

Writing Prompt Packet: Passage one

A CONVERSATION WITH DOCTOR SAMPSON DAVIS: HANGING TOUGH

You learned to grow up quickly around the Dayton Street Projects, where I lived when I was a boy. It was necessary to prove how tough you were, especially in the eyes of older boys. Hanging out with the older boys was always cool, and I loved being a part of that group, even though it sometimes got me in trouble. Kids often make mistakes and do things that are sometimes foolish or dangerous. Most of the time, just like me, they don't plan to get involved in something they shouldn't—it just happens. My mother, even though she acted like she was very angry at us, was probably really worried that I was seriously injured. When I got home from the hospital, I was treated like a little prince, with extra privileges and freedom from chores. Some say there is a reason for everything.

Breaking my foot was the first time I had the opportunity for an in-depth encounter with a doctor. Of course, I couldn't know it at the time, but that experience planted the seeds of interest in emergency medicine. Years later, when I became a doctor, those seeds grew and blossomed. And you know what? I am now working as a doctor in the neighborhood where I grew up. I am an emergency medicine physician at the same hospital where my broken foot was treated.

Writing prompt: Passage Two

A CONVERSATION WITH DOCTOR RAMECK HUNT: SCHOOL TROUBLE

The third and fourth grades were challenging for me. I came from a public school system where the culture was very different. The jokes were more hurtful, and problems were solved with your fist. At the Catholic school I attended when I was eight and nine years old, problems were solved by talking them out. It took me some time to get used to this more peaceful approach, but once I did, I actually liked it. Another reason I grew to like the school was that, in a way, going to a Catholic school meant your family had a little money, so it made me feel good to tell other kids in the neighborhood where I went to school. There was so much around me that shouted “poor” or “dysfunctional” that going to a Catholic school combated that negativity a little. But because of the threat of special education, and because funding for the private school finally became a difficulty, I ended up back

in public school. I had to reacquaint myself with my old culture, which was challenging as well as discouraging. The transition was awkward for me because I had stopped handling my problems with fighting.

Schoolwork was never a problem for me. Classes were easy, and learning was fun. But since I was always the type that needed my mind stimulated constantly, and because I had a little trouble with self-control, I was always into something. It took me many years to gain self-control. Controlling your behavior is just as important as what you learn in school. Good grades mean nothing if you're always in the principal's office. It took me a while to figure that out.

WRITING PROMPT PASSAGE THREE, A LOOK BACK IN TIME

“ISN'T THAT SCHOOL IN THE GHETTO?”

GEORGE, AGE 8 “Quit throwin’ bottles in the street, man,” eight-year-old George Jenkins yelled to his older brother, Garland.

“You can’t make me,” his brother taunted back. He picked up a green wine bottle he found in the gutter and tossed it onto the hard concrete of Muhammad Ali Avenue in Newark, New Jersey. It shattered into dozens of glistening fragments that shimmered in the sunlight.

“Suppose a car runs over the glass and gets a flat tire,” George asked. Garland was almost ten, and George didn’t think he acted his age.

“Too bad for them,” Garland said as he tossed another bottle. “Hey, now, look at that one—two bounces and a smash!” He cheered as the brown beer bottle exploded and shattered. “Hey, man, I’m outta here. I ain’t gonna be late because of you.” George glared at his brother before hurrying off in the direction of Louise A. Spencer Elementary School. Garland, he noticed, headed off in the other direction, once again skipping classes for the day. George loved school. Even though it was located in what was described as the “inner city,” it was relatively new and neat and clean. His third-grade teacher, Miss Viola Johnson, was a tiny ball of energy with a high-pitched voice and the same honey-colored skin as George’s mother. There was no doubt as to her power and authority in that classroom. Miss Johnson made every day an adventure, and George hated to miss school, even on days when

he was sick. George slid quietly into the room, only a couple of minutes late, and grinned at Miss Johnson, who noticed his tardiness but said nothing.

“Today,” she began, “we’re going to continue talking about the writer named Shakespeare. How long ago did he live?” she asked the class. “Four hundred years ago!” they responded immediately. “How many plays did he write?” “Thirty-seven!” George had no idea that Shakespeare was not usually taught in third grade. Miss Johnson simply offered it, and George, as well as the rest of his class, absorbed it. “What was so cool about this Shakespeare dude, Miss Johnson?” a boy named Ritchie wanted to know. George wished he just would shut up so Miss Johnson could talk.

“Well, for one thing, Shakespeare wore an earring,” Miss Johnson offered.

“For real? Real gold?” Ritchie seemed to be impressed.

“Here’s another interesting fact,” Miss Johnson said. “In order to seek his fortune as an actor and a writer, Shakespeare ran away from home shortly after he got married, leaving his wife and three children to make it without him,” Miss Johnson explained. “Sounds like yo’ daddy!” Ritchie yelled to the boy sitting next to him. Both of them cracked up with laughter.

Every Tuesday she told them all about Shakespeare’s time—about kings and castles, as well as about the rats and fleas that lived in the straw that most people used for bedding. “Did you know that during Shakespeare’s time almost a third of the people who lived in London died one year from something called the Black Plague?” she asked the class.

“Why?” George asked.

“There were very few doctors at that time, and they didn’t know what we know today about cleanliness and sanitation. Most people just threw their garbage out the window every morning, as well as the contents of their chamber pots. That’s what they used at night. Toilets had not been invented yet.”

“Yuk!” the class responded.

The class listened, fascinated and entranced with her stories, which taught them history, literature, math, and science without them even being aware of it. She passed out a children’s version of Hamlet, full of pictures and explanations, and let them read the play and act out the fight scenes. Every day went quickly in Miss Johnson’s class, but she often stayed after school with them to make cookies or

build projects. She even took them into New York City sometimes to let them see live plays on Broadway or to hear orchestra concerts at Lincoln Center. George loved to listen to the drums and horns and violins as they mixed up together in that huge concert hall. When her students formed the Shakespeare Club, Miss Johnson even helped them get sweaters.

They were deep burgundy with the name of the club embroidered on the pocket. George and his classmates wore them proudly to a concert one afternoon. During the intermission, a woman wearing too much perfume and a mink coat, even though it was the middle of spring, walked up to George and said, "What lovely sweaters you and your classmates are wearing."

"Thank you, ma'am," George said with a grin, touching the careful embroidery. "What private school do you children attend?" the woman asked. Miss Johnson walked over to the woman and said proudly, "These are students from Louise Spencer Elementary, a public school in the Central Ward."

"But they're so well behaved," the woman said with surprise. "Isn't that school in the ghetto?" Miss Johnson gave the woman a look that could have melted that mink coat and led her students away. George looked back at the woman with hurt and confusion. He wished he could have tripped the smelly old lady.

On the way back home from this trip, George, always the quiet kid, sat alone on the bus seat. "Mind if I sit next to you, George?" someone asked. He looked up, pulled his long legs out of the aisle, and smiled at her. "Sure, Miss Johnson."

"Did that woman upset you?" she asked. George shrugged. "I don't know. She smelled like mothballs." "There will always be people like that, you know," Miss Johnson explained. "Yeah, I know." "And you can either let them hold you back, or you can ignore them and go on and do your thing."

"Yeah, I know." George didn't want to admit how much the woman's words had hurt. He changed the subject. "That was a good concert, Miss Johnson. I think it's really cool that you take us to stuff like this."

"Perhaps when you go to college you can learn to write symphonies or plays of your own," she said. "College? I never even thought about it." To George, the idea of college seemed like something foreign and vague, like going to China or the moon. "Of course you'll go to college. You're one of the smartest children in my class." Miss Johnson spoke with certainty. "I have high hopes and great

expectations for you, George.” “Maybe you do, but some kids think it ain’t cool to be too smart, you know,” George told her.

“That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard!” Miss Johnson said loudly. The other kids on the bus looked up to see what had upset her. “You don’t understand,” George said quietly. “It’s hard to fit in with your boys if your grades are too good.”

“Nonsense!” Miss Johnson replied. “You don’t really believe that.”

George grinned at her. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I guess I really don’t care what they think of me.” “College is cool, George. If you can fit in there, you’ve got it made.” “Doesn’t it take a long time?” George asked, chewing on his lip. He felt a combination of excitement and wonder. “It takes four years to complete the first part of college,” she explained. “At the end of that time, you’ll be four years older whether you go to college or not, so you might as well go and get as much knowledge in your head as you can.” George looked out of the bus window and thought about what she had said. As the field-trip bus got closer to his neighborhood in Newark, he looked at the tall, poverty-ridden, high-rise apartments like the one he lived in; the boarded-up and defeated stores; and the trash all over the streets.

“I don’t know how,” he said quietly, helpless in his lack of knowledge.

Miss Johnson didn’t laugh, however. She just smiled and said, “It’s not very hard. Just do your best, keep your nose out of trouble, and one day the doors will open for you.” For the first time, George could see a glimpse of light, a spark of hope and possibility.

College.

What a cool idea.

WRITING PROMPT: PASSAGE FOUR

A CONVERSATION WITH DOCTOR GEORGE JENKINS

INFLUENTIAL TEACHERS

It's amazing how much of a positive effect one teacher can have on the life of a student. Miss Johnson was the most influential person in my life when I was in grade school. Thanks to her, I never believed my situation was hopeless. Thanks to her, I learned to dream beyond my environment. Thanks to her, I was able to see a glimpse of the future. She inspired me, encouraged me, and motivated me. She made learning fun and made opportunities possible. The field trips she took us on opened my eyes to a world I didn't even know existed. She brainwashed our class with positive messages, which made it easy to deal with the negativity in our environment. She believed in all of us, and because of her, I learned to believe in myself.

When I got older and times got tough, lessons I learned from Miss Johnson in those early years helped me to see that difficulties are only temporary. Her inspiration helped me to stay focused on accomplishing my goals. Because of her encouragement when I needed it, I now hope that I am a positive role model and inspiration to others. I do all that I can to help young people to believe in themselves and strive toward a positive future.

Essay Prompt: Write an essay describing how their environments and their characters motivated them to be doctors. Use your character analysis sheets to describe their characters, environments, and motivations.