

COMMENTARY

David McGrath: The Christmas gift every teacher craves

By David McGrath
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Cast members from the classic film "The Outsiders" include Emilio Estevez, from left, Rob Lowe, C. Thomas Howell, Matt Dillon, Ralph Macchio, Patrick Swayze and Tom Cruise. (Warner Bros.)

If teaching were baseball, I would have been sent back to the minors after my first year at Chicago Vocational High School.

A 22-year-old English major, I could diagram a compound sentence on the blackboard or scan a Shakespearean sonnet. But

I failed in matters of discipline, like keeping 98 students quiet in the study hall I was assigned to monitor.

I tried maintaining a strict and stoic demeanor, in accordance with “Don’t Smile Until Christmas,” a book by educator Kevin Ryan. But it went against my nature.

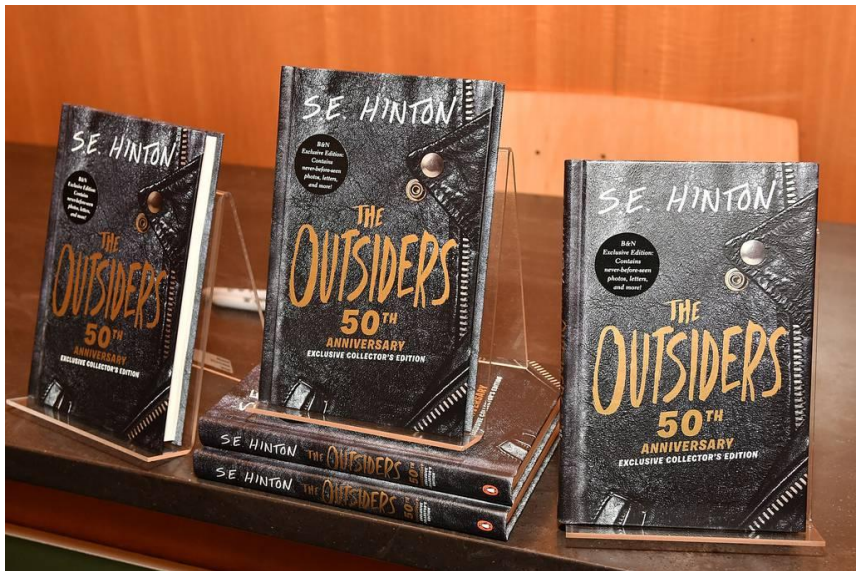
In my composition and literature classes, I was frustrated by students who were tardy, inattentive, shouting without raising their hands, or who arrived without their book or pen. By year two, however, I was able to turn my back to write on the blackboard without someone sneaking out. Year three, I could, in fact, smile before Christmas and even discuss literary themes like love, loneliness or death, without the class erupting in mayhem.

It remained a challenge, nonetheless, to get everyone committed to serious learning. Sophomores were the most difficult, with many 15-year-olds who wanted to be somewhere else but who, by law, could not drop out till 16.

Eugene, for example, liked to sit sideways and chat with his pal Stephen directly behind him when I was teaching or trying to hear another student’s question. They could have gotten away with it by whispering but willfully chose not to.

Keeping them after class, I asked each, in a man-to-man tone, to explain his animosity. By then I had learned not to corner a student and added that they were smart and could potentially be leaders whom struggling classmates might look up to. So we ended up shaking hands and pledging a truce. (Stephen would eventually drop out, while Eugene would surprise me when he confessed before graduation that our talk hadn’t meant as much as the handshake, since my callused hands from remodeling our house on weekends were what had earned his respect.)

For my sophomore class in 1985, I thought S.E. Hinton's novel "The Outsiders" might improve attitudes toward learning. Other than being white, Hinton's characters mirrored my students in age, in economic levels, and in problems with gangs, peer pressure, dysfunctional families and self-image.



The 50th anniversary edition of "The Outsiders" by S.E. Hinton is seen at a bookstore in New York City in 2017. (Slaven Vlastic/Getty)

I assigned the book, and as a bonus before Christmas break, I rented a video recorder and the largest screen TV available from the local rent-to-own store, which two burly men wheeled into our classroom.

I slid "The Outsiders" cassette into the video player, lowered the shades, and we all sat back to watch the first half of the 90-minute film. While most students recognized Ralph Macchio from "The Karate Kid," few were familiar with Matt Dillon,

Patrick Swayze or Diane Lane. The next morning, many arrived early, grabbing desks closest to the TV. The usual “suspects” were late and had to be shushed once the movie’s second half began.

As the plot ramped up, the tension in the room became palpable. At the climatic episode, when Johnny (Macchio) is on his deathbed, uttering his last words to his best friend, Ponyboy, I noticed a commotion in the far corner. I started to stand in order to quell the disruption, when I realized what was happening and sat back down.

Chris Zorich, an above-average student and top linebacker on the football team, was in tears. The scene on the screen was highly charged, and you could see his usually squared, substantial shoulders shaking. Like the character in the novel, Zorich was raised by a single parent in a tough neighborhood. But showing his emotions in front of streetwise classmates was risking ridicule and harassment.

I kept one eye on the TV and another on Zorich. One of the latecomers sitting across his aisle turned to locate the source of the sobs, a smile of glee on his face. He was poised to scorn and laugh derisively. This was not going to turn out well, I thought. But his smile faded when he saw it was the football star.

An impactful lesson in vulnerability, courage and authentic manhood had just been imparted to inner-city teens. And their teacher hadn’t said a word.

That night, I helped our children, Mike, Jackie and Janet, craft ornaments, and Marianne asked what put me in the Christmas spirit. The next morning, snowflakes fluttering like moths on the Calumet Expressway increased my excitement on the drive to school.

And my sophomores did not disappoint. They argued passionately over which actors were true to the characters in the book: “Two-Bit be trippin,” said Norman about the mouthy kid who drank beer for breakfast. And they continued debating even after the passing bell rang, over who was responsible for the church fire.

Lorraine turned before walking out the door and said, “Merry Christmas,” and that she loved “The Outsiders” because it was just like her “stories,” or soap operas.

It was the best I felt about school all year, thanks to the art of S.E. Hinton. And the courage of Chris Zorich. Zorich would become an All American defensive lineman at Notre Dame and an All Pro nose tackle for the Chicago Bears. But long before his celebrity, he motivated Chicago Vocational High School students with his serious embrace of learning.

And his help in making me believe in what I was doing, and in strengthening the confidence I’d sought for so long, was the best Christmas gift any teacher could hope for.

David McGrath is an emeritus English professor at the College of DuPage and author of the newly released book “[Far Enough Away](#),” a collection of Chicagoland stories. He can be reached at mcgrathd@dupage.edu.