

2 Teachers Live in Watts to Learn About Their Students

Neighborhoods: The white educators share a world of fear, acceptance and inspiration. They also find a home.

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A year ago, John Gust and Meghan McChesney didn't know what it was like to wake to the crackle of gunfire. Or live with the roar of a police helicopter overhead. Or walk streets that some people wouldn't drive, even with the doors locked and windows rolled up.

And a year ago, Gust and McChesney did not know how good it felt to be part of a neighborhood. To forge friendships with people who share nothing in common but a block. And to talk, really talk, about what is happening in the world around them. To be angry about some of it, proud of some of it and resigned to most of it.

Striking. Subtle. Heartbreaking. Inspiring.

The conflicting worlds, the bad and good, are now part of Gust and McChesney's lives by choice. A year ago, the two white schoolteachers left the breezy, upscale beach cities of Manhattan Beach and Hermosa Beach for a charming but weathered old house on 107th Street in Watts.

They moved to Watts to understand what life is like for their grade school students. And they live not more than a mile from the flash point of a riot 30 years ago that showed the nation, if it needed reminding, that not everyone feels that they have a stake in the American dream.

But this is not about two white folks come to save the inner city.

It is a story about two grade school instructors learning as much as they teach. Learning how tough school can be when you live in a place more vexing than any lesson. Learning that there is a difference between not having money and being poor. Accepting things that once seemed unacceptable.

It is a story of what Gust and McChesney have learned in Watts. And how it has made them better at what they do and aware of how much more must be done.

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The lessons come hard in the inner city.

For Gust, the moment of truth came soon after he moved to the Craftsman-style home on 107th Street and heard, through its leaded glass windows, the sound of gunfire and a scream.

The shooting took the life of a neighbor on her way to work--a payback, Gust was told, for the misdeeds of her drug dealer son.

For McChesney, the lesson of what it meant to live in Watts came more in a wave than in any single event.

"When I first moved here, I cried a lot," she recalled. "It's hard to see people living in such poverty and realize there is only so much you can do about it."

Gust arrived in Watts by way of Chicago. A 35-year-old former bodybuilder, he taught physical education in Chicago, his assignments including the tough Robert Taylor Homes.

He moved to Southern California seven years ago, joining the Los Angeles Unified School District.

McChesney's journey here was decided by others. After graduating two years ago from Washington University in St. Louis with a degree in architecture, the native of Pittsburgh enrolled in the Teach for America program, pledging to teach for two years.

"When you join, you have no idea where you will be placed," said McChesney, 23, who was sent to the Compton school district.

Gust settled in Manhattan Beach, McChesney in the neighboring city of Hermosa Beach.

But teaching in Watts, Gust felt that something was missing. Try as he might, he felt that he was not connecting as well as he should with the students. Maybe, he thought, it was because their world was so different from his own. Maybe, he reasoned, he could close that gap if he shared that world and moved to Watts.

"I {wanted} to find out who the kids were and what their experience was day to day," Gust recalled, "so I could bring home their lessons to them. So I could speak their language, {so} I could make it real for them."

He thought about moving for a while. He talked about it with his family and friends. He spoke with the parents of several students. One parent, Victor Cole, agreed to show Gust around the neighborhood, to introduce a new white face to a community that only sees them in uniforms or passing through.

The idea took hold. In February, Gust moved to the community, renting a three-bedroom home a short walk from his classroom at Compton Avenue Elementary. Like Gust, the home had been transported to Watts, moved from 55th Street and Vermont Avenue about 50 years ago.

The first week in his new home, Gust's home was burglarized. He lost a VCR and three coffee cans filled with coins.

Although angry, and later told that the burglar probably was a former neighbor, Gust never called police.

"So I was out \$180. It was my initiation into the neighborhood."

But it wasn't, really. That would come later. In stages.

Shortly after the burglary, Gust was reminded that even if he wanted to erase color lines, others would always see them.

Once, he was confronted at the Hacienda Village public housing development by a group of African American men. They had no beef with him, he said. But one complained out loud about how the group would be roused if any police came by at that moment, how cops would assume that a group of black men and one white man meant a group of predators and a victim.

Another time, a passerby saw him riding his bike down a sidewalk and quipped, "Man, you're pretty brave to be riding around here without your bulletproof vest." Gust responded: "Yeah, either that or pretty stupid." The man just laughed.

Those first few weeks, he said, were unsettling.

"I was scared to death walking down the street," he recalled. "I'd be walking and hoping that a kid could join me . . . that we could be talking,

that the kid would be sort of a protective shield. I didn't want to use the kid negatively. I just wanted to be recognized." As a teacher, he said. And as a neighbor.

Eventually, Gust's anxiety passed as he became more familiar with the neighborhood and it became more familiar with him. But his growing ease with the neighborhood, he said, was not shared by some family and friends.

"I lost some friends from moving. . . . I had to put up with my family and parents saying I was crazy and that they wouldn't visit me because I moved here."

But he stayed, he said, because the brusque, early encounters felt direct and honest. His new neighborhood might be tough, but the conversations were real.

"The people around here don't dance around issues. They come right at you, and I like that. It's healthy," Gust said.

"Here, I walk down the street and see my students and parents, and they say, 'Hey, Mr. Gust. Hey, Mr. Gust.' And we just stop and talk. And that is a lovely feeling."

Finally, Gust said, the anxiety of being a stranger in the neighborhood has diminished. "I don't feel afraid at all," Gust said.

But the danger is real where Gust lives, and at the start of the school year, he found that out in ways that have stayed with him.

It was about 4:30 a.m. and Gust was awake, busy at his computer. Then the silence was shattered. "I heard one shot, a scream, then I heard two more shots," Gust said.

To this day, Gust is struck as much by what he didn't do as what he did. He didn't bolt outside. He didn't stop typing. He didn't even call police. He just stayed in his home. He just worked until dawn.

Before that day, Gust remembered, he had heard stories from his students, or from their parents, about how you learn to accept such violence because you cannot stop it.

"I don't know if that was a good thing to do," Gust said, "but I don't think anyone does."

When he finally ventured outside the morning of the shooting, Gust got as close as he could to the murder scene. "There was a body lying on the curb and a couple of paramedics were leaning over it," he said. "I had never seen anything like that before in my life."

The dead woman's daughter wailed, Gust recalled. And a neighbor, the young woman's godfather, cried. The neighbor, Gust said, was a retired city worker whose children had grown up on 107th Street, the daughter now a principal, the son a police officer.

And as he started off to school, Gust saw something else that morning. "I saw a lot of my kids out there . . . my students."

At that moment, even if he thought he knew it before, Gust understood what it can be like to be a student at Compton Avenue.

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At Colin P. Kelly Elementary School in Compton, Principal Rosie Truewell has been around longer than Meghan McChesney has been alive. She has seen teachers come and go. So when she sings McChesney's praises, it means something.

And although proud of her other teachers, Truewell says: "I wish I had 10 Meghans. Twenty Meghans."

But when she came to Kelly, McChesney said, she realized that there was only so much she could do to connect with students whose lives, and past, were so different from hers.

Call it destiny, call it chance, McChesney saw an ad for a roommate in the Teach for America newsletter. It was put there by Gust, whom McChesney had met at a teachers' workshop and later helped with a workbook about multicultural education.

McChesney took the challenge and moved in last August.

Before moving in, McChesney brought her parents, visiting from Pittsburgh, to the house.

"When we pulled up . . . the cops had two guys spread-eagle on a cop car, patting them down. Right in front of the house," McChesney said.

Her parents' shock was unmistakable, McChesney said. "I was trying to break them into the area. But I didn't do a very good job," she said with a laugh.

McChesney got her own shock on the opening day of school, which also happened to be the day that the neighbor was slain.

"I remember being somewhat nervous about meeting my new students, and I realized when I went to school that the body was still there," she recalled. "I didn't mention it to my students. And then I realized that they have things like this happen to them and probably don't mention it either."

That has changed, she said.

Because she now lives in Watts, a community that shares almost everything but a name with nearby Compton, McChesney tells her students stories about what happens in her neighborhood; the children share stories about theirs. "I know the things they are telling me are the same things I am experiencing," she said.

Living where her students live, shopping where they shop, walking the same streets, all of it, McChesney said, has enabled her to understand the stories her students tell about why they did not do their homework or understand a lesson.

"If you talk to my students, the number of kids who have almost been killed, who have been hit by cars, who have had {serious} illnesses . . . " McChesney said, not needing to finish the sentence.

Before, McChesney said, she knew that her students came from families that were struggling. That some kids did not have beds to sleep in or could not see the blackboard because they didn't have glasses.

But now, she said, she looks beyond what she sees or hears in the classroom.

"Before, they were just students. They didn't have lives outside their lives as students," she said. "Now, when I am living here, I realize how much fuller their lives are."

The parents might be struggling, McChesney said, but they still scratch together money for gifts and a tree at Christmas or for clean clothes for their kids or to buy food their children can bring to school on holidays.

So even as she can be stunned by the pockets of poverty around her, McChesney has found the attitude of her students not only surprising but moving.

"They know they're not rich by any means, but I don't think they see themselves as poor," she said. "And for them to live in an area where people are being killed and the drugs and gangs {are so prevalent}, I think it's inspiring that they get up every morning and even make it to school, let alone learn."

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Nearing the end of her two-year teaching commitment, McChesney said, she has decided to stay on as a teacher in Compton at least another year. And like Gust, she said she intends to remain in Watts to be close to her students.

"I guess through all of this, they are teaching me as much as I am teaching them. If not more."

Gust agrees, both about his students and his new home.

"I have learned that people here are just like anyone else," Gust said. And just living there, Gust said, has changed him.

"These people consider me a neighbor and a friend," Gust said, "in addition to being a teacher."