

The Politics Of Un-Gratitude At A Fancy Westside School

Description



Photo: Flickr/Joshua Tree National Park

As Thanksgiving creeps up on us, I’ve seen my Facebook and other social media feeds filled with people giving one thing they’re grateful for in order to cultivate looking at the good instead of focusing on the bad. While I generally eye roll at the practice as suddenly everyone’s husband/wife/child/pets/job/plumber/waxer/proctologist is the best ever, I am particularly grateful for one seemingly odd thing: I got to accompany my son on a field trip.

The three years he spent at an expensive L.A. private school were filled with the usual politics that I still find disturbing. The administration deemed which parents were worthy to spearhead what committee. More often than not, those leaders were also the big donors. Coincidence? The same happened with Room Parents. You could not volunteer to be one, you had to be deemed worthy by the administration, receiving an email in later August. These women (always Room Moms, never ever Room Dads) gained special access to the class that non-chosen parents didn’t. They could go to all the parties, go to other special events in class and at school to take pictures for the yearbook and organized who did what for each such gathering. Part of their duties also included deciding which parents could go on field

trips.

Back in my private school elementary days in the 1970s and 1980s, if a parent wanted to go on a field trip, they signed up to go and they went. But at this private school it was a super- special designation. Though it was supposed to be blind, with the names of the parents who wanted to go drawn out of a hat, that of course was not the process. Every year, the close friends of the Room Parents went on the field trips. Three years and nine or so field trips and I never got picked. Not once. I'm not good with the maths but I'm pretty sure that's not statistically accurate. My son would always ask "Why aren't you going?" and be disappointed, which was heartbreaking because he still wanted me with him.

So imagine when I got the email from my son's teacher at his new public school asking for volunteers to chaperone a museum trip. I replied "I can go!" lightening fast. I was in. So easy. I was in! The night before the field trip my son seemed to be getting sick so I alerted his teacher that we might have to miss it and to maybe contact a back up parent. "We already have more than enough parents going so don't worry about it." So what you're saying is that a group of parents volunteered to go with their child to the museum, and they were all allowed to go? But, that's too easy. And fair! So not private school.

Not only did I have the pleasure of accompanying my son and a group of his peers for the day, I was given, a week later, a binder ring on which thank you notes from each student had been personally written to me on index cards. Each class member, whether or not they had been in my group, thanked me for going and had them write one thing they learned on the field trip, so the activity was one of gratitude but also a comprehension check for the teacher.

One of the things that also struck me as odd about our private school was the lack of gratitude towards parents. Yes, donors were acknowledged on the prominently placed public donation tree plaque and rewarded with their name for all to see (and no one chose Anonymous). And of course the highest-ranked parents were rewarded with the prestige committees and privileges. Parents were thanked as group, mostly for showing up to something like a winter or spring concert. But year after year almost no holiday gifts were made for the parents. There were no Mother's Day and Father's Day glued together macaroni art, mismatched bead necklaces or cards made. Unless you were designated as a strategically important parent, even the kids didn't thank you sincerely, let alone anyone else.

Of course no one volunteers on field trips to receive praise (I hope). And holidays aren't about the gifts (technically). But there is something to be said for cultivating the proverbial attitude of gratitude. Something more than the kids responding in unison to the teacher prompting "Let's say 'thank you' to the parents." Something to recognize all that parents do, even if the campus shuts them out.

On his index card my son wrote to me "Mom, thank you for coming on the field trip. You made it the best field trip ever!! Why shouldn't every parent have that opportunity, regardless of their donation size or popularity?"

Jennifer Smith was a mom at a fancy westside K-6 school where she tried to play nice until she couldn't anymore.*

*Not her real name

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