

When people hear the phrase “the one that go away” they instinctively think of a significant other. However, for me I use the phrase to refer to a student who I feel I let down, who I was unable to help as much as I wanted to, who moved away before I was done helping him.

J came to me as a 1st grader after a tough kindergarten year behaviorally and academically. He was a native English speaker in our Dual Language Immersion program who had experienced unknown traumas and often shut down emotionally. Despite quickly establishing a good relationship with J from the start of the year, that didn't mean I could always reach him when he was struggling. I remember during the second or third week of school I read *Molly Lou Melon Stand Tall*, a storybook about being proud of who you are and proud of your differences. I had students do a writing activity where they finished the sentence: “I am proud that...” Although J's work didn't necessarily show comprehension of the story, it was my favorite. He wrote “I am proud that you are my teacher.” And I was proud that he was my student.

Going forward in the year, the school counselor and I made numerous reports to DHS with concerns of neglect since J always smelled like urine. There were other areas of concern as well. It always seemed like we never quite got the whole story from his mom and step-dad about issues of concern or things that would be going on at home. I don't remember the specifics, but to say the least, we were concerned. We were beginning the process of an IEP (individualized Educational Plan) referral for J due to lack of academic progress and emotional challenges, but it still seemed like there was a missing piece. The district psychologist, school counselor, and myself scheduled a unannounced home-visit. It was supposed to happen on a Monday, but on Friday J was not at school and that weekend we got an email from J's mom. She had lost her job and they were being evicted from their apartment, so they were moving to Texas over the weekend. That was that, no closure for J or goodbyes, no time to seek out other resources. They had a family member who they could live with in Texas, so like many families who live in poverty, they left for where they could have shelter over their head. This was in February of 2018. Since I knew this hearing was coming up, I looked at the Facebook profile of J's mom and step-dad last week because I had been thinking about him recently. It looks like they had a new baby in December and his step-dad had posted a fundraiser the day before “Try to raise money or find odd jobs to make mone so I can get a motel room for myself and my family for a night to get out of the cold.” Needless to say, it made me feel once again as if I let J down. However, in all truth, I know that it was the system that let him down.

That Monday after J's mom sent us an email about them leaving, the school counselor and I went to his low-income apartment complex after work just to confirm they had actually left. Their apartment was on the second floor, their door right at the top of the stairwell. The counselor and I could smell the stench of urine coming from their apartment half-way up the staircase. Sure enough they weren't there and although we couldn't get into the apartment, we talked to the apartment manager. What we learned haunts me to this day. She said that the family, specifically the step-dad was being investigated for animal abuse by animal control. According to her, they housed exotic animals, and maybe I'm remembering wrong but I seem to recall she even mentioned a pig. She declared that her maintenance workers had left the apartment with animal feces on them after performing work. Needless to say it now became much clearer why J smelled like urine, but there was nothing we could do about it, at least nothing that felt like it mattered. The counselor and I made another report with the new information we had to DHS, informed them of his move, and I followed-up with Texas DHS a few weeks later to make sure that his case followed him. The counselor and I made contact with his new school and she reached out to his new counselor, although now I can't remember if she ever actually received correspondence back. I know that we did all that we could under the restraints of the systems in place but I have always wondered what would have happened if Animal Control Officers were mandatory reporters and reported to DHS about the horrendous conditions inside that apartment. Would the story have played out differently for J? Would he be in a better living situation now, instead of homeless, if animal control officers had made that report? I will always wonder what could have been for J.

It is because of J and others like him that I began to research animal control or humane officers and their duty as mandatory reporters. I had heard before that animal abuse and other forms of abuse are often linked, or one is a precursor to another. Therefore it seemed like common sense to me that animal control officers would be mandatory reporters. However, as I came to find out, animal control or humane officers were only mandatory reporters in six states and Washington D.C. I was shocked. I couldn't understand why they wouldn't be mandatory reporters. Requiring them to be mandatory reporters does not necessitate a large amount of funding, if any, and it can save children from living in horrible conditions and possibly even save their life. As a teacher I'm proud that the Oregon Education Association has taken the time and initiative to make Oregon state number seven where animal control and humane officers are mandatory reporters. Simply put, it is the right thing to do. It is our duty as citizens to protect those who cannot protect themselves: our children.