



TOUGH LOVE

Julie Propst
finds fulfillment
inside an inner-city
classroom

BY TIM ELLSWORTH

Every morning, Julie Propst greets her seven students with a cheerful “Good morning!” and a hug.

For some of those students, it may be the only hug they get all day.

“None of them has very easy lives,” Propst said. “I have a few kids who don’t see their parents. Their parents leave for work as they get home from school. Sister gets them off the bus. They are not easy lives at

home at all. I have several that come to school very hungry because they don’t eat dinner the night before.”

It’s a tough place to be a teacher. In fact, most of the first-year teachers at Watkins-Nance Elementary School in urban Columbia, S.C., don’t stick around for a second year.

But for Propst, it’s perfect.

“I came down here just because I wanted an inner-city type of setting,” said Propst, a 2005 Union graduate. “I thrive on challenges. I figured it would be more challenging to work in an inner city than with the middle to upper class students.”

If she wanted challenges, Propst came to the right place. Locals hurled insults, taunts and jeers at her almost from the minute she arrived in the fall of 2005.

“You don’t belong down here, white girl,” they said regularly.

It’s easy to see why Propst attracted attention at Watkins-Nance. Of about 500 students, two are white. Propst is one of only three white home room teachers.

“It was very hard when I first came -- to be respected, especially by the parents,” Propst said. “I think just being so few white teachers here it really affects the way they perceive us. So it was very hard to break in, to be accepted and respected as a teacher, and as a teacher who cared and knew what I was doing. That was probably the biggest thing.”

She soon found that race wasn’t the only challenge. Most of the students live in poverty. Some of them seldom see their parents. A few are behavioral nightmares.

“I have one student that has never been told what to do and she didn’t like coming into the classroom because I am very strict with behavior,” Propst said. “I have very high expectations of my students. So it took her a good four or five months to get under control. She did a lot of pencil stabbing and throwing blocks at students and at me. Biting me and kicking me. I had bruises almost every day for a good four months.”

But fueled by a love for her students – even the ones who bite her – bolstered by a natural stubbornness and reliant upon strength from the Lord, Propst gutted it out. She just finished her second year as a special education teacher at the school, where she works with students who are classified as “educable mentally disabled.”

She has earned that elusive respect from colleagues, parents and students.

“(The students) see she is very caring,” said Towanda Nelson, Propst’s assistant. “She is very warm to them. She makes the lessons fun. I think that’s why they like to be around her so much. The parents just love her.”

Felita Green, one of Propst’s co-workers, praised her for the way she works hard and is a constant encouragement to her students.

“She has done a remarkable job with a group of students that would have struggled otherwise,” Green said. “They obviously would have needs that are beyond most teachers and the scope of regular education. She is able to meet them. It is obvious that she applies her educational training as well as personal experiences.”

Raised in Kenya and Tanzania as the daughter of missionaries, Propst knew exactly what kind of work environment she wanted. Her background in Africa gave her a passion

and a burden for the challenges many African-Americans face, specifically poverty. So she chose Watkins-Nance. The journey for her has been difficult, but rewarding.

“Behavior has been a huge issue,” Propst said. “(My students) have never been with their parents, so you can’t expect them to know how to act right. My first few months here were very intense. Most of them are completely under control now. I praise God for that. There have been many times that I have had no idea what to do but the wisdom that the Holy Spirit gives me is incredible.”

In addition to praying and asking God for help, Propst often found herself going back through her notes from her classes at Union.

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Professors like Ann Singleton and Ralph Leverett had a significant impact on her, Propst said, and she values what she learned from them.

“Union’s education for me was so useful,” she said. “We were provided with so many strategies. But the biggest thing, I think, is that Union’s education program was so big on reflection. Figure out why they are doing what they are doing, and what I can do to help. Union definitely trained us to be able to do that.”

She also learned how to apply her Christian faith to her job as a teacher – something that isn’t always easy to do in a public school.

“Dr. Leverett weaved Christianity into it,” Propst said. “He made it a lot more than just special education. It was more of loving them with the love of Christ and making it into more of a witness opportunity.”

Propst took that advice from Leverett seri-

ously. Her strategy in dealing with difficult students who find it hard to behave? Love them unconditionally. When she disciplines them, she tells them, “I love you and I know you can do better.”

That message wasn’t always received well. Propst’s most difficult student – the one who would bite and kick her – would roll her eyes and stomp away when Propst told her that.

But the message ultimately got through. One day, when Propst told this girl the same thing, the child looked at Propst and said, “You really do love me.”

“That was huge,” Propst said. “From that moment on she pretty much respected me enough to do what I said.”

Her other students have come to learn that Propst truly does care about them. And the parents have noticed as well.

“I’ve had so many parents come to me and just say, ‘You must be a real Christian because you love these kids,’” Propst said. “And that is huge.”

Propst said that kind of love also makes her students work harder academically.

“I have very high expectations for them,” she said. “But when they know that I love them, they will work. It is exciting to see good scores come in because they are willing to work for it.”

One morning, Propst was working with her students on sounds. A boy named DeAndre sounded out the word “not,” and Propst asked him to use it in a sentence.

“I’m not the king,” DeAndre replied. “You’re not the king?” Propst asked.

“Who is the king?”

DeAndre’s answer: “God.”

Though it’s not always easy to show that love – especially when her students decide to act up – Propst said God has helped her to do exactly that.

“There is no possible way for someone outside to come into this community and love on these kids and enjoy teaching them if they don’t have the love of Christ,” she said.

Leverett said he remembers Propst as a student who had a deep sense of divine calling to do what she’s doing.

“She never wavered in her goals, in her desire to work in inner city schools with the toughest of kids,” Leverett said. “There was never any doubt that she had a divine call to do what she’s doing. I don’t know that she ever really considered anything other than what she’s doing, probably even as a little girl.”

“She is just a superb example of what it means to live out a calling.” ❖

