

La Waters

“What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?”

Langston Hughes

I

“Ms. Waters,” the little girl said.

“Yes, honey,” said the woman, kneeling down in front of her.

“This is the best day ever.”

The sentence that came from the tiny voice struck Grace Waters speechless as she looked into the small child’s eyes and saw a face that reflected hope and innocence, expectation. Six words - six simple words spoken with almost perfect pitch - had magically connected them. Another child had been given a chance; she had learned to read. Suddenly, it became one of the teacher’s best days ever too.

Jesse Grace Waters had been an educator for almost forty years, the last thirty as an elementary school principal. She believed deeply in education, particularly in reading, and considered it to be one of the fundamental keys in shaping young lives; in leading them towards the ideal of becoming productive citizens and parents in their own right. She spent her entire career in Columbus, New Mexico, a town of about nine hundred souls, where a prevailing west wind and hot sunshine are timeless visitors; a place too where Poncho Villa and Mexican children made their way, and mark, across an invisible border.

More passionate than sentimental and more hopeful than cynical, Jesse Grace Waters advocated learning and demanded good teaching in the public schools. She did not waiver from that truth which lived in her heart and in doing so, never intentionally shied away from the hurdles that stood in her path along the way. From a distance, on the slide rule of

wealth and celebrity, or however success is measured, some may view this as a simple and ordinary life. Perhaps, but it was also one comprised of challenge, dedication, mastery, and courage; elements that some would argue make it a truly heroic journey, certainly one worthwhile.

“If we do not attend to public education, we will become the ultimate victims,” Grace Waters said, time and again to her various audiences. “Someday – and you can take this to the bank – we will pay the price of failing to educate our children. It may come in the form of violence or economic costs, but eventually we will pay.

“There is no substitute for hope.”

II

Jesse Grace Waters was born to ranch-life in the southeastern part of the New Mexico Territory – near the town of Hachita – in 1911; a year before the state joined the Union. Her father, Tom Waters, managed two ranches owned by a well-to-do-family out of California; one located on the American-side of the border, the other just across it in Old Mexico. The Cody Land and Cattle Co. covered more than 20,000 acres, raising cattle and some horses. But Jess, as she was called growing up, took more after her mother – Rachael Matthews-Waters – than her Papa.

“My mother had an independent streak a mile long,” she said, later recounting her early days. “She left the impression she knew exactly who she was, where she was going, and was willing to work hard in order to get there. I admired her, of course loved her completely, and took her directions into my heart.”

Rachael Waters encouraged her daughter and told her she could do almost anything in life if she had an education and was willing to earn her way. In the years that followed,

Grace Waters took many students and teachers under her wing and passed that same advice forward nearly every day.

Young Jess was not sure why exactly, but early on she realized that she would not spend the rest of her life on a ranch. Something different stirred inside of her; the love of learning, books, and being at school. In the meantime, her Papa and Mama raised a family, embraced the traditions and endured the rigors of ranching, and crossed swords with a man named Poncho Villa.

Tom Waters first met Poncho Villa in 1913, at a banquet for revolutionary sympathizers in El Paso, Texas. The young Mexican was a popular figure in the border town, where he successfully recruited followers and raised money for his insurgent campaign, and in the process, bought large quantities of supplies from the local merchants.

“I liked him,” Tom Waters said, on his return.

“Why on earth for?” asked Rachael. “He’s a thief and troublemaker.”

“You should have been there - he’s smart and committed to helping the people of his country, especially those in Chihuahua,” Tom Waters said. “From what I understand things are pretty bad towards the interior.”

“I don’t like it,” Rachael said.

A few years later, when the United States recognized the sitting government in Mexico City, Poncho Villa violently retaliated. On a March day in 1916, he led his army of revolutionaries across the border into Columbus, New Mexico, where they burned and looted the main area of town. Eighteen Americans were killed. The raid cast a pall over

the other towns and ranches nearby, and authorities ordered all women and children into Hachita, until things were safe.

Rachel Waters refused, "I'm not going anywhere," she said.

For months Poncho Villa stayed in northern Mexico and during that time began preying upon the ranches along the border, including the Cody Land and Cattle Co., for supplies and horses. It took some time to arrange, but the cowboy Tom Waters and now infamous outlaw met once again, this time at a safe house located in the back alleys of Juarez.

"Buenas dias Señor," Poncho Villa said, shaking the American's hand and offering him a chair. A bottle of whiskey and two small glasses sat on the table between them.

"Hello, Francisco," Tom Waters said, taking off his hat. "It has been a long time."

"Yes, a long time," said Poncho Villa, "many things have happened."

"Yes they have," Tom Waters said.

"Why did you wish to speak with me, Tom Waters?" Poncho Villa asked.

"I have a favor to ask of you."

"Yes, go ahead."

"I'd like for you and your men to stop stealing my horses. We need them to work the ranch," Tom Waters said.

"How do you know it is my men who do this?" Poncho Villa asked.

"I know," Tom Waters said.

"Go on," the Mexican said.

“Francisco, I realize you need the horses for travel, but we must have them to support the ranch operation, otherwise we’ll go broke. Look, if your folks are hungry – take as many beef cattle as you need. Just leave the horses be.”

“Okay, Tom Waters,” said Poncho Villa, after a few moments of silence. “It’s a deal.”

“I hear there are soldiers gathering near El Paso. They say our president is determined to find you and bring you to justice after the raid on Columbus,” said Tom Waters.

“It is what I hear too,” Poncho Villa said.

The two men shook hands with one another, their eyes fixed. Tom Waters could see a change in the Mexican after years of fighting; his steel conviction and fatigue lived side-by-side now. Under different circumstances, the pair might have been friends.

On the way home and on the outskirts of El Paso, Tom Waters saw troops from the U.S. Cavalry camped by the roadside. A few of the men were bathing behind wagons; they were noisy – shouting and using coarse language. He wondered what it was about the Army that changed the behavior of ordinary men.

“Poncho Villa kept his word and never came on the ranches again,” Grace Waters said, remembering stories from those days. “In 1923, Papa delivered the news to us at supper one evening, ‘Poncho Villa is dead. Someone gunned him down in the streets of Chihuahua City,’” he said.

“I’m not surprised,” said Rachael Waters.

III

Jesse Grace Waters became valedictorian of her high school graduating class that numbered twelve and went onto college in Silver City, where she earned a bachelors and masters degree in education. Afterward, she landed a permanent teaching position in Columbus.

“My first year I taught fifth and sixth grade, all subjects,” she said. “The children were like all kids – they would push you to the limit if you let them, but they were also smart, full of surprises, and hungry for direction.

Being a classroom teacher prepared her for the principal’s position she accepted six years later.

The school in Columbus was structured differently than most. Children attended only elementary school there, and from the seventh grade on all students were bused each day to Deming, about thirty-five miles to the north. Approximately three miles south of town, stood Columbus’s sister city in Mexico, a place called Palomas.

In 1951 and with Grace Waters at the helm, a small cluster of kids from Palomas showed up at the doors of the Columbus Elementary on the first day of school. Without hesitation, Principal Waters registered them and placed them in the proper grades. She told her teachers there was nothing left to do except enroll them – that to do so was not against the law and they were hired to teach any child that wanted to learn. It was a decision that she never regretted – the fact of the matter was she thanked her lucky stars every day she had reacted the way she did.

“May I help you?” Grace Waters asked, a few years later.

In a mix of Spanish and English - Robert Gutierrez said, "Yes, you can. These are my children and I would like for them to attend your school, where they can learn to read, write and speak English. I want them to be able to make their way in the world."

"You have a fine looking family, what are their names?"

"Robert Jr., Maria, Alicia, and Ricardo – Richard," he said.

"Mr. Gutierrez, I'm sorry, but my school is full and I simply cannot accept them,"

Grace Waters said.

"Please," he said, the honest plea confirmed by his dark eyes.

"Okay, okay, but they must learn English and keep up with their assignments, because we do not have the extra resources to spend teaching them only the language outside of everything else they will be required to do. Do you understand that you must be a partner in this effort?"

"Thank you, La Waters," he said. "They will learn fast, they are bright children."

"La Waters?" she asked.

"Many call you La Waters – the lady Waters," he said.

At the end of the school year, Columbus Elementary tested their students and every one of those children had the highest marks in the class where they had been assigned. Grace Waters had no better friends than the Gutierrez family, and three of the children became teachers in their own right. Robert Jr. earned a doctorate degree in education.

"I never had a clear vision of where this was going, only that some children wanted an education and that I was in a position to provide one," Grace Waters said, later. "I simply never asked about nationalities."

Through the years Grace Waters enrolled youngsters from every background imaginable – railroad kids, ranchers’ kids, migrants – you name it. Originally, the ones from Palomas came to learn only English and more about American, but ended up getting more than they bargained for – the roots of a real education.

“Most of them may never see the beauty of Florence in April,” Grace Waters said. “The flower stalls piled high with irises, delphiniums and lilies; the fountains singing; or the cafés, where young men and women flirt wildly with one another. They may never go to the park in the center of the city; where children eat ice cream, sail toy boats, fly kites, watch puppet shows or ride carved, painted horses on the carousel. They many never see Florence at night; the cobbled streets, bridges and Arno River lit by the moonlight.

“They do have a chance, however.”

IV

“Tossing money at the problems we have in education is not the answer,” Grace Waters said, to Fred Harris Jr., the young state senator that had made the trip down from Santa Fe to visit with her one afternoon. She had been skeptical of his intentions at first, but pleasantly surprised by his curiosity and knowledge as the day wore on.

“Don’t get me wrong, the money has to be there, but the funding must support programs and policies that help educate all families, especially the poorer ones,” she said. “Experience has shown me that education provides the best means for people to lift themselves out of poverty, to make better choices, and consequently, build a better life.”

“What about vouchers, charter schools, magnet schools, improved access to private schools, changes like that?” he asked.

“What about them?”

“Well,” he said, “given the ideas pass constitutional muster and have sufficient political muscle behind them, do you believe something like a five-year pilot program incorporating the best of these ideas would improve the opportunity for a good education?” Senator Harris asked.

“We are spending the money now, but our test scores lag behind nearly every other state in the nation,” she said. “But it is more complicated than performing well on tests or children doing the things required of them while they are at school, especially if our goal is to teach our kids to think. Kids can harden with time, and it is easy to lose them. All sorts of things – small and large – contribute to that fact: diet, the need of eye glasses, abuse at home, neglect, and self-dislike, just to mention a few.

“My biggest concern would be the impact these new programs might have upon the public schools if implemented across the board,” she said. “I believe public schools are the cornerstone of our education system and I’m against hurting them in any way. They work, if people pull together.

“But if the honest goal is a quality education for everyone, then I am open to innovative ideas. I’d like to hear more about it though.”

“What would you say to a young teacher just starting out?” Senator Harris asked.

“I had a teacher once that came and complained to me about a child wearing her pajamas to school. I’m just sick and tired of her wearing those pajamas, she told me.

“So I went to the child’s home. Her family was having a hard time and as it turns out, they were the only clothes she had. They were her nightclothes, and her school clothes. When the teacher found this out, she looked at that child much differently. You have to know where these kids live their lives,” Grace Waters said.

“So Ms. Waters, how do we start – if we could design a new approach to education and begin again, what would you do?” asked the senator.

“First, let me ask you a question or two, okay?”

“Sure,” he said. “Fire away.”

“When did you take your last History course?” she asked.

“College,” he said.

“Say grade fourteen,” she said.

“That’s about right.”

“What about English or Science?”

“Same, he said.

“How about reading?”

“Hmm, I guess maybe around third grade.”

“That’s right,” she said. “Now let me asked you – does that make any sense?”

“Look, if a child does not learn to read, he or she is going to fail. That’s it in a nutshell. If they do not learn to read in their first three years of school, the kid is probably not going to be a good reader.

“Senator Harris, kids are smart. They can learn anything if you demand it of them and make it halfway interesting. Every school in the country ought to teach a child to read first, before they are put in a science or math class. If they cannot read, they are going down and they are going to be angry about it. Like I have said, pay attention now or pay the dividends later.”

Grace Waters had her Mama's genes, and when it came to doing what was best for the children at Columbus Elementary, that helped. Not everything was sweetness and light – then again most things worth fighting for never are. Two women in particular – one the local post mistress and the other a wealthy rancher – did not think it appropriate for the Mexican children to come across the border to attend school or eat the food the government provided at breakfast and lunch.

“Come on, am I hearing this right?” Grace Waters said, rising at a school board meeting to address the charges when they first came up. “This is about food?”

“We have a petition, with more than a hundred signatures,” one of the women said. “The kids from Palomas should not be attending our elementary school.”

“I don't care if you have a thousand signatures; the fact is state law mandates that we enroll every child that shows up at our door, regardless of where they live. Education provides hope for these kids – we all win in the end and believe you me, the Mexican people know that.

“These kids assimilate into school easily. They learn English, make friends and their grades,” Grace Waters said. “I think Columbus has taken the lead on this issue, and I will not apologize or back away from what we are doing here.”

Grace Waters ended her comments that evening with a story she had heard somewhere else; it revolved around perceptions and misconceptions, and two British women having tea one afternoon in a London hotel.

Seated at a table next to the two ladies were three people – two younger women and an older gentleman, with thick, white hair.

“They must be foreigners,” one of the British women said. “Take a gander at the loud manner in which they are acting.”

“They’re American,” the other said.

Each of the travelers had ordered a coffee and some sort of cherry or strawberry tart that were brought by their waiter and sat down neatly on their table, just as the British ladies finished their tea. As the pair began to leave, they notice the gentleman slip to the ground from his chair. Had he fainted or had some sort of an attack? They rushed to help and noticed one of the American women held the older man’s head in her lap, sheltering him from view. One of the British ladies became angry when she watched the foreigner caring for the man fingering what she thought was a piece of a half-eaten tart on the table. But it wasn’t a tart at all; it was a set of dentures that had slipped from the man’s mouth at the moment of his fall, and his wife was now privately attempting to slip them back in place.

“These are good people caught in a dreadful situation,” the British woman thought. “How could we have misjudged them so?”

Grace Waters told the people in the crowded room that evening to be careful of making hasty and unsympathetic judgments; her stern warning driven home by the serious yet slightly absurd comparison of mistaking dentures for tarts. The meeting adjourned and the petition issue was tabled by the board members for another day. Tension raced in several directions.

A couple of weeks later, Grace Waters received an informal directive from her superintendent up in Deming. She understood the concept of a trial balloon and had even floated one or two herself during the years; one does not survive in any public school

system without having some notion about politics. The note said that any child not born in the United States is illegal and must be put out of school.

“John, I think we have a problem,” Grace Waters said, later in the telephone conversation with Superintendent Leathers. “And I’d like to run it by you first.”

“Alright, Grace,” he said.

“You know we have the three Sanders kids enrolled, right?”

“Harold Sanders, the man in charge of U.S. Customs?” he said.

“That’s right.”

“So, his kids are not Mexican, are they?”

“The children were born in Italy,” Grace Waters said.

“Please don’t call me anymore Grace,” he said. “You made your point.”

“Pop that balloon,” she said, gently laying the receiver back onto its cradle.

VI

Jesse Grace Waters retired some years later and remained in Columbus. She lived alone with her cat Smokey in a small house on a dirt street. Until her memory went bad she drove her Oldsmobile Delta eighty-eight to the grocery and post office, and a few other places around town. She continued to keep an eye on things.

As an educator she saw no race, class or economic levels, just children. She helped turned small ripples into big, beautiful waves. She believed that school was the one constant in many children’s lives, and that kids were basically the same, regardless of which side of the border they slept. Her demands of working hard, being on time, and respecting others helped several generations move forward through learning.

There are still many travelers along the old Camino Real highway; folks from South and Central America, and Mexico make their way north through Columbus – mostly for economic reasons. The two towns - Columbus and Palomas – have changed some, but stare quietly at one another, inevitably linked. The Poncho Villa State Park is on the American side of the border.

Certain memories forever clung to and chilled her heart.

“This is the best day ever,” the child said.

“Yes, yes it is,” said La Waters.

