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23 YEARS OF TOUCHING HEARTS AND MINDS NAJLA HAMATI OF COLLÈGE LOUISE WEGMANN



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Smart phones are a very bad influence. One's relationship with language changes. It causes a total disinterest in reading, weakens one's vocabulary and compresses sentences.

Holding children by the hand
Collège Louise Wegmann teacher Najla Nasser Hamati is Lebanon's answer to Robin Williams' much celebrated character in *Dead Poets Society*: inspiring, unconventional, and lovable. She approaches teaching with love and her students with the type of respect that leaves an indelible mark for life.

Hamati has been expanding the hearts and minds of children for the past 23 years. While she speaks, hope, perseverance, and ambition naturally weave into the conversation: “*Je vous tends la main, prenez la*” [I extend my hand, take it], “*Exploitez votre intelligence*,” [Take advantage of your intelligence] and “*Mettez tout votre cœur là-dedans*” [Put your whole heart into it]. Her motivational quotes serve as a lighthouse for her nine-year-old pupils in need of guidance.

In her quiet way, Hamati rattles the status quo that students should be grade-oriented. Instead, she values the children's characters over the grades that often motivate them to perform. “I've had many good students who were strictly working to hit a high grade,” says

Hamati. “Whenever parents talk to me, I make sure to stress on the importance of personality.”

The elixir of youth

For someone who has been teaching for so long, the seasoned teacher retains the enthusiasm of a first-timer on the job. “I am dynamic and do not age. My students keep me youthful,” says Hamati with a kind of infectious optimism that fills the room. “My students are quite young. They still have an innocence that I love. Learning with them is far from a one-way street; we learn so much from each other and we do it with joy.” This reciprocal learning process has taught Hamati humility. “I will apologize to them if I wronged them,” says the teacher. “One of my former students graduated from engineering at the American University of Beirut and apparently thought of me on that special day. This is the greatest reward for a teacher.”

Another pillar that she stands by in her ethos is clarity. Some educators, whether intentionally or otherwise, adopt a patronizing attitude toward their students that can foster alienation in the

classroom. “If I say or do something, I explain the reason behind my actions or words,” says Hamati. In that way, students come to understand the motivations and underlying logic behind her actions. “When I say something, they believe me. They know that I'm telling them the truth,” she says as a means to explain her what-you-see-is-what-you-get philosophy *vis a vis* teaching.

Searching for one's place

Prior to discovering her vocation as a pedagogue, she had a stint in public relations. “After two years, I asked myself, ‘Is this really what I want to do?’” says Hamati before shifting career paths. With its lax working hours and long summer holidays, teaching has a reputation for being an easy job — an assumption that she could not disagree with more. “Sure, there are teachers who are not conscientious but that exists in any other profession. For those that take their jobs seriously, it is a demanding job,” says Hamati. She sometimes stays up until 1 a.m., leaving diligent and colorful annotations in the sidelines of her students' assignments. “Some people say that this amount of dedication is

ridiculous,” says the pedagogue. “When I first started in 1995, people always said that I cannot maintain this pace, that I'll change at some point. But I haven't. Ever since, I have kept on doing what I do with the same passion and energy.” Her attitude toward teaching can be summed up by her favorite quote by Gibran Khalil Gibran: “And what is it to work with love? It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth.”

Tough love

Disciplining students can be challenging; this is especially true when handling a classroom full of children. Hamati has two rules: Never humiliate them and only interfere if they are negatively affecting another student or the group. “As a teacher, sometimes you have to play the evil part. Even though I may seem bad, I am doing it for them. You need to frustrate students to push them to find the answers,” she muses. “Belonging to a community, behaving in a way that benefits the greater good and living according to sound principles — these are the things that I want my students to learn. As a teacher, you must

have the desire to forge the path forward with your students.”

The youth of today become fluent in using smart phones before learning to read. “These devices are a very bad influence. One's relationship with language changes. It causes a total disinterest in reading, weakens one's vocabulary, and compresses sentences,” says Hamati. “Children no longer interact with their surroundings nor use their imagination as much. Unable to free their spirit, children become like automatons.” She makes the following observation about Lebanese children: “They can be spoiled since their parents seem to pamper them perhaps more than Western cultures.” Hamati says the solution is “*Il faut les responsabiliser*” [They need to be made aware of their responsibilities].

Family life

Born in Beirut, Hamati studied at Collège Louise Wegmann then Collège Notre Dame de Nazareth. “Arabic is a very beautiful language but I never bought Arabic books for myself or my children,” she says. “French is my language. It is a refined language —

one that resonates with me.” While the teacher has to be reminded that her students are not, in fact, her children, Hamati actually has two teenage boys.

She describes her younger son, Antoine, as inventive, the type that never gets bored. “I have always taught them to be humane and inculcated in them an awareness of others,” says Hamati.

Seventeen-year-old Ibrahim activates both hemispheres of his brain with his literary and scientific talents. “He wants to go into medicine. I told him that he could go into literature, if he wanted to.” Choosing a literary or artistic track should not be regarded as the road to nowhere. The youth of today need to be taught such revolutionary ideas for a more colorful, compassionate, and inclusive tomorrow. As Khalil Gebran says, “The teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind.”



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