

**Tuesday, March 1, 2011, Edes Gilbert, "Reflections: Past, Present and Future."**

MS. FORD: Good afternoon, everyone. Yesterday one of the highlights of our program was acknowledging the outstanding achievements of Edes Gilbert, and she's going to expand a little bit on that with some tales from the many, many roles that she has held in many, many places.

Yesterday I said that the theme of this program is "Take another look, but look both ways." Edes has clearly done that, as well as going full circle. But in thinking about that theme, I was reminded of something that Robert Frost said, which is I think a wonderful phrase that I have used with students when they're struggling with hearing things that they don't agree with and with one another and how they might resolve that, and the way they do that is by listening. And it reminded me that Robert Frost said that education means being able to listen to almost anything without losing either your confidence or your temper. And clearly, someone who has achieved everything that Edes has, has developed that incredible skill of listening which would have impressed Frost. And I think if he thought about it, he probably would have said, "Take another look but look both ways," so we will hear more now from Edes Gilbert.

MS. GILBERT: I hope all those skills of endurance will not be something you have to call on for the next few minutes. I have to say that I have changed my thoughts several times over the last couple of days. But what I have come out with -- and then I'm going to get into my story -- is that I think we have been privileged to hear the most extraordinary group of teachers. When you think about it, we have had the teacher-scholar, we have had the teacher-demonstrator, we have had the teacher-artist, we have had the mentor. It's an extraordinary array of truly wonderful teachers, and I am a firm believer that as an ancient and honorable and retired head and long-time member of NAPSOG, what unites us all is that basically it's about teaching. It's about the kids. It's about the learning we do together so we can be more effective with our kids.

My background is that for the last seven years I have been involved with Teach for America in New York City, and I sit on the New York Advisory Board and I have had the great privilege of sponsoring some teachers and I have become really interested in the whole subject of educational reform. Our speaker on China certainly made us all think about ways in which we need to be doing something -- we're just not sure exactly what it is -- to prepare our young people for whatever comes ahead. So in that spirit, I want you to go on a trip of a bit of imagination, although what I'm about to describe to you is real.

Last May, I went up to 147th Street and Third Avenue. I went to a school which was closed by the City because of its poor performance, and then it was reopened and made into two schools. One is a charter school and on the second floor a regular mainstream public school. I was going to visit a fifth-grade class, and my particular interest was in seeing my very own teacher, Amy, who had graduated from University of Oregon and was in her second year as a Teach for America teacher. She happens to be fluent in Spanish. She was in charge of 18 fifth-graders ranging in age from 10 to 14. Their reading level was grade 1 to grade 4. She was one person, no assistants, and the schedule was so arranged in that school that each teacher had these children for two and a half hours. Two and a half hours of language arts in the morning, and then two and a half hours of math and science, and then in between, there was some art and some physical education.

Now, this classroom was large by any standard, with big, tall windows, so there was light and there was sunlight. The room was clean; I wouldn't say it was immaculate. It was orderly; it was not tidy. And in one corner, there was a piece of old carpeting and a whole bunch of books, I would say reading level of probably kindergarten up until about seventh grade. And in another corner of the room there were six computers which had all been programmed by the Department of Education.

In the front of the room was a big round table, a reading table, stacked high with books and papers. In the middle of the room were three smaller tables that seated six to eight students. There were a couple of hooks where people hung their jackets.

It was 8:00 in the morning and I'm standing there wondering how this all works. How do you manage this range of students? We all hear our faculties complaining about range of students on a fairly regular basis, and I thought, This is going to be something, because here's a very young teacher. Amy was 22 at the time.

So the kids came in, and the first one to come into the room was Juan. I have to tell you, Juan is the most adorable ten-year old boy with a cheery, big face, and he was carrying books. Right behind him was the one I called Cool Dude, because he was the 14-year-old. He was shaving, clearly; his voice had changed. He was wearing his baseball cap backwards. He was a stereotype of a kid on 147th Street and Third Avenue. Amy greeted them all. There were a couple more boys than girls, but the class was pretty well balanced. A couple of the girls came in looking as if they were about 15, and then there were a couple of girls who looked as if they were about six. It was the most polyglot group of children. Anyway, they are clearly cheerful, the teacher's cheerful, everybody's cheerful.

So they arranged themselves. At no time, by the way, does the room become quiet. Forget about quiet. Up in the front of the room, there's a list of vocabulary words, there's a white board, and there's a big, big sign, literally that big, with two words on it. "No excuses." That is one of Amy's mantras, if you will, and I learned later this is true of most of our Teach for America teachers, and probably other teachers involved in educational reform in the city, as well, because for years I have to say we have been making excuses for these children, really consigning them to a second-class-citizen status that no child deserves. And of course, underpinning all this is a profound belief that poverty does not have to be destiny. And if you start with that, then, well, anything becomes possible.

So I'm off in the corner watching what happens next.

What happens next is, her two and a half hours is arranged around one question, and she had told me in advance that this is the way she organizes. It's a thematic approach. The question they're addressing today is one they have been working on for two weeks. If any of your fifth-graders or twelfth-graders or even any of you can answer this question, I will be very impressed. This was the question, and this is a quote. What aspects of the Mayan, Incan, and Aztec cultures were different from or similar to the Minoans?

I was stunned, but then I'm thinking, This is brilliant. Because within that question there are all these different subjects: Child-rearing, kitchen utensils, art, weapons. You may believe the cool dude was doing an amazing thing on weapons. There was reading. There was writing.

So Amy reiterates the question, and off they go, six to the computer, six to the writing tables, and six for guided reading. And I, of course, drift around and they don't pay any attention to me. They have lots of visitors.

Each of the computer people is doing the research, and they each have to pick one aspect and they have to commit to it, and that's all they can do for that day. So they each have written down or given to Amy what they're going to do.

At the end of 35 minutes, the ones that were on the computer go to writing, the ones that were writing go to reading, and so forth. Somewhere in the middle of the morning they have a break and they all go off to the bathroom or whatever, and come back and they have a cookie, which she provides, and they finish up.

At the end of the two and a half hours, they get a lot of affirmation from her, what a good job they have done, she's looking forward to reading their papers. She has met with each of the children individually on their writing. The essays range from some that look unacceptable to some that are really quite brilliant. And as a sort of a way to finish the class, she does a five-minute video that she took herself on a hike that she took up to Machu Picchu the previous summer.

Now, there was a lot going on there. And I'm not suggesting that all of us should be hiking up Machu Picchu.

However, when the principal and I talked a little later, the principal said to me, "Well, you know, schools are not about giving information anymore. That isn't where it is. And any teacher we have who's giving information as his or her primary job, I really have to have a long talk with them. It's all about managing information."

Well, it's a simple statement, but you know, as I went back into the classroom, there were a couple of things that I noted besides the obvious. The first is that those children were learning critical thinking. And they were learning it through the study of cultures with which they could identify. Most of the class was actually Dominican. There were a couple of Haitian children. But they were all children of color.

And then they had to learn who in the world were the Minoans and why do the Minoans matter? So the computer piece of their work was doing all this research and, of course, as they're doing the research, they're reading and they're asking each other for help.

The essay assignment is what you and I would call probably compare and contrast, but variations on that theme.

It was a stunning morning. I can tell you that every child was engaged with the exception, not surprisingly, of Cool Dude, who, once the computer part was over, didn't feel quite so compelled to participate. However, it was interesting, because she didn't spend a lot of time talking about why you needed to participate or all that. She is, "So are you going to stay with the class today or not? We'd love to have you."

Well, he was forced to say yes or no, and "No" meant that he would have to get out and not come back, so he said "Yes" and the moment passed.

I was thinking today about this with the whole matter of China. I have done some very interesting work at Hunter School for Gifted Children in New York City which you may be aware of. It's a K-to-12 school, and my consulting there has been with the teachers. However, when you walk into that school on a February morning, the first thing you hear at 7:30 in the morning is the most beautiful music. This is a public school. You qualify for Hunter by test score only. That's it. There's no essay, there's no interview. All the children are above the 98.5 percentile. It's a cold February morning. You open the door and there's this most beautiful music. Many of these children have no instruments at home. 78 percent of the population -- at least last year; I don't know about this year -- was Asian. They all play instruments. And they have to practice at school, many of them -- not all, but many -- so the first thing you're struck with is this rather austere building, it's not very attractive, but there's this beautiful music.

And then when you go into the classrooms and you see the quality of the work going on, I imagine their fifth and sixth graders could answer questions about the Aztecs, the Incas, and the Mayans, and it's not because those children have anything more than -- obviously they're very capable, without question, but my goodness, do they work hard. It's unbelievable. And many people say it's pressure. That's another conversation.

These are both public schools. Two weeks ago I was at a Bronx charter school, visiting a primary school, and I'm looking at the kindergarteners who are doing their Friday morning presentation. They are all in navy blue sweaters, and they're doing something that involves birds. I wasn't quite sure what it was. But there was a lot of stuff going on. And what I was struck by there, I looked across the room, there were solid parents. The assembly was at 8:00, and all the working moms -- they're mainly moms, but not all; dads were there, too -- it's a charter school. It's 130-something and Third Avenue. Parents are all there. Parents volunteer to answer the phones. Parents pick up whatever slack they can. They want their children to have as good an education as they possibly can.

All three of these schools are public schools. And I have to say that the most innovative, interesting teaching -- and as many of you know, I consult with a number of independent schools. They're fine schools. But I also have to tell you that independent schools by nature are conservative, and whatever changes I have witnessed -- and there have been some -- I would have to say come in the category of tweaking. Shall we add Chinese and

Arabic or shall we not? Should we have another soccer team or should we not? Should we change the schedule or should we not?

It's not really addressing this whole matter of what is the most effective schedule for the children who are going into the 21st century. I would submit to you that the children in the Bronx who were studying these cultures and who had to hold their concentration for two and a half hours were learning something very important besides the material. Concentration is something we all worry about, and not without reason. We're all adults, we always seem to be in a hurry, our children, whether they are children of affluence or not, seem to all be really busy, and they're on all their things. The idea of sustaining interest in a subject for two and a half hours -- and I got to thinking, I don't think I know an independent school that has that at the fifth-grade level. There probably is one. I just don't happen to know it.

So as I'm thinking about educating children for the 21st century and I'm thinking about the wonderful teachers that we've heard here, I'm thinking, you know, the qualities of flexibility, the qualities of empathy which these children are learning as they work together and help each other with their papers -- certainly there is knowledge, but more important than actual knowledge is the management of knowledge, the skills of working with knowledge. All of those have to move up on our ladder of what constitutes achievement.

Now, as I stand here, I have been head of two prep schools. And you say, "That's fine, that's all just fine, but they have got to pass their tests. They've got to do well on tests. Otherwise, they're not going to get into whatever."

Well, the interesting piece of Teach for America, in addition to the approach to teaching, is this other piece called assessment. In all the classrooms I have been in, there is a laptop on a table somewhere any of the kids can go to anytime and see how they're doing. The mystique of grades has been removed. Some of these classes are assessed on a weekly basis. It depends. It's up to the teacher. But the teacher is assessed by the principal on the results of these weekly, or should I say regular, assessments. It's very tight.

Well, you say, what about creativity? And I understand all that. I'm simply saying that one of the reasons this is working is that the children see their own progress.

Now, in closing on this subject of teacher reform, I thought it would be worth noting, I brought a few numbers because there were a lot of questions. Well, we bring these young teachers in and train them, and then they're gone, and why are we doing all this, and they're only around for two years, some of them three?

Actually, it's interesting how this picture is changing, and it's not just the economy. This has been changing over the last six years. Right now, Teach for America is an organization with 8200 teachers in 39 regions, reaching over 450,000 underserved students just in this one year. I am so proud of these young people, and I'm proud of the school principals, and I'm proud of the superintendents who hire them. Last year 46,000 people applied for 4,500 jobs. The year before it was 40,000. The year before that it was 37,000. These young people are applying for jobs in the poorest rural and urban schools in our nation, and only the top students from 120 or so colleges and universities get in, and the selection process, they report to me, is as rigorous as getting into any university or college. Think what this is doing for the status of our profession. How often have we heard it's only the lowest third of the graduate school classes that go into teaching? Well, this is changing, and it's changing from the bottom up.

A couple of stats: Twelve percent of all seniors in Ivy League schools applied to Teach for America. They did not all get in. Seven percent of the graduating class in the University of Michigan applied. Six percent of the University of California Berkeley. Remember, now, all these young people are going to be paid whatever the rate of beginning teachers in their particular state or city is. They will work the usual 12-hour days, which are true of most young teachers starting out. I can't speak for all states, but in New York state, our deal with the teacher union is that they get waivers to teach because they will all be going to school at night to get their

master's degree. That's part of their contract with the City. So off they go in the evenings, after facing classroom management issues that are daunting, even after the intensive training they receive for eight weeks during the summer.

Just as another observation, I was interested, when I was preparing this, that one-third of the incoming corps of teachers this year are people of color and that's up. We're doing better and better at recruiting in that area. A number are coming from Spelman and Morehouse.

Now, many people have expressed some concerns about these young people. They're terrific, they're wonderful but they don't stay. Wrong. The answer is, as of this year, 67 percent of the alumni from Teach for America are working in education full-time. That's pretty good by any measure. Those that are not tell us -- this is now anecdotal -- that their lives as citizens have been forever affected by their experiences as teachers in these classrooms. The children in the classrooms in which they have taught, of course, whether they stay in the field or leave, will always remember these smart, committed, energetic young people. This is our Peace Corps, and it's working.

So what are my take-aways from all this? First, and most important, expectations matter. Teachers having expectations matters. And believe in the children's ability to work hard and acknowledge that for many of these children in these populations, they are going to have to work harder. And you know what? Maybe it isn't fair, but it's how it is. Speaking as a woman, I get it. We women, particularly my generation, have always felt we had to work harder to get just as far as the men with whom we were competing.

Assessment matters. And I see that. For a child to be able to go and look at his or her own grade and see that they have gone up from 86 to 87 in a week, it's sort of like losing weight. It's just so great. You get on the scale and you have lost two pounds. You're inspired to go on for the next.

A study done by the University of North Carolina which was released in 2009 found that students taught by Teach for America teachers do better for the most part and as well at least as students taught by traditionally prepared University of North Carolina teachers. Interestingly enough, in middle school -- this is defined as grades 5 to 8 -- middle school math students receive the equivalent of an extra half-year of learning in math. The Mathematics Policy Research Study found that the students of TFA teachers make 10 percent more progress in a year in math than the average.

Our 2009 survey of principals who employ these teachers report that 94 percent of these principals say that these young, dynamic teachers have a positive impact on their schools.

Now, the other piece of this is about leadership. And leadership matters. Because of the 20,000 Teach for America alumni around the country, over 500 are serving in school leadership positions. And I tell you that in New York City, we have 47 school principals that have come through the teaching and the leadership training. It's making a difference. Is it slow? Oh, my God. It's glacial. Does it matter? Yes, it does. Are Teach for America or AmeriCorps or New Teacher Fellows perfect? No. Does every young person succeed? Of course not. But most of them do. I'm more interested in the ones that do than in the ones that don't.

It's interesting to me, too, that we know of over 40 of our alumni who are serving in elected office around the country. Now, that's big. Because people in elected office get to make decisions about where money is spent. And I think that's terrific.

So I guess what I would say in conclusion, and certainly after this marvelous program that we've had over the last couple of days, is that we are all in the same vocation, the vocation of teaching, and whether you happen to be in a mainstream public school, whether you're in a charter school, whether you're in an independent school, whether you're in a parochial school, it's all about the young people and the children. The differences are not in the capacity and potential of our students. It's in the way in which we as adults are organizing ourselves to

teach these young people and to prepare them for the coming years.

So I would just like to say that I think we're all blessed to be in this profession, but, but -- and this is a big but -- I think we have to pay attention. I think we need to listen about China, not out of fear, but out of the fact that this is the world our young people are going into, and if we want to be helpful to them and not be becoming irrelevant very quickly, we've got to get ourselves up to speed.

Is it about curriculum? Maybe. Is it about scheduling? Maybe. It's not about any one thing. There's no magic bullet. But I do know that the educational reform movement is alive and well, it's working, and actually, I think you may find it's going to provide even some competition for some independent schools.

So please remember that poverty is not destiny, and insularity of our country need not be the way we live for the rest of our lives. And most of all, you know what? I salute teachers. Actually, I salute all of you and all of us.

It's been a wonderful meeting. Thank you, Bruce. Thank you, Burch. And thank you.

MS. GIBBS: I have a question. I saw Wendy come on "Charlie Rose" recently and she was described as the CEO of Teach For All. Do you remember about Teach For All, the global version of it?

MS. GILBERT: Yes, Teach for America is now just taking the first steps in expanding its model to other countries. And so she is calling it that. She's amazing. She was a senior at Princeton, and she came to see me, actually, in 1989, said, "I have got this idea and somebody said I should talk to you," I thought, Great idea. Impossible. Here I am, a middle-aged woman, saying, "No, I don't know." And she's president now of the world, practically. So what do I know?

MS. CHANDLER: Could you tell us a little about how Teach for America prepares these young people to enter the classroom?

MS. GILBERT: They have had some bumps along the way. They have started out by preparing them in a national kind of summer institute thing, not unlike an NAIS institute. However, what they found pretty quickly was that the young people were not equipped to deal with their different regions. So now there's regional training for the northeast, southeast, southwest area, and those young people that work on our Indian reservations have very different issues that they're dealing with. So we're trying to have pockets of training. They have a combination of classroom theory, but they are thrown right into summer schools with teachers who are being paid extra to be their mentors. And when you hear about -- and certainly as a board member I hear about it a lot -- all the fund-raising for Teach for America, the money we raise is for the training and for the support. Once the teachers are hired by their system, the public school system, they go right into the raise and the salary scale.

But it is a combination of theory and practice, and it's extremely intense. I mean, they are really washed out by the end of the afternoon, because after school, they meet every day to debrief. How did the lessons go? How could you have done better? So on and so forth. It's very intense. Is it as good as three or four years? Probably not. Although I took those three or four years and I have to say, I didn't learn a whole lot in many of those classrooms. But I do think teacher training has improved. I would not recommend this as a way for teaching all teachers. But I believe we have a crisis in this nation. I think this is a very honest, transparent way, understanding the flaws, to deal with that crisis, and we'll get better at it.

MS. FORD: Another question. Does Teach for America oversee these teachers at all while they're in the process of teaching?

MS. GILBERT: Yes, and that was another thing that they had to get better at. In each region there are supervisors, and each person has been a teacher and they are responsible for anywhere from 20 to 30 young

people for the year and all they do is just go around.

MS. FORD: So they were mentoring.

MS. GILBERT: They do have mentoring. Sometimes it isn't enough. Particularly, I'd say, at the high school levels, it's tough.

MR. GALBRAITH: And are all the teachers in Teach for America young, and this is their first teaching assignment?

MS. GILBERT: Yes, they're right out of college. By definition, they are recruited during their senior year, so the big recruiting goes all over the country. Yes, they are young. If they got much older, they probably wouldn't.

MR. GALBRAITH: There's somebody out there quoting that it's harder to get into Teach for America than Harvard Law School. I heard that quote.

MS. GILBERT: About 4,000 jobs and 45,000 applicants.

MR. GALBRAITH: Thank you.