MEETING MANDELA
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When My School Failed, Nelson Mandela Re-Inspired Me
by Jeniffer Montano

Jeniffer Montano, who graduated from Jill Chaifetz Transfer High School in 2009, met Nelson Mandela in South Africa after winning a writing contest sponsored by the Mandela Foundation in partnership with the Department of Education.

On the occasion of Nelson Mandela's 95th birthday and Mandela Day, celebrated worldwide, GothamSchools is collecting tales from New York City schools about the former president of South Africa. Jeniffer Montano met Mandela in South Africa in 2009 when she attended Jill Chaifetz Transfer High School.

Since I was a little girl, I have always had a desire to change the world. I wasn't sure how, but I just knew I wanted to leave this world a bit better than it was before I entered it. I idolized people like Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela. These people dedicated their lives to helping others.

Nelson Mandela once said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Schools are the primary source of education. Teachers and staff are the ones that dispense this powerful weapon. So, what happens when kids like me learn to define education by the metal detectors they must walk through to enter school, or by the teachers who do not care or by the guidance counselor who tells them to drop out because they are not “school material”? If education is one of the most powerful weapons in the world, then the type of education I received is closing the door to change. It is destroying potential leaders and reformers. It is breaking down and destroying our future Nelson Mandelas.

I live in a poor neighborhood in the Bronx where violence and drugs are a part of daily life. I live in a place where hopelessness fills the hearts of most, and our schools are a reflection of this. My dreams of changing the world were slowly shattered as I moved through the public school system. By the time I got to Dewitt Clinton High School I had completely lost sight of my dream. I looked around me and started to understand the message that was being sent. You are nobody and therefore you will forever be nobody.

By the time I got to my junior year I had completely given up. My average was about a 55.8 and I had been absent for two months straight without anyone noticing. I was ready to drop out. Before I made my
decision I went to my guidance counselor. I was hoping to find words of encouragement and motivation. Instead, I was told to drop out and get my GED. The guidance counselor said that I just wasn’t made for school.

I was now set on proving him wrong. How dare he tell me that I was the problem? How dare he tell me that I couldn’t make it? I would make it! I would be someone! And he would have to eat his words.

I decided to transfer to another school, Jill Chaifetz Transfer High School. Once I found myself in a nurturing environment, everything changed. Before I had been told I wasn’t school material, and now I was now an honor roll student. However, while I was striving academically, surviving school took up so much of me that I had completely forgotten about my dream. Then one day my mom told me about a writing contest. My first reaction was, ‘No way, I will never win,’ but Mom persisted until she finally convinced me to submit a piece. On March 27, 2009, I uploaded my thirteen-page essay and submitted it to the Nelson Mandela Legacy Contest.

When I got the call a month later that I was one of 12 winners, I was shocked. A few weeks later I found myself on a plane headed to South Africa to meet Nelson Mandela — that trip would change my life forever.

It was a cool June day and I was standing in front of a wooden door frame waiting to be called into the room. As I entered the room I was blinded by flashing lights. Photographs and videos were being taken of me as I walked toward this majestic-looking being who was sitting on the other side of the room. I made my way over to him and sat down next to him. He extended his hand and I shook it. As my hand touched his, my stomach jumped and goose-bumps over took my body. I was in awe.

He then asked me in a gentle voice, “What is your name?”

“Jeniffer Montano,” I said.

“Nice to meet you, Jeniffer Montano,” he replied.

I was speechless. All I could do was stare at him and try to hold back the tears. Nelson Mandela had just said my name. Nelson Mandela, the man who most of us only read about in our textbooks. Nelson Mandela, the man who gave his life and freedom to free a nation. Nelson Mandela, the man, the leader, the hero, had, for a brief moment, acknowledged me. That simple handshake changed my whole life. If I could do something worthy enough to be placed in front of Mandela, then surely I could achieve anything.

This was when my dream came back into focus. I thought about how I was going to change the world and then it hit me — education. Education truly is a powerful weapon. I almost didn’t make it because I saw no hope in education. After my trip to South Africa I decided to dedicate my life to helping kids find and build their dreams through a good education. I decided to pursue a career in teaching.

I am currently attending the City College of New York, where I am pursuing a degree in secondary education. I want to become an English teacher. I want to use my degree to help assure that all our future leaders understand that no matter where they are from, they can make it. I want to assure them that no one ever thinks that there is no way out. I want to assure that no kid ever has to hear that they are the problem, that they are not school material. I want assure that education is truly held up and acknowledged as one of the most “powerful weapons” in the world. For so long I was lost, I was unable to find my way, and I was unable to give my dream a platform. But a simple handshake changed that. I want to do for others what that handshake did for me: help them keep hope alive and help them see the greatness in themselves.

Thank you, Madiba.

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