



“Courage was about recognizing what the next step was and even in the face of obstacles and consequences taking the step I felt to be right.”

Doug Ward reflecting on what courage meant to him as he was taking a stand for his students.

“I didn’t want a job. I wanted a joy.”

Doug Ward describing the process of leaving the safety of the career he had known to set out and find the work that inspired him.

“My daughter has been talking about what you did. She told us that she wants to be a teacher like you now.”

Encouraging words from the mother of one of Doug Ward’s former students. The change in this young girl reminded Doug why he had taken his stand.

An installment in the ongoing Giant Leap Consulting series *Profiles in Courage*. These profiles seek to highlight the courageous stories of the people around us, whether they are in the community or the workplace. We strive to shine light on the stories that surround us but are often not told.

Doug Ward: Advocate for Special Needs Students

The Courage of Conviction

Doug Ward was not having a good day. He was not in a classroom teaching kids with special needs or teaching mainstream kids about their special classmates as he normally would have been at this time of day. Instead, he was at a local restaurant having an early meal by himself and doubting that he would ever come out from under this cloud.

Then he heard two friendly voices. One of his former mainstream students and her mother came over to talk. The kind words lifted his mood, but it was what the mother said to him after her daughter walked away that helped to break that cloud apart. She told him that because of his example, her daughter wanted to be a teacher.

Doug stumbled into his passion. “I didn’t want a job. I wanted a joy,” is how he describes it now. He found a teaching position at a residential program for autistic children and teenagers. One of the first things he learned about the residents is that they were, in Doug’s words, “beautiful nonconformists.” Inspired by these young people, Doug returned to college to earn both a bachelors and masters degree in special education. In the Fall of 2005, Doug became the lead teacher in a classroom for severely to profoundly disabled students.

Working with a teacher of a mainstream classroom, he was able to implement an inclusive education model. Special needs students were engaged in mainstream classrooms and mainstream students adopted the role of peer teacher. Their approach was successful, and students began to build new friendships.

While Doug worked to achieve small goals with his severely disabled students, North Carolina was revamping their standardized tests as part of the No Child Left Behind Act. In order to continue receiving federal funding, North Carolina would be required to administer tests to special needs children that were designed for fully functioning healthy children. To Doug, testing special needs children against criteria that were written for “normal” children was an effort in futility, not to mention unfair. The reality was, such a system set them up for failure.

As he wrestled with the idea of administering this test to his students, he began a series on the civil rights movement in his inclusive classroom. The mainstream 5th graders immediately made the connection to issues of disability rights. During classroom discussion, Doug recalled that one student said a Rosa Parks for people with disabilities was needed to bring awareness to their challenges.

Through this experience, Doug remembered that teaching was not

only about what you say and the facts you share. Teaching was also about what you do and the example you set. He knew the test was invalid for his students. He felt that administering it would compromise his ethics. Doug made a choice. He decided he would not give his students the test.

He sent a letter to the school administrators outlining his concerns and decision. Doug knew that a likely consequence was that he would be fired for not fulfilling his contract, but he felt that his termination would bring additional attention to the issue and would be worth it.

When he was called into the principals office, he knew what was coming. The administrators present asked him to administer the test. Doug refused and was suspended. His story hit the local media and the letters and emails of support poured in from around the country.

Doug struggled to find a new job and months later he was still unemployed and doubting if he had made the right decision. Media coverage died out quickly and no one seemed interested in running follow-up pieces on the state testing results of special needs students. Testing regulations were not changing. On top of all that, he feared that he was being black balled in the school systems and would never find another job. It was a bad day.

Then out of no where, his former student and her mother came over to say hello. They were having conversations as a family about disability issues due to his decision. My daughter wants to be a teacher now, the Mother said. Change was happening. It just was not the kind of change Doug was expecting.

Doug did find a charter school that embraced his ideas and encouraged him to do what was best for his students. He found a place that recognized teaching is not about one size fits all, but rather is about learning from your students and finding the ways that best engage them.

In Doug’s perspective, “Courage was about recognizing what the next step was and even in the face of obstacles and consequences taking the step I felt to be right.” He had to find the courage to do what was next because that next step was intimidating.

Many months after taking his stand, Doug Ward is happy again. Enthusiastic about teaching and excited about having the support of his current school. None the less, remembering the openness of that little girl causes the words to catch in his throat. Doug made a bold decision that effected his life greatly, and he would not undo it for a moment.