Essay: One-time teacher sees lessons come to life in Texas border town

Maria Isabel Garcia (center) and Alexy Rios greeted reporter Lillian Mongeau before they graduated from Roma High School in Roma, Texas. Maria, who Mongeau says was loud and disruptive in class, said, "Miss, I apologize for how badly I treated you." Lara Solt/Staff Photographer

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ROMA, Texas — There are no streetlights on this roughly paved road, less than a mile from the Mexican border. It is dark and muggy as my friends and I walk toward our rented cars. We’re in Roma, Texas — a small town where we taught middle school from 2005 to 2007. We’re white and the town is 95 percent Latino, so when a brown SUV rolls up, we know the driver isn’t stopping to ask for directions.
“Are you teachers of America?” he calls out the window.

All of us tense up a bit. Being a Teach For America teacher in Roma can be a mixed bag. Though most of the people we met during our time here were genuinely welcoming, a significant minority resented our presence. And who can blame them? We come for two years. We profess undying loyalty to the kids we teach. We work hard. Then we leave. How is that loyalty?

Tonight, we former teachers of America have just come from the high school graduation of the Class of 2011 — a class we taught years ago in middle school. After the ceremony, we went to a graduation party featuring tender brisket and pitch-perfect sweet tea. None of us wants the evening to end badly.

“I have something for you,” the man says, parking his SUV.

He walks around to the back and lifts the hatch. He reaches in and pulls out … a cantaloupe.

He smiles. His child had an excellent “teacher of America” in nearby Rio Grande City, and the cantaloupes are just a little something to show his appreciation, he tells us. Suddenly we’re all laughing — simultaneously thrilled and incredulous — and accepting cantaloupes. We protest that we’ll never be able to eat them all, and he keeps handing them out.

It is then, juggling cantaloupes in the dark, that I know: I am back.

Roma, Texas

I first arrived in Roma in 2005. The previous winter, I had been accepted by Teach For America, the independent nonprofit that recruits and trains recent college graduates to teach in low-income school districts. I had no idea what I was in for. To make matters worse, I arrived with that most questionable of motives: to help.

The town of 10,000 curves along the Rio Grande for several miles of bumping reggaeton, mouthwatering tacos and dusty lemon trees. It is a hard place to describe to the outside world without having your explanations filtered and simplified to either “quaint village” or “lawless border town.” Roma is neither and both.
The town and its people are tightly bound to Mexico. I used to tell friends that the closest city to Roma was McAllen, Texas, but that’s not technically true. The closest car dealership, orthodontist, coffee shop — all these are in Miguel Alemán, the Mexican city you can see and walk to from downtown Roma.

Many of our students made that walk every day. Though the vast majority of them were American citizens, a large number lived in Mexico. In the mornings, they’d trek across the short bridge over the Rio Grande to a school bus stop on the U.S. side.

But things have changed. Violence along the border has increased dramatically since the beginning of the cartel wars in Mexico. Miguel Alemán has been ravaged by gunfights and arson attacks as two military-style drug cartels, Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel, battle for control. Kidnappings are common. Residents and businesses have fled. Doors are closed and locked by dusk.

Jocelyn Rodriguez, a former student of mine, thinks of Miguel Alemán as her hometown, but she can’t live there anymore.

“We had traditions here,” she said. “What they did, the cartels, they broke the traditions.”

In middle school, Jocelyn was a diligent student, more talented than she realized. Five years later, she’s the vice president of her class and has adopted the strident generosity that is the cultural norm here. When she takes a photographer and me to her sister’s home in Mexico the morning before graduation, she insists on presenting us with lovely handmade bracelets from her mother’s dress shop. We are the only customers.

Like any 18-year-old, Jocelyn is nervous about her next move — to Arizona, where she’ll begin her college coursework online. But straddling two countries and belonging to both, then watching one get torn apart by violence, has given her a maturity few teenagers share.

“You have to go on with life,” she says when asked about the bloodshed. “You can’t stop.”
‘I hated you’

My first year teaching was the hardest year of my life. As I drove to school through the misty Roma mornings, I often eyed the roads that headed north and imagined escaping on one.

When I tell people this, they assume it’s because life is hard in Roma. Or they cringe at the thought of dealing with a room full of 12- and 13-year-olds. Or they shake their heads in pity. “Kids like that,” they say, “with no resources. What can you expect?”

All of these responses make me want to scream.

It was hard for me to live in Roma, but that was because I was a square peg in a round hole, not because of anything Roma did. And, yes, 12- to 13-year-olds are certifiably insane. But they’re also brilliant, funny and able to grasp new ideas so quickly it takes your breath away.

And they don’t need your pity. They have so much going for them it makes your eyes hurt to see it all. They are bilingual. They are bi-worldly. They understand what it means to be an immigrant and what it means to grow up in a place steeped in tradition. They are creative beyond measure, intelligent beyond knowing and kind beyond reason. They play mariachi, are 19th in the state in tennis and have tight-knit, loving families.

My kids, and here’s the mama bear in me, will kick your kids’ asses.

I adored my students instantly. From Jaime Lopez, whose favorite trick was hiding under his desk during lessons (guess who slid down the banister after receiving his diploma?) to Daniela Rendon, who earned a perfect score from me on her first essay (guess who graduated sixth in her class?), my students rocked my world.

What made my first year of teaching so hard was the utter conviction that I was not worthy of the students. That I couldn’t give them what they needed and deserved: an excellent education.

Make no mistake: The needs in Roma are great. Most families live below the poverty line. Many have at least one family member involved in illicit activities. More than half of my students started seventh grade at least a year behind in reading.
And the town is so tight-knit as to sometimes be closed-minded. It is not easy to grow up gay in Roma. A girl who likes reading and sports more than high heels and nails will always feel a bit out of place. And leaving town, even for college, is not encouraged.

Samuel Escobar was one of those I always thought could benefit from exposure to the outside world. He was one of my most analytical thinkers, even in seventh grade. He was also incredibly and justifiably loyal to his hometown. When I saw him again at graduation, I asked him to send me his thoughts on what it was like to grow up with a rotating cast of Teach For America teachers.

“Honestly, when I first met you, I hated you and your class and everything you stood for,” Sammy said in his email to me.

This is exactly what I’d feared he might say.

Leaving

A common misconception was that Teach For America teachers paid for college by working in Roma. They didn’t.

Teach For America recruits and trains new teachers, but individual districts hire and pay those teachers standard starting salaries. They are also eligible for about $5,000 per year from Americorps that must be spent on education. I used mine to go to journalism school. In doing so, I joined the 40 to 60 percent who leave the field of education after completing their two-year commitment.

This is one of the biggest complaints about the program. We don’t stay. But Teach For America insists that’s not the point. In principle, I agree. My time in the classroom made me want to tell the story of public education in this country. Now, I’m an education reporter.

Still, Sammy’s words rang in my ears. What did I stand for if I couldn’t commit my life to kids like him?

When I stop beating up on myself long enough to look at the evidence, I know that I did help. More than 80 percent of my students passed the state’s standardized seventh-grade writing assessment in my first year, and more than 90 percent passed in my second year. These numbers
were at or above state averages. I also had more students score well on the essay portion of the test than other English teachers in Roma.

But the other teachers stayed, and just as I was beginning to understand what it took to be a teacher, I left.

When I came back for graduation, I worried that my personal failures would be all anyone remembered. I was sure I would find students who despised me for being a fake.

That's not what happened at all.

‘Real hope’

It’s graduation day, and I’m intensely nervous. I’m pushing open the door to the cafeteria where students are assembling in caps and gowns. Before I’m all the way through the door, I’m greeted with cries of “Miss Mongeau!”

Maria! Alexy! Cesar! I can’t believe how many kids I recognize. They come up to me with bright eyes and excited smiles and “thank yous” just for returning to celebrate with them.

At some point, I stop telling myself I don’t deserve it. Maybe I don’t, but isn’t it just as self-centered to be obsessed with your own failures as it is to be too sure of your own successes?

And I stop worrying that I have failed. Instead, I just feel incredibly lucky to have been allowed my one small part in these students’ lives. I have been shaped more by them than they by me. For that, I am in their debt.

The students haven’t forgotten that I walked away, but they aren’t mad at me, either. “It’s OK, Miss,” they tell me when I ask how it feels to have so many of their teachers come for two years and then go. “We’re used to it.”

What Teach For America teachers bring to Roma, students tell me, is the rest of the world. Even Sammy, bound now for the elite Berklee College of Music in Boston, says he came to see a positive side of the program by the end of high school.

“Teach For America teachers,” he wrote, “had real hope in their students in Roma.” In part, Sammy thinks, that’s because we didn’t know any better.
“The TFA teachers had a lot more faith in their students because they were unaware of their surroundings, unaware of the struggles that we would face because of of traditional values.”

This I had not considered. Maybe my biggest contribution was simply my inability to see their background or their community as a limitation.

Do teachers matter?

The hot wind does little to cool me as I sit in the Roma High School football stadium with my fellow teachers and watch the pomp and circumstance. The bass notes in the school choir’s rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” bring me close to tears. Those are my boys become men.

The valedictorian talks about the most important teachers she had. (A few were from Teach For America.) The vice president of the school board drones on about “the honor society of life” until nobody is even pretending to listen. Then the 367 members of the Roma High School Class of 2011 — the largest class in Roma history — are walking, one at a time, across the stage to receive their diplomas.

There’s Beatriz, with her wacky sense of humor. And now Bryan, whose detailed illustrations of cars I still have tucked away. Clarissa, who has a new last name and a pudgy 6-month-old baby. Cirio, with his bad-boy swagger and lightning-fast intellect.

Cirio. Six years ago, I worried he might leave school — not because he couldn’t keep up, but because he found it too dull. But there he is, collecting his diploma and grinning like crazy. I’m cheering like a maniac.

Eighty-eight of the 131 students I taught graduated this year. One will graduate next year. Several have moved out of town.

Of all of them, the one who surprised me the most was Jonathan Hernandez.

In seventh grade, Jonathan was quick to anger. He obsessed over small details and had nearly illegible handwriting. By eighth grade, he began acting out violently in class and was eventually kicked out of school. Honestly, I never thought he’d make it.
When he walks up to me — smiling, confident — and says, “Miss, do you remember me?” I’m so surprised, I don’t recognize him at first. But when he tells me his name, I remember everything.

In the fall, Jonathan will attend the local community college to train for a job in IT. I am immeasurably proud of him.

I take a deep breath and ask him a question that’s been bugging me all weekend.

“Didn’t you do most of this yourself?” I say. “Do teachers even matter?”

He looks me steadily in the eye — another new trait — and smiles again.

All at once, I can see the tall young man before me and the impish boy he had been flickering back and forth like one of those cheap hologram bookmarks.

“Yes, Miss,” Jonathan says. “They matter a lot.”