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lessons from a thirtysomething sophomore

BY SCOTT GREENE

The story of youth pastor Scott Greene—the guy who got the national media’s attention when he decided to go back to high school for two weeks as a sophomore student. What he learned about himself, his teenagers, and his ministry that changed his life forever.

You can feel the pulse beating in your fingertips. All your past insecurities are suddenly stalking you. You’re sick to your stomach thinking about what you have to do. Your hand is sweaty as you reach for the door handle—this is a commitment you’ve tried to avoid for weeks, but you know you’ve got to follow through.

No, you’re not headed to a meeting with the elders to explain what really happened to the church van. You’re on your way to the dreaded “school lunch” visit that every youth leader I know tries to avoid—even your cool goatee and a passion to reach kids for Christ do little to squelch your dread. I’ve pushed school lunches and campus visits off my calendar more times than I can remember. I’ve invented excuses to avoid them, intentionally scheduled over them, and even driven all the way to the school and simply not gone in. But I’ve paid the price for it.

Not long ago, after 10 years in youth ministry, I realized my “avoidance strategies” had left me nearly out of touch with today’s youth culture. My passion to reach young people was as strong as ever, but my ability to understand their world was quickly evaporating. As much as I love serving God in youth ministry, I’d rather listen to NPR than watch MTV. The older I get, the less empathetic I can be toward teenagers, their culture, and their everyday

predicaments. So I knew I needed to do something radical to reverse my momentum. What could I do to understand their world like never before? I know it sounds like the newest (and lamest) FOX reality show, but at age 33 I went back to high school for two weeks as a sophomore. It was an experience that will forever shape the way I approach teenagers and youth ministry.

I worked closely with school administrators for months to prepare for my “immersion” experience. On the first day I was armed and ready for my five classes (including old nemesis Algebra 1, and PE) with a locker, student ID, student handbook, three #2 pencils, and the principal’s guarantee that I’d get no special treatment. That first day as a thirtysomething sophomore at Warsaw High School represents the pinnacle of fear (so far) in my ministry. My gut felt tight—I hadn’t felt that way since I’d asked Alicia Malcowitz to the Sophomore Valentine Dance and she’d said no in front of all my friends (okay, that still hurts).

My original mission was simply to gain perspective—to experience and attempt to understand the pressures my senior highers constantly feel. I wanted to taste the impact that comes from competing demands on their time, conflicting emotions, rapidly changing bodies, and their shifting relational battleground. And I got way >>>

»» more of that perspective than I expected. Along the way I picked up a couple hundred new friends (otherwise known as classmates).

HALLWAYS, DOUBLE-SHOTS, AND BOSSES

As I walked the halls my first morning of class, almost every student I passed looked tired—many of them were already on their second cup of coffee. They looked worn out, and it didn't take long to understand why.

Today's teenagers are pressured on every side. One student told me he had "13 bosses"—five teachers, one principal, two coaches, two employers, two parents, and a youth pastor. Grimacing, he told me every "boss" had expectations for him—none of them low.

It's no wonder that when we gathered information from our online survey of teenagers we discovered that nearly a third (30 percent) of kids have persistent feelings of hopelessness, and 10 percent wrestle with recurring thoughts of death or suicide. They're feeling the pressure. They don't have a mortgage or family to feed, but their stresses are very real to them. We must keep that in mind—especially when they let us down or fall short of our standards. We must meet their failures with grace—if we don't, they'll run elsewhere when they're struggling.

CAN WE BUILD IT? YES WE CAN!

My second-period class was called Construction. The first day of class was weird—I sat by myself and was nearly "taken out of the game" by several strange looks and obvious sneers. No one really talked to me, but then again, I didn't go out of my way to talk to them. Much later I realized we were all hoping the other would begin the conversation. Both parties were unwilling to make the first move.

By day two I could "fake" confidence. I knew I only had two weeks, so I took a chance and just started talking to the guys in my class. It paid off. Over the next two weeks I worked side-by-side with some really amazing guys—the same ones who'd intimidated me only days before. I realized they'd freaked me out because I'd assumed so much about them. Eventually we laughed together, made fun of each other, and tried not to screw up the garden shed we were building. We connected and built a bridge of friendship. And then I thought: "I think these guys have something to teach all of us."

No teenagers are going to send us a written invitation asking us to talk and connect with them. Actually, their "smoke signals" often convey exactly the opposite. But on the inside they're longing for connection with someone a little wiser than they are—someone who can point them in the right direction. That someone might be you. Start by saying hello, even if it takes "fake confidence" to do it. Relationships, like garden sheds, aren't built in a day.

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE TRACKS OF HER TEARS

During my two weeks back in Sophomore English, we read about, wrote essays on, and acted out portions of *The Miracle Worker* (the story of Helen Keller). It was a great time. I had so much fun that if I had to pick a favorite class, I'd pick this one (even though my English grades almost kept me from graduating the first time around).

Mrs. Patrick's English class welcomed me more than any other. From day one they were interested in my little project. They asked me questions, offered their insights, and accepted my intrusion into their lives. On the first day, after I'd described my project to them, they spontaneously applauded. I think they were clapping because someone was genuinely interested in their side of the story. They were floored that an adult was willing to step into their world, even for a short time, to listen and experience their pains, joys, sorrows, laughter, pressures, and tensions.

Sound familiar? Well, I'm not really comparing myself to Jesus, but it's the same concept—Jesus left a rich life with his father and the Holy Spirit to fully enter into the real world of his children. On my last day in English class, my classmates presented me with several gifts (one included parenting advice for me when my kids reach adolescence!). After the presentation of gifts, an awkward silence settled in the room. It was as if everyone knew that something special had taken place, but didn't know what to do about it.

The girl who'd sat behind me began to tear up. Other students broke the tension by teasing her. But I learned something profound from those tears—it's so important to go where teenagers live, to enter their world(s) with purpose and humility. I was reminded how crucial it is to sit, listen, laugh, and just be with them. Programs, events, worship, PowerPoint games, and curriculum are all important, but they'll never replace presence in their world. When we're present we earn the credibility to one »»»

»»» day share the truth. When that opportunity is ripe, we can introduce them to the real Miracle Worker.

MY ACCIDENTAL EXPERTISE

You already know how timid I was about setting foot on school campuses—one thing my sophomore plunge did for me was cauterize my fears. I think my experience can help you get over the hump, too.

1 Go with permission. Get to know the administrators at the school you're planning to visit. Bring the office staff gourmet coffee and chocolates every now and then—"just because." When they know you're on their side they're much more willing to help you out.

2 Go without a motive. Don't show up at a school fixed on your own agenda. Resist the urge to pass out tracts, Jesus Frisbees, or fliers for your next big event. In every way possible show kids they're valued as people, not as participants in your next event or as notches on your "salvation belt."

3 Go with a "wingman" (or "wing-woman"). Don't go alone. Always take a small group leader, an adult leader, or even a youth pastor from another church. Believe me, they'll be just as scared as you are—but you can comfort and look out for each other. They also provide desperate companionship if you run out of young people you know.

4 Go with a plan. Make sure kids know when and where you'll be on campus. Ask them what lunch period they're assigned to and make sure they know you'll be there. If you're already looking for each

other you can head off that awkward foot-shifting dance that exposes your insecurities.

5 Go quickly. When you go on campus don't plan on staying long. Hang out just long enough to make your presence known, but don't linger. Leave yourself and your teenagers wanting more.

6 Go often. Every time you go it gets easier. Schedule it, grit your teeth, and don't let anything stop you from being right where you should be—in the real world where your kids live.

LET'S JUST FORGET THIS EVER HAPPENED

As great as my experience at school was, there are some things I wish I could erase from my hard drive. For example...

■ The time I forgot my homework—my wife (and 3-year-old son!) had to bring it to the school office for me.

■ On the first day of school I locked my combination inside my locker.

■ Once I had to borrow money from a freshman because vending machines don't take VISA.

■ I was ticketed with two tardies in English class.

■ I almost passed out in PE class after I choked and gasped my way to the end of the dreaded "10-minute run."

■ I plunked my first three serves squarely into the net during the PE volleyball unit.

■ I was asked to take a drug test so I could get my student parking sticker. ■

scott is a 10-year youth ministry veteran in Indiana. He drew national media attention for his Two Weeks Back experience, including an appearance on CNN Headline News and NBC's Today Show. Scott and his wife, Deanna, have been married eight years and enjoy corralling their 3-year old son, Aaron, and newborn son, Isaac.

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