receptive to her guidance and to enjoy the assignments she gave them. However, despite Olga's great rapport with the students, a lot of the time the students weren't listening to what she had to say. Instead, they were clowning around with their neighbors. Neil made a mental note of these norms and from this observation, he assumed that Olga must like using a laid-back approach to discipline.

Apart from the lukewarm reception given to him by the students, one other thing bothered Neil. It seemed to him that Olga relied on the textbook too much, especially in the seventh and eighth grade class. Neil saw ways the lessons from the book could be expanded by using outside materials, but that wasn't happening. Fortunately, the

textbook being used was structured around a Madeline Hunter clinical teaching format so that even under the worst possible circumstances, the students would get something out of it. At first, Neil was confused about Olga's reliance on the text. Was it because Olga didn't know how to pull in outside resources in order to enhance a lesson? Was it because she didn't have the time to devote to the class? Was there some valid reason for sticking strictly to the book? For example, maybe Olga was utterly convinced that using that approach was the most effective mode of instruction. This nebulous situation gave Neil the opportunity to practice a new skill he had learned: holding tentative conclusions. Neil privately speculated that the reason Olga rarely strayed from the textbook was philosophical; Olga or maybe even Mr. Strauss probably had very strong feelings about this issue and those feelings were probably manifested in what he saw going on in the classroom.

During the third week, as Neil prepared to assume the responsibility for the seventh and eighth grade class, he decided to follow right along in Olga's footsteps by relying almost exclusively on the book. Neil did alter Olga's lesson plan slightly by increasing the amount of time devoted to guided practice during the lesson. He was convinced this was the weak link in the lessons he had formulated during his practicum. Being a fairly well organized guy, four days before he was to begin teaching, Neil showed Olga his five lesson plans for the following week. Each lesson plan was a one and one-half page, typed out, full-blown Hunter. Olga's expression showed that she genuinely admired the effort Neil had put forth. As a result, Neil felt all warm inside. He liked pleasing his superiors.

### **Neil begins teaching**

When the big day arrived, the day when Neil would begin teaching, he felt a little nervous. His mind repeatedly went over each of the steps of the lesson to make sure he remembered the little gags and transitions he had worked up. When the time came for him to deliver the lesson, the young people were fairly responsive and they seemed to enjoy interacting with him. At the end of the class when the homework assignment was given, Neil cringed when he heard some groans. Jeremiah, the son of

the second and third grade teacher, protested, "But Mrs. Traven only gives us half as much to do as this! This is going to take forever!"

Neil was taken aback. Didn't the young people understand the importance of homework? Neil countered, "I know it's more than you normally do but I just want to make sure you know how to do this stuff."

In answer to Neil's prayer, the bell rang and the grumbling, grimacing students shot out of class. To his surprise, at the beginning of the class period on the following day, Olga turned to him and said, "I need to make a little announcement before you get started." Then she turned to her students and said, "You guys, I guess I'm a little disappointed by your reaction yesterday when Mr. Steiger gave you your homework assignment. You know, just because I haven't given you a lot of homework doesn't mean that I shouldn't be doing that. The truth is, if I had more time, I *would* give you more homework, and in fact sometimes I'm sorry that I can't give you more. So instead of being critical of Mr. Steiger for giving you too much homework, you should be grateful to him that he cares enough about you to give it to you." Then Olga turned to Neil, signifying that she had said what she wanted to say. Neil was really grateful to her for publicly showing her support for Neil's stance on the homework issue. Judging from the students' facial expressions during the talk, though, it looked like Olga's exhortations fell short of filling her students with a burning desire for more homework. Nevertheless, Olga's gesture made Neil feel good.

After he had been teaching the seventh and eighth graders for about two weeks, Neil came to some conclusions about his cooperating teacher. Now that the cross-country skiing season was over, Neil found that Olga was really hustling to help Neil make his lessons more enriching by helping Neil design extension activities centered on the textbook. The first time Olga offered to do this, Neil was dumbfounded. He thought Olga had refrained from doing this due to her beliefs concerning how English should be taught. What it boiled down to, though, was that during the first three weeks of the semester, Olga had been so bogged down with her responsibilities as the cross-

country skiing coach, she really couldn't spend the time needed to develop her lessons as much as she would have liked. Now that there was more time, Olga flew into high gear and helped Neil design some brilliant lessons; lessons which leave kids wanting more.

Also, Neil was beginning to learn more about what kind of person his cooperating teacher was. Like Neil, Olga was very interested in social issues. Once, she brought in an article which centered on a controversial rap song. The lyrics of the song dealt with the way the singer employed a flashlight during lovemaking. Fascinated, Neil watched how Olga helped the class explore the song's latent, dehumanizing message. The students not only became very involved in the discussion, they also learned some of the finer points of persuasive writing—Olga's objective for this lesson. Neil was awestruck by the way Olga deftly handled such a sensitive topic in the context of a ninth and tenth grade English class. He knew that it would be years before he would be able to develop the skills necessary to do something like that without running the risk of offending someone or conveying the wrong message.

Neil also grew to respect Olga's dedication to her family and to her students. Experienced with children, Olga was a natural when it came to dealing with students. In her quiet, friendly way, Olga was generally successful in getting the students to do what she wanted them to do, though Neil was still a little uncomfortable with the amount of talking going on in Olga's classes. Neil realized that he had sold Olga short during those first few weeks. He winced when he remembered his cocky attitude at the onset of the semester. Neil had come to Vonnegut Bay thinking he had all the answers and that due to the special training he had received, he was possibly better prepared for teaching in this setting than his cooperating teacher was! Neil realized now that Olga truly was a master teacher and he felt fortunate to have the opportunity to learn from her. Although Olga was continually being dragged in seven different directions because of the plethora of responsibilities a rural teacher must shoulder, Neil thought that Olga was, nonetheless, a highly effective teacher.

As Neil continued teaching the seventh and eighth grade language arts class, he gradually began to grow tired of the burden of grading the daily homework assignments. Admittedly, he was assigning twice as much homework as Olga used to, but Neil clung to the belief that doing that amount of homework was essential to achieve the results he was seeking. For three hours every night, Neil sequestered himself and graded his students' homework. To make matters worse, some of the grammar assignments Neil designed demanded careful analysis, requiring Neil to thoroughly master the grammar concepts he was teaching in order for him to be able to properly evaluate his students' work. How much easier it would have been to have the students complete the exercises for which there was an answer key. But since he believed simplifying the assignments in order to meet his personal needs was a form of betrayal, Neil bravely carried on.

### **The teaching load increases**

Six weeks into his student teaching experience, Neil assumed the full responsibility for the ninth and tenth grade writing class and the junior and senior American literature class. Because he wanted to make his instruction as meaningful as possible in the American literature class, Neil designed special study guides for the students to fill out as they read the short stories from the modern era. These study guides took hours to write. Grading them was no mean feat, either, because the study guides entailed open-ended questions. The questions were specifically written to require the students to write lengthy responses for each question.

The first week Neil taught this class happened to coincide with the boys' state volleyball tournament. For the first time ever, Vonnegut Bay School's team had a shot at the state championship. When Olga first saw the study guides which were to be used that week, she blanched a little. In her soft-spoken fashion, she suggested that perhaps the proposed assignments were a bit too demanding considering the students' plans to attend the state championship later in the week. Neil immediately began defending his plans by countering that the study guides would be fairly easy to fill out and that he would allow them to collaborate with each other in order to get



them done in time. Nothing more was said about it, so Neil passed out the study guides as planned.

The following day, Neil asked his students how long it had taken them to complete the study guides. The answers ranged from forty-five minutes to two hours. Since the members of the volleyball team had to complete all of their homework assignments before they could be cleared to leave school, this meant that they were having to double up on their homework load. Because of this policy, some students were spending up to three hours a night on their English homework. Though Neil suspected he may have made a mistake, he didn't feel he could back down. Reducing the work load would be tantamount to admitting that volleyball was more important than school work—a notion which made Neil's blood boil.

Feeling a little self-conscious about his decision to proceed with the demanding homework assignment, Neil sought out the volleyball coach, Phil Douglas, who was also the history teacher at the school. Spotting Phil at the water fountain, Neil bashfully slinked over to the coach and asked him how the boys were holding up.

"Oh, it doesn't look real good. About half of the boys are on antibiotics because of this flu bug. I've been trying to see to it that the boys get as much rest as possible so they'll be in shape to play. They have mentioned that they've been working on a real bear of a homework assignment for your class. Anything you could do to give these guys a break would really help."

Neil started to wilt like a pansy in a microwave. "Yeah," he moaned, "I guess I didn't realize how much work was involved with the assignments. Listen, I don't even mind if they copy each others' work, as long as they get the assignments turned in."

As Phil walked off to his classroom, Neil felt disgusted with himself. Not only had he underestimated the complexity of the homework assignments, but he had compounded his error by suggesting that the way to fix the mistake lay in having the

boys cheat to get their work completed. Neil felt he had compromised his personal ethics.

As it turned out, all of the boys wound up getting released from school so they could attend the state tournament. They played well, too, though they didn't win first place. Upon learning of their failure to win the state championship, Neil wondered whether they might have done better had he not taken such a hard line on their homework for the week. In the end, he doubted that the stand he took was worth it because after the boys returned, many of them refused to look him in the eye.

Soon afterward, another incident occurred which served to underscore the conflict between sports and the general school curriculum. In one of the nearby towns, some of the residents reported seeing a very queer phenomenon in a nearby cave. One evening, while walking past the entrance of the cave, several of the residents noticed that a glowing, nebulous cloud of gasses was periodically emitted from the opening. Though this alone fascinated him, but what really intrigued Neil were the reports that, on occasion, the clouds assumed the shape of world famous political figures. The town's police chief even swore that once while he was watching, one lethal smelling emission resembled the gaunt, furious specter of former president Ronald Reagan. Upon hearing these reports, Neil's mind clicked into gear. Wouldn't it be great to fly the journalism students over to this town so they could interview these people and photograph the cave? According to the reports, the United States Geological Survey even sent a team of volcanologists over there to check it out, so the story couldn't be completely bogus. Who knew? Maybe they could sell the story to one of the newspapers—if nothing else, the *National Enquirer* would probably pick it up.

Neil decided to test the waters. He tracked down the journalism teacher and asked her what she thought of the idea.

"Well, I do think it's a good idea but you probably won't have any luck getting any money out of Mr. Strauss for the airfare. I guess the budget is pretty tight right now."

Dejected, but still convinced of the merit of his idea, Neil ran his proposal past Olga. She smiled and said it was an interesting idea, but she didn't show any signs of wanting to get behind it herself. So Neil just gave up on it. Why buck the tide? He wasn't in any position to approach Strauss on it if he didn't have the enthusiastic backing of at least one teacher. Neil started mulling over just what did receive the principal's nod, and he didn't have to look too far. It was sports. By his calculations, the amount of money spent on sports at Vonnegut Bay School easily topped thirty thousand dollars a year. Sports! Sports were standing between him and his dream of doing something really special with the kids! Sports!

Meanwhile, the work was starting to stack up. Between the language arts class, the writing class, and the American literature class, Neil worked from 6 A.M. to 11 P.M. each day of the school week. Sundays, he'd work from about 11 A.M. until 1 A.M. the following morning. When Saturday rolled around, he was so exhausted from work, he'd think of any excuse to avoid grading papers or planning the following week's activities. Sometimes he'd rent movies at the local grocery store and sit mesmerized in front of the TV. He rationalized by telling himself that unless he was rested and somewhat happy with himself, he would be no good to the young people. However, he usually felt so guilty about taking out time to watch a movie that he didn't enjoy this diversion, so it lacked the therapeutic value he sought in it.

Throughout these weeks, Neil had placed nearly all the responsibility for the care of his children in Monica's hands, and she was beginning to resent it. Further, she resented the fact that Neil had no time to spend with her son because he needed frequent contact with a good male role model. Slowly, these pressures began to build to the point that Neil and Monica constantly bickered with each other. Though they loved each other very much, Neil's responsibilities at school, coupled with the family's problems, seemed more than they could bear. And to his surprise and disgust, Neil even found himself picking fights with his wife just so he'd have a good excuse to avoid working. Neil and Monica both helplessly watched as the ties binding them together began severing and unravelling.

'My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.  
'Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.  
'What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
'I never know what you are thinking. Think.'

I think we are in rats' alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones.

T. S. Eliot, from *The Waste Land*

Later, Neil picked up the responsibility for his other two classes: photography and AppleWorks. Photography was a fairly easy class to teach because there was no homework and photography had always been one of Neil's passions. It was time-consuming, though, because he had to design demonstrations for the darkroom techniques he was teaching. This involved going into the darkroom and methodically documenting each of the steps he took to produce a print which exemplified the technique. This process normally took about five hours per technique, and he taught one new technique each week.

AppleWorks, an exercise-based curriculum, did not require much preparatory work. Despite that advantage, the amount of time spent correcting the exercises was substantial. In fact, Neil began devoting each Saturday afternoon to the task of correcting the previous week's AppleWorks papers. To make matters worse, each of the young people worked at their own speed, so it was practically impossible for Neil to grab the answer key and grade all of the students' work for a given exercise. Furthermore, in many cases, the students didn't always enter the right file name on the daily work they turned in, so just sorting the papers into the correct piles to prepare them for grading often consumed at least an hour each Saturday.

After a couple of weeks of wading through the students' carelessly prepared assignments, Neil drew the line. In class one day, he told the students that from then on, he would rely on whatever file name appeared on their paper for its identity, and if they had the wrong file name on it, then their answers would probably be counted as incorrect. After class that day, his cooperating teacher for that class, Ms. Cornwallis, insinuated that Neil's policy was a little too extreme. Angered by Ms.

Cornwallis' efforts to mollycoddle her students, Neil countered that their irresponsibility was costing him at least an hour a week. Ms. Cornwallis made no reply. From that point forth, without exception, the students began writing the proper file name on their daily assignments.

### **The Vonnegut Bay Project**

Shortly after assuming the responsibility for these last two classes, Neil had a brainstorm. Why not try a cross-curricular approach with the writing class and the photography class? But what could they write about and photograph? After thinking about that for a while, Neil decided that it might be fun to make a book patterned after *A Day In The Life Of America*. Enthusiastically, Neil shared his idea with Mrs. Anderson and Olga, and not too surprisingly, they both fell in love with the project. As they started talking about it, the concept evolved from *A Day In The Life Of Vonnegut Bay*, to something far more comprehensive. Their final conceptualization of the project, appropriately called the *Vonnegut Bay Project*, included sections covering the archaeology of the area, the recent history of Vonnegut Bay, profiles of longtime residents, profiles of community leaders, the residents' lifestyle, local recreational opportunities, a profile of the local economy, a section containing photographs and descriptions of Vonnegut Bay's natural beauty, a chapter dealing with the challenges facing the community, a section containing an analysis of a student-designed survey of residents' attitudes, and descriptions of the hotels and lodges in the area. They figured it would take them about six weeks to generate a publishable manuscript.

The following weekend, Neil devoted about thirteen hours to planning for the upcoming project. All told, he developed about twenty activities to carry the project forward, and he was really proud of how innovative some of his ideas were. For example, he planned on having each student do a videotaped interview with a famous Vonnegut Bay resident. In preparation for that, each student had to generate a list of twenty-five relevant, open-ended questions for their assigned guest. The students would engage in videotaped, mock interviews to help familiarize them with the stress associated with being on camera and to acquaint them with operation of the video cameras (Neil wanted the students to videotape each others' interviews).

Furthermore, Neil scheduled teleconferences with the borough mayor and with a team of archaeologists who were experts in the Vonnegut Bay area. To top it all off, he tried to incorporate several cooperative learning activities in the program. Neil was so jazzed about this project! He was just sure that successfully completing this project was the key to getting a great job in the school district serving the Vonnegut Bay area.

When Neil and Mrs. Anderson unveiled the project to their students, the reaction they received was far from what they expected.

"Ah, Jeez, a book on Vonnegut Bay? Are you kidding?!"

"Who would want to read a book about this stupid place? Everyone knows that Vonnegut Bay sucks a big one!"

"What a laugh! What are we going to do? Write descriptions of how the tourists puke on our streets at the Fourth of July party?"

"Everyone hates this town. We all want to get away from here as quick as we can! We hate our parents for making us live here!"

"We aren't going to do it. We just want to do our regular work instead."

Dazed, Neil began to doubt that the students would be willing to invest the necessary amount of effort in the project to make it successful. He thought that the best thing to do at this time was to explore their negative attitudes toward the town, to give them a chance to ventilate a little bit. So, the rest of the class period was spent allowing the young people to express their feelings about living in Vonnegut Bay. In an effort to get some closure and to allow the students to feel like they had some control over what they were doing, Neil said, "Well, do you guys want to do this or would you rather go back to the same old stuff you've been doing?"

He was hoping that the students would, in unison, smile and shout, "Yes! Now we want to do that book! In fact, we think it will be great! We're confident that doing the book will help us develop high level thinking skills! We believe in you because you know what's best for us!" Instead, what he heard was, "Just give us our regular assignments." At this point, Mrs. Anderson squinted at the young people and said, "You *will* do this book. If anyone has a problem with this, we'll arrange for her or him to have a talk with Mr. Strauss." The bell rang, signifying the end of the class. As the students left the room, Neil heard them making fun of his idea. He wished Mrs. Anderson had just let it go.

Despite the awkward start, as the project activities commenced, the young people seemed to approach their work with the same level of enthusiasm they displayed toward their other work. First, there was a week of library research intended to uncover possible resources for the book. Next came the warm-up activities for the videotaped interviews with community leaders and other residents. The young people really got into the role-playing involved with the mock interviews—they loved hamming it up in front of the cameras! Neil didn't mind the monkey business because he knew that they were mastering the skills he was trying to teach. Though some of the students balked when the time came to do the real thing, all but one student performed this task remarkably well. The one student, a Caucasian youth, never got around to doing his interview. He claimed he never could make connections with his guest. Neil knew this was untrue because he saw the boy's guest several times during the course of the two-week period over which the interviews could be conducted. He never did find out what the boy's real reason was, but judging from the boy's academic record, he figured laziness might have played a part in it.

### **Family problems**

At this point, two-thirds of the way through the student teaching experience, Neil and his family were going through the roughest times of all. Neil and Monica were perpetually sparring due to disagreements over childrearing issues: Neil's kids were no saints and the pressures of being a stepmother to such kids was really taxing to



Monica. When Neil sat down to grade papers, all he could think about was how miserable his family life was. As a result of this and all of the other stresses in Neil's life, his creativity was shot to hell, and what were once routine teaching tasks now loomed before him like insurmountable barriers. For example, on two occasions, when Monday morning rolled around, Neil didn't have the students weekly scores tallied for the purpose of determining their eligibility for extra-curricular activities. When this happened, both Olga and Neil scrambled to get them turned in by the mid-morning deadline. Olga never mentioned the disappointment she must have felt about Neil neglecting his duties.

Soon, Neil began to attribute the family's problems to the excessive amount of time he spent on school work. To compensate for this, Neil began doing the bare minimum when it came to preparing for class. Not that he actually gave poor instruction, but gone were the little frills which take time to plan but which add so much to the effectiveness of a lesson. No more time for gathering props to use to illustrate a point. Now, Neil was budgeting his time, trying to spend more of it on his family. The only problem with this strategy was that when he spent time with his family, Neil felt guilty about neglecting his school responsibilities. It was a terrifying Catch-22 and Neil didn't know what to do to turn things around.

As his student teaching experience drew to a close, Neil observed that the *Vonnegut Bay Project* was in real trouble. The self-imposed six-week deadline was fast approaching and the students had barely begun writing their individual contributions for the book. As Neil assessed what went wrong, he realized too much time had been spent collecting background information. Also, the videotaped interview activity, though highly educational, really did little to advance the progress on the book which everyone agreed was the most important product. The teleconferences had been marginally successful. Despite engaging the students in one preparatory period before each teleconference, they took little interest in what was being said during the teleconferences, preferring to joke around whenever it wasn't their turn to ask a question.



Neil was registered to attend the annual job fair in Anchorage. The job fair is a spring event, a marketplace for people seeking teaching positions in Alaska. He could look over the available teaching positions and the district personnel officers could look him over, too. Neil became preoccupied with these concerns during most of his prep period time. Olga took note of this and gently prompted Neil to grade one of the homework assignments for the seventh and eighth grade language arts class.

During the job fair, Neil was ecstatic about seeing several of his friends from education classes. For the first time in months, he felt there were friends with whom he could share his misgivings concerning his mediocre student teaching performance. The bonds he had forged with these people actually seemed to have grown stronger during the time they were all apart. It was a very emotional experience for him, and with his friends' help, Neil was able to sort through the issues he had been dealing with during the previous months.

Despite his joy at being with old friends, Neil left the job fair dispirited because he had failed to secure a teaching position while he was there. The atmosphere at the job fair was most depressing. Working in the back room, he was privy to the process many administrators were using to screen prospective applicants. Neil was sure that each of the administrators tried their hardest to select the most qualified applicants for interviews, but the sheer volume of the applications prevented the administrators from giving the applications anything but a cursory reading. Empty handed, Neil headed back to Vonnegut Bay.

### **The end of student teaching**

Neil's last week of school was the worst of all. The students who were working on the *Vonnegut Bay Project* began to verbalize their boredom with the project. Most of the students sensed that the project hadn't met many of the goals Neil and the other teachers had established. Further, they doubted that the book would ever become a reality, and this realization seemed to render all their efforts meaningless. As the week closed, Neil wound up taking the students' shoddy papers with him. When he picked up the stack, he handled it with distaste. He'd had such high hopes for this

project. Well, he had promised them a book, and indeed there would be one, but it looked like he would wind up writing it himself, patterning it loosely after the students' work.

As he was leaving school that Friday, Neil halfheartedly hoped that the students would be sorry to see him go. Instead, several of the students who had given him such hell during the *Vonnegut Bay Project* greeted the news of his departure with joy. Daily during the last few weeks, they had made a point of inquiring about Neil's departure date.

While Neil, head hung, paced out to his car with some of his personal gear, a couple of the seventh and eighth graders called him.

"Mr. Steiger, you aren't going to be teaching any more?"

Expecting another round of insults, Neil was tempted to say, "No, you stupid little farts, you won't have Neil Steiger to kick around any more!" Instead, he curbed his tongue and said, "No. My student teaching is over. Now I need to find a summer job so I can earn some money."

"You mean you weren't paid to work here all this time?"

"Nope. This was all for a university class I was taking. In fact, I had to pay to do it."

"Wow. Well, we're going to miss you."

"I'll miss you guys, too. You guys are a pretty good bunch of guys."

It wasn't all for nothing, Neil thought as he sauntered on out to the car. These were the same kids Neil had to ride so hard. These were the same ones who would unabashedly carry on a conversation right in front of Neil while he was trying to deliver a lecture. These were the kids who would dump each others' books on the

floor when Neil's back was turned. Though Neil realized that the kids were not absolutely in love with him, the fact that they had shown him a little friendliness and understanding meant the world to him. With a little smile on his face, Neil deposited the last of his books in his car and drove away from the school.

## Notes From Neil

Student teaching was one of the most grueling experiences of my life, and I can't really blame the school or the community in which the school was located. My cooperating teacher and my principal were as good as they come, and the students and their parents were probably more cooperative and concerned than average. No, the discomfort I experienced was entirely my own doing. You see, I was a zealot. Not the religious or political kind; instead, I was a victim of my own inflated, unrealistic expectations of myself and my students. I guess I wanted to prove something to myself and to those around me. By being hardnosed about lengthy homework assignments and by biting off more than I could chew with the *Vonnegut Bay Project*, I intended for people to look at me and say, "That Neil Steiger is an ambitious, uncompromising teacher. He's the Bobby Kennedy of the world of education!"

I learned the lesson the hard way: I shouldn't have tried to make a name for myself while student teaching. It's a time for learning, not a time for trying to break new ground. Even under the best of circumstances, teaching is a demanding job and I shouldn't have complicated it by trying to rewrite the book on teaching.

In addition to being demanding, teaching is also an incredibly complex profession. By my count, in this case study I touched upon twenty-four factors which can influence a student teacher's performance. The outline I originally formulated for the case study was eventually scrapped because, all told, I identified at least fifty discrete issues which played a part in impairing my performance during the last half of my student teaching experience.

As I mentioned earlier, after a while I just sort of shut down. Not that I actually became a bad teacher, but my instruction no longer radiated the enthusiasm and inspiration that it did at the onset of my student teaching experience. A number of factors contributed to the degradation of my performance. These factors included my insensitivity to my students' needs as human beings and my decision to ignore the advice of my cooperating teachers. My decision to challenge my students with so much homework ultimately prevented me from having enough time for planning

good instruction. Additionally, ignoring my family's needs caused such damage to my relationship with my wife that it rendered me useless for anything but a good argument.

So what would I do differently? For one thing, I wouldn't depart too much from my cooperating teacher's style of instruction and I certainly wouldn't undertake any special projects—as soon as I put this case study to bed, I've got to pull the *Vonnegut Bay Project* out of the ashes and try to breathe some life into it. Remember, I promised them a book . . .

Also, I'd manage my time differently. What good is having a great reputation as a teacher if I'm a failure as a husband and father? If I'm lucky enough to land a teaching job, I intend to plan my schedule in such a way that I can remain a central figure in the lives of the people who love me and give me the emotional support I need to deal with all the pressures associated with teaching. One of the best ways of conserving my time and that of my students is to critically assess the value of the homework assignments I give. It also means spending a little more time planning daily instruction—if the instruction effectively gets the point across, the need for homework isn't nearly as great. Pretesting, as a way of determining the students' weaknesses, can help me design classroom activities and homework which will specifically target the areas requiring the greatest emphasis.

Above all, I won't feel guilty about the fact that I need a little time to myself. Heck, I'm a human being, too, and I need to treat myself accordingly. Like anybody else, I need time to write, play guitar, read a story to my children, take a walk with Monica. How can anybody be sensitive to the needs of others if they continually refuse to acknowledge the fact that they have needs themselves?

If you are just beginning your student teaching, I advise you to approach your student teaching experience the same way you'd tackle any opportunity to refine a new skill—for example, a novice swimmer wouldn't consider trying to swim across the English Channel. Some teaching tasks are equally formidable and equally

dangerous. Just take it easy and save the fancy stuff until you have a good grip on the basics. Third, listen to the things going on in your mind. If you hear a lot of nasty talk bouncing around in there, chances are you need to spend a little time doing something fun. Though your responsibilities as a teacher are enormous, you aren't going to be worth a tinker's damn to anyone if you deprive yourself of what you need to stay happy. Last, treat the ones you love with the same respect and concern you show your students. Are they any less worthy of the special gifts only you can give?

## **Comments on Neil Steiger's performance from his cooperating teacher at Vonnegut Bay: Student Teacher Evaluation Form**

Cooperating teachers fill out a standard rating form and write a summary evaluation. On the standard rating form, Neil received the top rating of "outstanding" in 23 categories out of a total of 30 categories. He received a rating of "above average" in five categories and "satisfactory" in two categories (clarity of oral directions and defining limits of behavior in the classroom). His cooperating teacher was pleased and impressed with Neil Steiger's performance and offers a viewpoint very different from Neil's.

Sample comments made on the rating form:

*On the Vonnegut Bay Project:*

Mr. Steiger has spear-headed a cross-curricular project incorporating English, photography, computers, and history in the development of a Vonnegut Bay publication. He has been the liason between teachers. One of his strengths is a desire to help students and he has spent time in doing that.

*On preparation:*

I am very impressed by Mr. Steiger's detailed plans. He does an especially good job of accounting for individual differences.

*On classroom management:*

Management style is supportive of students. Positive reinforcement sets a comfortable atmosphere for students.

*Summary evaluation*

I have had an excellent experience in working with Neil Steiger. A good part of a successful program has been Mr. Steiger's commitment to education. By having him in the classroom I have questioned my own teaching and I feel he's helping me to improve.

As far as Neil is concerned, it seems like he has some of the real keys to becoming a successful teacher. A strength is his ability to communicate with people by being a listener first. Students should have the idea that he is an advocate willing to spend time and energy on them. Colleagues should feel supported as I have observed Neil complimenting and consoling people around him. He appears very open to a wide variety of teaching styles, although Mr. Steiger works especially well with cooperative learning techniques. His classroom management style is informal and student-centered. He has had to "buy" into my philosophy and grading practice, so I can't really tell how he would do on his own if given freedom. We have worked together very well so far.

## **Epilogue**

At the end of this student teaching year, Neil Steiger decided to take a position with an oil company in an Alaskan community. His decision was the result of a number of considerations. He did not receive an offer of a teaching position from the school district. He wanted to spend more time with his family, and he felt his family needed a higher income than a first-year teacher's salary could provide. Neil says he has now found the kind of family and community life he had wished for when he lived in California.

Neil Steiger is taking care to keep his teaching certificate current.



## Discussion Questions

1. After reading Neil's case, one student about to embark on student teaching said, "In Neil's defense—We are all going to go out on a white horse, with our bag of tricks, trying to do it all. That's where we are at!"

Do you see such a Don Quixote figure, idealistic but inept, as an apt characterization of your own motives and passions . . . or of Neil's? What were the fundamental problems in this situation? Were the problems external, the difficulties of student teaching in Vonnegut Bay or the kind of preparation for teaching Neil received? Or were the problems internal, located for the most part in Neil himself?

2. Consider Neil's relationship with Monica and how his domestic turmoil influenced his teaching in Vonnegut Bay. Could Neil's problems with his blended family have arisen from some of the same personal characteristics that caused problems in his student teaching?

3. When Neil first wrote this case, he titled it *The Judas Tree*. He introduced his story with a quotation from Matthew 27, telling of the remorse of Judas. Why do you think Neil sees his case as a story of betrayal? Who or what was betrayed?

4. A year after these events, Neil reflected again on what he had learned from his experience. Here are a few of the lessons he came away with. Do you think Neil drew the right lessons from his experience? Or did he draw the wrong lessons, like Mark Twain's cat who sat on a hot stove and learned never to sit again?

"My view of sports is different now. Sports can be the vehicle for developing rapport and community. I thought sports was a mindless, macho thing. I'd be a lot more open now to the sports program."

"I started out on the right track. I followed the scheme my cooperating teacher was using. You give a brief lecture. You do guided practice. I have a lot of faith in the Hunter model. I got sidetracked with the *Vonnegut Bay Project*. It was self-indulgent. My basic teaching skills weren't solidified. It's better not to impress your principal and cooperating teacher with your creativity so much as your diligence."

5. Why did Neil have so much difficulty with the *Vonnegut Bay Project*? What explained the students' reactions? Once Neil realized that the project was far too ambitious, what strategies could he have used to repair the situation? What would have been your bail-out plan?

6. Some see Neil Steiger as an idealistic and ambitious teacher who sacrificed rapport with his students to abstract academic ideals. Do you agree with this judgment or do you think this description leaves out something important?