

# HARD WORK IN THE BIG EASY

BY EVE ABRAMS '93

**“K**iss your brain,” Katharine Needham ’05 tells Brian, who has just recalled the “fancy word” for people in a story. Needham turns and writes “character” on the dry erase board behind her, and meanwhile, a rug full of second graders squirm and chat and pay attention in varying degrees. Brian, like all his classmates, wears a green polo shirt emblazoned with the Wilson Charter School name. Printed on the back of some shirts is a single word: “Wisdom” or “Hope.”

Needham’s eyes quickly return to the portion of the class sitting before her, who, unlike those still scattered at desks around the room, have completed an earlier writing assignment. “What else do we always have in a story?” she asks, and then abruptly follows with another question: “Who am I talking over?” Hands raise, names are called, and Needham tells the two offenders to “go move your color.”

Needham’s New Orleans classroom is active, vigorous, messy, and organized. At all times, 23 second graders have substantive work to do and rules to follow, yet they are largely unchained to desks and are expected to operate with some degree of independence. Needham keeps the pace of the school day bulleting forward, and she does not wait for stragglers. Not working is not an option.

Needham exudes school. In her professional, comfortable skirt and blouse, her commanding tone and her constant stream of praise and reprimands, she lays a nonstop succession of work before her students, like breadcrumbs leading to the accomplished futures she consistently verbalizes for them. Committed, articulate, and hard-working, she personifies the ideal of Teach For America, the organization that brought her to New Orleans and after five weeks of intensive training, plunked her down at Wilson Charter School.

Following her graduation from Wesleyan, Needham moved to London and worked as a lacrosse coach in a boarding school. A year later she was in New York City, working on recruitment for Teach For America, where she thought a lot about being in the classroom. “Working there, it hit me that I want to do this,” she says, and New Orleans, with all its problems eviscerated for the world to see, became integral to her vision. “If I’m going to do

this,” she reasoned, “I’m going to the place where I’m needed the most.”

It was a huge leap of faith. Needham didn’t know anyone in New Orleans. She had to buy a car, make friends, find a place to live, and learn how to teach. But one of TFA’s catch phrases kept reverberating in her ears: *This is our generation’s civil rights movement.* “The more I read, the more I felt that I wanted to go help rebuild that city. I want to tell my grandchildren that after Katrina I didn’t just stay in the North. I did my best to help contribute.”

I visited Needham’s classroom several times over the course of the 2008–2009 school year—her second year at Wilson, and her second year of teaching, period. I often found her at the front of the room, perched in a swivel office chair on rollers. From the chair, Needham easily turned to write notes or instructions on the dry erase board behind her, but just as often, she used the board to keep a visible record of behavior systems, such as scoring the class’s table groups, named for both local and personal notions of academic success: Loyola, Southern, Louisiana State University, University of New Orleans, Wesleyan, and Tulane. The scores reflected each group’s adherence to a set of classroom values, such as noise level, active listening, staying on task, teamwork, and attendance. The table with the most points received the reward of eating lunch with Needham on Friday and sitting on cushions the following week.

This system is but one strand in a web of behavioral structures made visible by rules and charts and tracked via numbers and colors. Throughout the day, for a host of infractions (being mean to a classmate, talking while a classmate is talking, pushing) children are told to move their color, which essentially means progressing along a continuum from good (green) to bad (red). Children at Wilson don’t have recess, but every Friday, those in Ms. Needham’s class who’ve managed to stay away from red get the reward of going to the park.

“One two three, eyes on me,” Needham chants.

“One two, eyes on you,” the second graders answer.

Creating and maintaining this order is but one layer of the multitiered juggling act known as elementary school teaching. Needham is good at it. She is constantly, relentlessly keeping her students on task.

“Criss-cross applesauce,” she says, over and over again, to combat squirming and other forms of inappropriate physical activity.

“If you can hear me, clap one time,” she instructs in a noisy room. When no one is answering a question, she asks: “Do you have your brain on?”

Needham’s teaching is an impressive feat of stamina.

**T**each for America’s recent growth in New Orleans has been dramatic. Since its inception in 1990 and up until 2005—the year Hurricane Katrina washed in a highly publicized opportunity for reform of New Orleans’ beleaguered educational system—an average of 85 TFA teachers (referred to internally as “corps members”) were placed in Greater New Orleans schools each year. By September 2007, the TFA corps numbered 126. In September 2008, their ranks rose to 348. This year, about 500 TFA corps members are classroom teachers in Greater New Orleans. Corps members are spread throughout four different parishes (Louisiana parlance for counties) and, together with TFA alumni, reach one in four students in all of Greater New Orleans.

Last year in Orleans Parish, roughly 60 percent of TFA corps members were placed in classrooms within the Recovery School District (RSD), a state-run entity created before Katrina that took over governing the majority of schools within the Orleans Parish School Board after the city was flooded. More than half of RSD schools are now charters. The remaining TFA corps members were placed in other charter schools, governed by either the Orleans Parish School Board or by the state’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. These placements are wildly diverse, ranging from early childhood, to special education, to high school classrooms. Yet one thing they have in common is the economic and academic disadvantages of their students. Louisiana ranks third in the nation for having the highest percentage of low-income students attending public school, and though a variety of data show academic improvement in most New Orleans schools post-Katrina, the disparities these schools must overcome are staggering. As of 2004, 25 percent of New Orleans citizens failed to complete high school; 40 percent of the city’s adults were unable to read beyond the elementary school level.

Kira Orange Jones ’00, who grew up in the Bronx’s Co-op City and studied film at Wesleyan, is the regional director for Teach For America in Greater New Orleans. Following

**A student is challenged to meet high goals at Wilson Charter School in New Orleans, under the auspices of Teach for America.**



# TFA CORPS MEMBERS SET HIGH GOALS FOR THEIR STUDENTS

graduation, Orange Jones became a TFA corps member up the Mississippi River from New Orleans in Zachary, La., just north of Baton Rouge. She remained in Baton Rouge to work in film, but about the time Hurricane Katrina made its devastating sweep over the Gulf Coast, she headed to Harvard to pursue a master's degree in the School Leadership Program at the Graduate School of Education.

Orange Jones describes Wesleyan as a sort of training ground: a "context" of rigorous thought around the social ills that have an impact on our society and that need to be addressed. "I love Wesleyan," she says. "It changed how I see the world. It had a big impact on my framing." Teach For America, in turn, gave her a way to funnel her convictions into actions. "It allowed me to take a lot of the ideas I had and put them into a practice that aligns with what I believe."

Orange Jones is articulate and thoughtful, and facile with numbers as they pertain to kids, education, and the difference TFA makes. Throughout my time with her, one word she repeatedly returned to was *effective*. "That's what I obsess about most," she told me. "Five hundred teachers in a city is worthy of conversation in its own right: the talent coming in, the people who will stay and go on to do amazing things. But I think we will be measured by how effective we are in improving student achievement."

Teach for America measures effectiveness by standardized tests, improvement in reading level, and mastery of class objectives specified by teachers. One overriding objective is to close the achievement gap with the highest performing parish in the state. Orange Jones, who spends large chunks of her days poring over data, says the evidence shows progress. "I know where we are versus where we were. But it's impossible for me to say that sentence without saying we have so much left to do."

TFA corps members set high goals for their students,

which they continuously track through a host of quantitative analyses. A standard goal, one shared last year by Needham, is to raise the reading level of an entire class by one and a half to two grades—both to catch them up to grade level, and also, hopefully, to get them a little ahead.

That's a significant challenge for students who have been affected by poverty and its corollaries: insufficient health care, substandard housing, and under-resourced schools. Orange Jones believes that in places like New Orleans, where large numbers of families are living in poverty from generation to generation, the achievement gap between students and their wealthier peers arises for a multitude of reasons. "Poverty creates myriad issues that these students, their schools, and the community must face," she says, "and they often don't have the resources to combat these challenges. These disparities unfortunately often limit the life prospects for young people growing up in these conditions."

Before moving to New Orleans, I taught in public schools in New York City for more than a decade. My path included a graduate school program in education, which incorporated lengthy placements in schools in order to learn from veteran teachers. In contrast, Teach For America corps members generally come directly from earning a bachelor's degree. They spend five weeks at a residential institute where they learn the foundational tools associated with good teaching, in part by helping to run summer school programs. This incredibly intense experience consists of 70- to 80-hour weeks, and each year, a certain percentage of corps members drop out. Those who stay in the program move to one of 30 regions across the country and begin teaching, where they are closely managed and supported by a staff of TFA employees for their two years as corps members.

Despite the rigor of their summer training, the disparity between the teaching preparation encountered by teachers like myself and that of the typical Teach For America corps member rankles. How can a typical corps member be as prepared as a trained educator? No successful teacher ever stops learning how to teach, but for the typical TFA corps member, the initial on-the-job learning curve is undoubtedly steeper. One of TFA's five core values is *respect and humility*, yet it seems to me that there is an undeniable hubris in substituting years of professional development and experience for five weeks of preparation. Still, there is no denying the pressing need for hard-working, high-

achieving teachers, particularly those committed to working in low-income neighborhoods, and TFA has managed to make this difficult, desperately needed work both prestigious and competitive. As I learned more about TFA, both in and—more significantly—out of the classroom, my unease softened. Meeting Needham, who largely credits her growing effectiveness in the classroom to the help she received from veteran teachers in her school, changed the face of TFA for me. In place of the arrogance I'd pictured, Needham embodies the humility to which TFA aspires. Most important, given our national academic achievement gap, all hands are needed on deck.

"There are 30,000 students who will wake up tomorrow needing an education in this city," says Orange Jones. "We're doing everything we can to train teachers to have an impact on their lives tomorrow. We know that if we do that well, we'll be creating leaders who will be able to take on many of the systemic realities that continue to hold kids back and thus perpetuate the achievement gap. Those are both parts of our plan."

This point is key, and it is potentially the most potent change maker I've encountered against the forces that negatively affect education. Teach For America is attacking our nation's pervasive educational disparities on two fronts: immediately, in the classroom, through vigorous, high-aimed teaching, and in the long term, by creating a workforce of individuals who begin their professional careers by successfully working with and caring for kids whose lives they've helped put on a different path. The hope is that this cadre of alumni, as they move to other professions, will pursue work that alters the societal conditions that continue a cycle of educational inequity and entrenched poverty.

Although only one in 10 TFA corps members initially say they will remain in education, in reality, more than six in 10 do for at least one additional year. And that 40 percent who leave the field are just as vital to solving our nation's entrenched educational inequalities as those who continue teaching. "We're trying to create an alumni base here and across the country who have the insight from having taught successfully in lower income communities," says Orange Jones. "While we know that more than 60 percent of our alumni will stay in classrooms or move into school leadership positions, many of our corps members also will go on to become doctors and lawyers. They'll become leaders in the business world. We think that's phenomenal.

Because the reality is that this problem is so systemic that we'll need leaders in all professions to make a difference."

Teach For America is highly selective. Out of last year's 25,000 applicants, 4,100 were accepted. Ten percent of Wesleyan's 2008 graduating class applied to become Teach For America corps members; eight percent of 2009's class applied. Corps members are selected for their critical thinking and organization, as well as for leadership abilities and an inclination to work hard. "We look for people who will meet challenge with effort," says Orange Jones. "We're catching them in their own leadership trajectory."

"There is so much that even one teacher can do in one academic year," Orange Jones continues, "but it's still true that if we don't address the achievement gap with what we see systemically, then our kids will never have equitable opportunities years from now. That's why it's so important to address it both by providing outstanding teachers to under-resourced schools in the short run, as well as by developing alumni who will work toward our vision in other venues. There's not one magic bullet. It's about sustaining hard work over time."

In New Orleans, the potential impact of TFA alumni may be even more potent, for these former and present teachers inhabit the city at a precarious yet potentially constructive time. New Orleans needs industrious citizens to ensure its positive growth and survival, and after two years of immersion in its unique culture and charms, TFA corps members from Greater New Orleans tend to incorporate caring about New Orleans into their life paths.

Needham, now officially a Teach For America alumna (one of three known Wesleyan graduates who are TFA alumni in New Orleans), is still teaching at Wilson Charter School—in a brand-new building that replaces the one destroyed during Katrina. Of her close network of 40 to 50 TFA corps members, only five alumni are leaving New Orleans, and all for paths related to educational equity. "One is going to med school, one to law school, one to a juvenile justice program, one is getting a master's in public policy, and one is getting a master's in educational policy. They're going to Duke, Harvard, and Oxford. This is not a shabby bunch." And even those five who are leaving talk about coming back. "We've all fallen in love with the city,"

**Katherine Needham '05 has helped her students develop an appreciation for learning.**

says Needham. "It's found its way into our hearts."

Orange Jones says this burgeoning love of New Orleans is good news for tomorrow's students. More and more Teach For America alumni will stay in New Orleans—as school and civic leaders as well as health care workers, city planners, and a host of other professionals. Some, like Needham, will remain teaching in New Orleans classrooms.

"I loved getting up and going to work this year," says Needham, whose first year of teaching was incredibly stressful and exhausting, with workdays stretching 15 hours or more. That first year, the majority of second graders in her class had missed a year or more of schooling due to the upheaval of Katrina. Some lost family members in the storm or endured traumatic experiences such as losing their homes or witnessing violent crimes. Many of her 25



students, whose ages ranged from 7 to 10, hadn't been adequately trained about how to behave in school; their reading levels ranged from pre-kindergarten to fourth grade. "One-third of my class did not recognize letters or numbers when they should have been beginning readers, writers, and capable of computing basic math," says Needham. "I was completely overwhelmed by the multiple levels and needs of my students." She didn't sleep well that first year, particularly on Sunday nights when she tossed and turned, filled with anxiety about the upcoming week and what might have happened to her students over the weekend.

But her tenacity in reaching out for and accepting help, and developing strong relationships with her students and their families, led to substantial professional growth in her second year. She doesn't know what her professional

future entails beyond teaching at Wilson a third year, but she happily reports that her students have developed an appreciation for learning.

"They're so pumped up about learning. It's amazing to see. The numbers [from test scores] motivate them, but when they can tell their reading is better or they understand a math problem or they're writing a paragraph when at the beginning of the year they couldn't write a sentence, I think that's what's really exciting for them."

It's no less exciting for their teacher.

"I want them to like learning and like going to school. I want them to think it's cool to be smart. I always talk about that stuff with them. I praise them so much—when they get something right or even say something nice to a classmate. They need encouragement. I want to give them a bigger picture of what's out there."

One day in late May, when I stopped into Needham's class, she was sitting at the front of the room in the swivel chair reading with one of her students, Cabria.

"Do you know how many words you just read in one minute?" Needham asked Cabria, once she'd finished. "One hundred fourteen. At the end of second grade, you're supposed to read 90 words per minute, so you're *above* the goal for the end of second grade."

She looked pointedly at her student. "I am so proud of you. You have worked so hard. You have grown your brain two years this year. You are definitely ready for third grade. How do you feel?"

"Proud," answered Cabria.

"I'm proud of you, too."

Needham and Cabria exchanged a high five before Cabria returned to her seat.

"Good stuff," Needham told me. "Makes me proud."

Later, when I asked her about her 23 charges, and the potential impact she's making on their lives, Needham told me: "It's crazy when I think about the responsibility on my shoulders. I'm just a few years out of school. This is an incredible leadership position. I don't know many other professions where you can have so much responsibility."

That Teach For America helped bring this young, motivated, and resourceful teacher to choose this particular responsibility is good news—both for the kids in her classroom and for the city of New Orleans.

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