

JEREMY'S STORY

Jeremy, a freshman in high school, was a quiet student, withdrawn, and completely checked out. He showed up for class every day and didn't cause any problems, but he was clearly just putting in his time until he was old enough to drop out. He was failing nearly every class and didn't seem to care. Jeremy had effectively shut down all efforts by his teachers to get to know him and engage him in the classroom experience. His teachers had met countless times to discuss his case and had exhausted their bag of collective strategies to support struggling students. They had tried to contact his parents numerous times, with no response. They had offered to spend time with him before or after school to help him catch up, suggested peers that he might be able to study with, tried to connect with him individually during class time, and tried a host of other efforts, all of which had resulted in nothing. Bottom line: Jeremy was in the state of learning hibernation. At the end of one such meeting, Adam Sanders (school counselor) threw out a new idea. "What if next week we all focus on trying to identify even one thing *Jeremy* is interested in that we might be able to use as leverage to somehow reengage him?" The team agreed.

When the team regrouped, Sandra Keen announced with a sly smile that she had something to report. She had discovered that Jeremy was interested in the outdoors. She had uncovered this in a stroke of luck when Jeremy jumped in on a class discussion about the environment. Not only had Ms. Keen been surprised when he spoke up, but also she sadly realized that she didn't even recognize his voice. *"It is really frustrating to me that no one seems to care about the environment. There is nothing better than being outside, but most people I know seem to be so consumed with things like video games, and they don't give a sh*# about anything you don't need to plug in to charge!"*

Ms. Keen had to think fast. She didn't want to squelch his first real effort to engage in class discussion, but she also had to redirect the inappropriate language. *"I am impressed with your passion, Jeremy. Of course, in the classroom that passion needs to be expressed with more academic language . . . but tell us more about what you would like to see happen regarding care for the environment."*

Jeremy paused, and Ms. Keen was tempted to quickly move on, but she allowed for a bit of awkward silence before Jeremy added, *"Well, look at all the meaningless things we have clubs for at this school, like chess, debate, and even student council, and all the effort they put into planning stupid school dances, but no one cares enough to have a club about the outdoors."*

Ms. Keen responded, *“Keep in mind that those clubs all represent things that other students care about, and we should respect that. But you do make an interesting observation that there isn’t any type of organized effort to support the environment and allow students opportunities to connect with the outdoors. Let’s talk more about that later.”* A flash of slight panic crossed Jeremy’s face as he realized that he had divulged something about himself and that Ms. Keen wanted to talk to him later.

“Later” came right at the end of class, when Ms. Keen somewhat cornered him on his way out. *“Jeremy, I really appreciated your contribution in class today. What types of things do you enjoy doing in the outdoors?”* Jeremy just wanted to get out the door, so he quickly responded, *“Hiking, camping, fishing, that sort of thing.”*

Ms. Keen responded, *“That’s great. I really love the outdoors as well, and believe it or not I have been fly fishing since I was a kid.”* Jeremy didn’t respond, and it was clear he was done with the conversation. *“What would you think about us working together to start an Outdoors Club at this school? I would even be willing to connect some of your missing assignments to this if you are willing to put in the time and effort.”* Again, silence. *“Just think about it, and I’ll touch base with you tomorrow.”*

Ms. Keen was quite doubtful that Jeremy would say yes to starting an Outdoors Club, but at least she had discovered something he was interested in, and this gave the team something to work with. They eagerly jumped into brainstorming how they could use Jeremy’s interest in the outdoors and, by intentional design, reengage him in learning and school in general. It is important to note that these teachers did not view Jeremy as a problem; rather, they were focused on his potential!

The Rest of the Story

The next day, Ms. Keen again caught Jeremy on his way out the door, despite his best efforts to evade her. *“Did you do any thinking about the idea of starting an Outdoors Club here at school?”*

Without making eye contact, Jeremy flatly responded, *“I don’t think so.”*


Ms. Keen was desperate. *“What if we could organize a backpacking trip for club members?”*

Jeremy looked her in the eye. Now he seemed at least a little interested. “*Are you serious?*”

In addition to helping him start an Outdoors Club, Jeremy’s teachers invited him to find creative ways to connect his interest in the outdoors to the content learned in his classes. They gave him ideas to get started, but they were clear that the responsibility would ultimately be his. As most students do, Jeremy rose to the occasion. In a social studies paper, Jeremy wrote about the economic impact of conservation efforts and the struggle to entice companies to pay more now in production costs for the sake of future benefits to the environment. A series of math problems were created based on the distance and terrain of the Appalachian hiking trail, and the connections in science were endless! Jeremy conducted a study on the impact of pesticides being used by farmers on the peregrine falcon population. He led the effort to connect the Outdoors Club with a local water plant to learn more about the city’s water supply and followed up with a campaign to inform the student body of easy ways in which they could help conserve water, like turning off the faucet when brushing their teeth. True to their word, Jeremy’s teachers worked with him to connect his efforts to class assignments whenever possible.

Ms. Keen also kept her promise, and the year ended with the first annual Capital High Outdoors Club hiking trip. The club had experienced significant growth over the year, and Ms. Keen was worried about getting enough faculty sponsors for the trip. She was pleasantly surprised at the number of teachers not only willing but also *wanting* to participate. The story of Jeremy and his reengagement both in and out of the classroom had spread across the school and had become a source of inspiration to other students and to teachers as well.

There was plenty of content Jeremy needed to master that did not connect to the outdoors, but the opportunity to inject his passion into the classroom experience here and there was the key to his reengagement in the classroom . . . mostly. We would not want to inaccurately paint a picture of all sunshine and roses. After barely surviving summer school and some very painful tutoring sessions (for the student and teachers alike), Jeremy graduated and proudly placed a pin on the map outside of the front office reflecting where graduates were going to college. His GPA was not the best, but with a decent SAT score and a glowing teacher recommendation from Ms. Keen praising Jeremy’s academic turnaround, Jeremy



had been accepted to a local community college to study wildlife biology. Jeremy had a goal for his future. He engaged in actions and learning to work toward achieving that goal. And he had experienced teachers who embraced him for who he was as an individual and allowed him to find his place of belonging in the school community. For Jeremy, the engagement gap was closed, personally and academically. And the inspiration he provided his peers led to other new clubs and organizations, such as a World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Club, the Cupcake Cooking Team, and a Graffiti Magic group, to name a few!

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