

Inspirational Teacher Rembert Herbert **A Story by Lin-Manuel Miranda**

The trajectory of my life changed in 8th grade, when I got the following note back on the back of an English essay. My teacher's name was Dr. Rembert Herbert. This is what he wrote:

“Lin-Manuel—This is an excellent, well-crafted essay. It confirms what I have suspected for some time—that you have been ‘hibernating’ in the back of my class, emerging only occasionally—as when you wrote ‘The Chosen’ musical for class earlier this year. It’s a new semester, almost spring—join us!”

The “Chosen” musical he references was a class project I created as a part of a class assignment. The assignment was to teach three chapters of *The Chosen* by Chaim Potok, as part of a group. I decided it would be easier to write a song based on each chapter and have our group perform it. Actually, I recorded myself singing all the songs and made my group mates lip-synch my voice, as I had no trust in their musical ability and no way of teaching it to them. Why did I do this? Well, I loved the book. And I loved the way Dr. Herbert taught the book, encouraging us to find the connections and themes for ourselves. I had, in fact, spent most of 8th grade scribbling song lyrics and poems in the back of my classes, earning grades just good enough to get by. I never saw any reason to share these with anyone else.

With this note, Dr. Herbert essentially called me out. He told me, “That creative energy you are burning in the back of the class is what we need IN the class. You can USE that here.” He was also the first person outside of my family to say to me, “You’re a good writer.” He encouraged me to audition and submit my writing to Brick Prison, a student-run theater group at my high school. It was there that I found the energy source that would power the rest of my life.

His encouragement extended far beyond that 8th grade English class. When I began making films in high school, Dr. Herbert would sign permission slips allowing me to film in classrooms, or after school. I began writing short, 20-minute musicals for Brick Prison, buoyed by my “Chosen” experience in his classroom. My senior year, I earned course credit as his intern, helping him with his 8th grade students. I gained a whole new respect for how much he invested in every student, stepping in if he sensed a drop-off in the quality of their writing, or quietly encouraging the shyest class members with leadership roles.

I still have that 8th grade essay, and Dr. Herbert's attached note. He is still teaching 8th grade English at Hunter. I am so grateful to him for paying such close attention, for seeing something in me, and urging me to share it. That's what the best teachers can do. I hope I have made him proud.