

THE HUFFINGTON POST

February 17, 2012

SAN FRANCISCO AROUND TOWN



**Christopher
Caen**

Writer

Friday Future

The irony of the situation does not escape me. My 11-year-old daughter told me last weekend about the cool kids at her school. Now mind you, this is a very nice public school, so I found it amusing to hear that the older boys have decided that being cool means hanging out at the gas station across the street, wearing their pants low, using slang they probably picked up from YouTube clips and watching Jackie Chan and Martin Lawrence movies. Yes indeed, they are truly being all "street" and "legit." Right up to the point where they stop playing boyz in the hood and head back to their nice homes.

That's not the irony though. The irony is I do actually know some kids from the hood. And they are nothing like that. My girlfriend Melissa and I volunteer at a school in the Tenderloin called [De Marillac Academy](#), and teaching there is one of the joys of my life. We lead a journalism class filled with the most magical kids you have ever met, kids who lead a life that most of us cannot imagine in our town.

I think what hardened our resolve to do something for these kids occurred before we even walked in the front door. As we walked up the street to the school we started counting the street denizens around us. Including two gentlemen passed out against the walls of De Marillac. Even for someone who has walked through this city his whole life, it was a little disconcerting. Imagine it as a 12-year-old.

Countering this was the stream of scarlet-clad middle school students, navigating through this as blithely as if they were walking through the Quad at Stanford. Students who almost all live in the immediate neighborhood, some even making the walk alone. Melissa and I looked at each other with the same thought: they do this every day. Twice. We were hooked before we even met the kids.

Then we got to meet our class. Sixth and seventh graders who are more mature than many high schoolers I know. And when you look in their eyes you see a determination that is heart-warming and heart-breaking at the same time. Every single one of them knows that the school is their ticket to a different world, and they are taking advantage of it every day. In our second day we handed out reporter's notebooks to the group to make them feel more like journalists. Each week, every single one of them remembers to bring it to class.

Mind you, our class is an after hours class. Our kids don't have to take our course, and had to volunteer for it. One student told us the reason he was taking the course was because he wanted to learn to be a better writer because he thought it would help him with his other classes. Some may be waiting until one or both parents get back from work. Or maybe they just want to stay inside those walls a little longer before they have to make the trek once more, put on their hard face, avoid eye contact, and make it home in time to do their homework.

In Europe there is the idea of a parish, where the local church, the local school, and the local neighborhood are all intertwined. As much as we talk about economic tax breaks, the disappearance of redevelopment funds, historical districts, and other "drivers" of our economy, the reality is the heart of this city, the lifeblood of our future, are these kids. Schools like De Marillac anchor a neighborhood in a way that no legislation ever will. And when those schools and their kids reach out into the neighborhoods, magical things happen.

Another example of this is [French American International School](#) in Hayes Valley. Again, a very unlikely school in a very unlikely place, nestled between the Civic Center and the Western Addition. Like De Marillac, this is a school that insists on being a part of the neighborhood instead of taking the attitude that they are there to insulate the kids. They work with the Spectrum Center, where the students become "Best Buddies" for the autistic children there.

They reach out to other schools in the neighborhood like John Muir Elementary for afterschool programs. This year some of the students even decided on their own to start teaching art classes for the kids at John Muir, where almost all the children are from disadvantaged families. And since they quickly discovered there was (of course) no budget for art supplies, they are now writing a grant proposal to get funding for supplies for next year.

We constantly hear about how our school system is broken, but when we see those determined faces at De Marillac, when those kids from French American International troop over to John Muir, I don't believe it. When our leaders seem to abandon the next generation so they can squabble over today, we need to look within ourselves and find a way to rally to this cause. And I don't mean to hold myself up as some shining light, because I am not the only one. You only need to look to local groups like sfBIG to know that others see this too.

sfBIG is one of the largest organizations in town for the advertising industry. Given the tech-heavy nature of their clientele, they came at this from a different angle. This statistic shocked even me: the San Francisco Unified School District manages over 60,000 computers on their network. That is more than most corporations, and in classic fashion, most of those computers are tragically out of date.

So sfBIG joined up with Computers for Classrooms to tackle this problem head on. They are taking recycled computers that have been certified by the EPA, and then are refurbishing them to the specifications for SFUSD. They kicked off their effort last week, which you can find and donate to on the [sfBIG website](#).

There is a role for government to play in addressing our social ills, but so much important work is being done by volunteers within organizations and schools. Hopefully, someday kids who look like they are from the "mean streets" will all be pretending.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-caen/friday-future_b_1285291.html