



## Dr. Bill Cosby's Fireside Chats: Getting real in talking about urban education

The young eighth-grade literacy and social studies teacher in South Philadelphia had had a very bad day, and she was telling Trustee Bill Cosby, EdD, and more than 100 College of Education students, graduates and area teachers about it. One of her male students had punched her and shoved her into a desk when she tried to break up a fight during class. Perhaps even of more concern, she felt she was not reaching her students the way she had when she taught in an inner city school in Cincinnati. Disheartened, frustrated, she was searching for better strategies.

Thus went one of the seven candid and unvarnished Fireside Chats Cosby has hosted over the past two academic years. After comforting the young teacher with a hug, Cosby unraveled her story with his inimitable blend of probing questions, humor and tough love. After the fight the teacher, who often has her students write to her if something seems to be bothering them, told the boy she and he would both “write down together how we both could have handled the situation better.”

“No, no, no!” Cosby objects. “Why did *he* strike authority? And what did he say that made you frustrated and angry enough that you lost it?”

“He said it was an accident,” she responds.

Among the advice she receives: Don't physically intercede to try to break up fights among students. One member of the audience also suggests that she try to gain better control by pairing up her students with kindergartners to help with the latter's reading skills. “What if they don't know any better?” Cosby counters. “What if they have not been taught at home and they bring what I'll call their natural behaviors to that classroom? How do you put people like that in charge of little ones? It almost sounds fantasy-like.”

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Another audience member, a woman who recently retired after 38 years of teaching, asks if the teacher intends to discuss the fight with her students the next morning.

“Yes, we will reflect on it, set goals and talk about how they can meet them,” she says.

“You have to say not what *you* can do better but what can *they* do better to make the community in your classroom,” advises the retiree. “The meat of that discussion is that you want those kids to work because you know it’s in them.”

Following up, Cosby moves into a chair in the audience, and pointing around him, tells her, “This is your class. We want to know: ‘Why we gotta know this?’”

Most of her students, she says, want to be an actor or football or basketball player and she repeatedly tells them to achieve these goals they first must do well in school.

“That’s not an answer,” Cosby retorts. “Why are you *standing . . . up . . . there?* Because if you can’t tell me why you *love* what you’re teaching, it’s not going to come here,” he says, gesturing toward himself and her hypothetical class. “It’s the easiest out for any kid if you can’t answer, ‘Why I got to know this?’”

“Because if you want to achieve what you want to do, you’ve got to know this,” she says.

“That’s not an answer.”

“That’s what I give them.”

“Why?”

“Really, I don’t know,” she admits.

“Then,” Cosby says, “it’s not going to happen.”

“He’s very good at drawing out firsthand observations of what people have experienced,” says Michael Colón, a Class of 2009 secondary education math major in attendance that night. “It helps me prepare for and know what to expect when I begin teaching.”

Sometimes the evenings have a theme — student engagement and safety, creating success in the classroom,

relationship building, succeeding in alternative school environments—and sometimes the audience dictates the direction the discussions take.

Guest speakers also often accompany Cosby. November’s guest, Nikki Johnson-Huston, is an assistant city solicitor in the City of Philadelphia’s law department. After flunking out of St. Joseph’s University, the daughter of a West Coast drug addict who was homeless at the age of nine regained her scholarship, earned a business degree and then, in 2004, became one of the first students in the history of Temple University to receive JD/MBA/LLM in Taxation degrees in the same year.

Other guests have included Robert Gregory, principal of the American History High School in Newark, N.J.; Rose Ford, director of academics and partnerships with Project Forward Leap in Philadelphia; Sister Mary Scullion, founder of Project HOME in Philadelphia; Malvine Richards, headmistress of Sarah Pyle School in Wilmington, Del.; Deborah Kenny, PhD, CEO of Village Academics in Harlem, N.Y.; Philadelphia School District principals David Baugh of George Meade Elementary School and Lois Powell-Mondesire, principal of Strawberry Mansion High School; and Tricia Jones, PhD, who heads the College of Education’s pioneering CRETE (Conflict Resolution Education in Teacher Education) program, which focuses on pre-service teacher training.

The one constant is Cosby and his ability to make the discussion real and to create a communal environment in which all in attendance feel a shared mission to educate America’s children — regardless of the daily personal, socioeconomic and institutional challenges that must be overcome to achieve that goal.

“What’s interesting,” Cosby said at the beginning of the November chat, “is that when most of you decided you were going to teach you also felt you were going to save people. And then you meet people and they didn’t appear to want to be saved. As a matter of fact, they look at you as if you were some sort of evil thing,

“You’re in your twenties, you’ve had Psych 1, Psych 5, abnormal psychology, and after your first day you go home and cry because you let a 6-year-old kid put you in the toilet.

“Your parents say, ‘Why are you crying?’

“A little kid didn’t like me and I wanted to kill him,” Cosby blubbers.

“These chats are designed to hopefully give you alternatives other than becoming sad or flat-out angry with a student.”

Students are responding. “He’s not on a big stage, not Bill Cosby the comedian or Bill Cosby the actor, he’s Bill Cosby, a guy right in front of you,” says Heather Williams, BSEd ’08 (Elementary/Special Education), from Allentown. “He’s like an uncle who is very real and open and, unlike in a classroom where everyone might not feel free to speak their mind, it’s not so formal and people are more comfortable participating in an open forum.”

“Dr. Cosby encourages us to come up with our own pedagogical solutions to real world problems and promotes the fiery passion for teaching we all desire,” says Michel Andrews Pfannenstiel, an early education major. “These experiences benefit not just the graduating student but allow an open forum discussion that links pre-service and veteran teachers to have a conversation about what they love most: To teach by learning from each other and celebrating differences and overcoming challenges together.”

