

M I L K W E E D E D I T I O N S

A Year

BASIC



with Street Kids

NEEDS



in a City School

Julie Landsman



Basic Needs

A Year with Street Kids
in a City School

JULIE LANDSMAN

MILKWEED EDITIONS

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Printed in the United States of America

Published in 1993 by Milkweed Editions

Typeset in 11.5 pt. Adobe Garamond by Stanton Publication Services.

97 5 4 3

Publication of this book is made possible in part by grants provided by the Jerome Foundation; the Minnesota State Arts Board through an appropriation by the Minnesota State Legislature; and the Literature Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional support has been provided by the Dayton Hudson Foundation for Dayton's and Target Stores; First Bank System Foundation; General Mills Foundation; Honeywell Foundation; The McKnight Foundation; Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; Northwest Area Foundation; I. A. O'Shaughnessy Foundation; Star Tribune/Cowles Media Foundation; Surdna Foundation; Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Literary Publishers Marketing Development Program, funded through a grant to the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses; and generous individuals.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Landsman, Julie.

Basic Needs : a year with street kids in a city school / by Julie Landsman.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-915943-65-4

1. Problem children—Education (Secondary)—Minnesota—
Minneapolis—Case studies. 2. Education, Urban—Minnesota—
Minneapolis—Case studies. I. Title

LC4802.5.M6L36 1993

371.93'0973—dc20

93-16148

CIP

Acknowledgments

Portions of this book appeared in a slightly different form in *Clinton Street Quarterly*, *Sing Heavenly Muse*, and *Hurricane Alice*. My appreciation goes to the editors of those publications.

I am grateful to the McKnight Foundation and the Minnesota State Arts Board for their generous fellowships when I needed them the most. Also, I wish to express my appreciation to the Loft, a Center for Writing, for their support over these years.

There have been many public school colleagues from whom I have learned what it means to be a teacher. Specifically, in the years that make up this book, I especially want to thank Tom Kitto, who has continued to be an important friend and mentor. I also want to express my gratitude to Mary Kaye Carlson, Bob Johnson, Mary Jo Coyle, Mae Gossett, C. Hamner Williams III, Iola Smith, E. J. Johnson, Darlene Franson, Jeane Dixon, Jeff Burk, Dave Andell, Tom Olson, Bruce Villebrun, Sandy Westby, Audrey Murray, Larry Zimmerman, Bob Lynch, and Joan Rudd.

Without the kids, their warm response, their tenacity in spite of great odds, I could not have survived as a teacher. Their determination has always inspired me immensely.

Without my fellow writers who have read and reread the earlier drafts of this book, I could not have survived as a writer: Jim Moore, Christian Davis, Pat Francisco, Sue O'Halloran, Olivia Galt, David Mura, Ellen Hawley,

Shannon King, Jill Breckenridge, Mary Rockcastle, Alexs Pate, and Bart Schneider.

Thanks to the New Riverside Café on the West Bank, which provided me with great coffee and the perfect table by the window to write.

There are my teacher and reader friends who read a near-final draft and encouraged me to seek a publisher: Rosemary Prihoda-Pucci, Jill Lakowske, Paula Evans, Chris Thiem, Claudia Cady, my brother Boone Guyton Jr., and my sisters Lesley Guyton and Claudia Jones, and the Florida relatives, including my in-laws, Mitzi and Manny Landsman, Sol and Audrey Block, and Shelly Goldstein.

My friend Ruth Katz has simply always been there to read and offer support and helpful suggestions. John King has provided much computer assistance as well as never-ceasing encouragement. Lin Enger, who team teaches with me at the Arts High School, has never stopped believing in this book.

Natalie Goldberg gave me the process as well as the confidence and the belief in my own voice to keep going.

The late professor Harriet Sheridan taught me to write on the blackboard without turning my back on the class. For this skill I will be eternally in her debt.

I am grateful to Rhoda Weyr for her early support as an agent.

Emilie Buchwald, my editor, has been all a writer could wish for, and I believe the book has only been improved by her careful, tireless work.

My father, a writer, and my mother, a listener, have provided me with important role models.

Teachers who work with energy and devotion every day in the public schools under impossible conditions, in an increasingly violent and despairing world, continue to be my guides, my inspiration.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude, love, and continuing appreciation for the encouragement, affection, and

patience my husband Maury has given me over twenty-six years of a beautiful marriage. And to Aaron, my son, I can only say thank you for your hope and belief in me as a writer as well as your love for me as a mother.

Introduction

I have heard that once every seven years each cell in the human body is reconstructed. Because I have lived in Minnesota for almost twenty-four years, I believe that I have been rebuilt at least three times since moving here from the East Coast. My body feels, now, forever in tune with the landscape.

For awhile after we came to Minneapolis, I taught in the suburbs. I worked with learning-disabled and emotionally disturbed students. They came from trailer parks and small ranch-style houses, large mansions and condominiums. I liked them—the hyperactive kids who jumped around the building in pain after sitting too long, the quiet ones whose mothers ran the PTA, the one whose father was “born again” and who was kept so close and so tight his anger swelled under his skin.

And yet, all the time I taught in the suburbs I looked for a job in the cities. After three years I finally got the job I wanted in a special public school for students who had been removed from their neighborhood junior and senior high schools. These kids had assaulted staff members, often got into fights, swore at their teachers, and destroyed whole classrooms. In our program they were put into small classes and given individually designed instruction. They were also assigned to a group that met at the end of each day where they could work out their problems by planning ways to change and to adjust. I don’t know how I knew that this was the place I wanted to teach, but when it came it was absolutely right for me.

The first year I worked with kids who were African American, Native American, and white. Many of my students couldn't read. Those who could read, read at the first- or second-grade level. Their backgrounds ran the gamut of possibilities. They came from homes where their mothers drifted in and out, occasionally fixing meals. They came from homes where both parents worked and together brought home barely enough money to feed their big families. Often, their fathers were absent. Some fathers fenced stolen goods. From time to time their sons and daughters, my students, showed up outside my classroom door with watches, small radios, and jewelry that gleamed in the darkened shadows of the corridor. Yet I am convinced that these fathers meant well; they came to school from recent stints in prison to find out about their daughter's reading, their son's ability to use phonics. Their mothers were sometimes women bent on instilling the ways of the Lord into their sons, who had moved to Minneapolis from Chicago to keep their sons from the gangs. There were small and timid women who sat at conferences huddled under thin coats, pale from years of working at meaningless jobs in dry cleaners or fast-food restaurants. There were mothers elegant in fur who kept fine homes.

I learned about the differences in my kids' lives: their houses desolate or cluttered with knickknacks, their yards clean and bordered by perennials or littered with pieces of scrap metal, old car parts. At the same time I learned about the differences in my kids' ways of learning—what kept them from reading, what blocked certain letters and their associated sounds from coming through. Gradually I began to distinguish whether it was food, clothing, physical space, or psychic space they needed in order to be able to read. I also learned to understand and appreciate the sounds of black dialect, the hesitancy in the shape of Native American kids' speech, and the street bravado of the language used by white prostitutes who were my students.

As I write this, gangs have become part of Minneapolis school life. Beepers go off during geography, signaling seventh graders that it is time to make calls to their dealers. One evening recently, on the national news, I watched the funeral of a fifteen-year-old African American boy being buried in New York City. On the local news ten minutes later, I saw the funeral of another fifteen-year-old African American boy being buried in Minneapolis.

I grew up in a suburb an hour and a half by train from New York City, went to college near Boston, and later studied in Washington, D.C. The major difference I find between the cities of the East Coast and Minneapolis is the degree of severity of our problems. There are simply *more* kids dying in New York and Chicago. But they are dying here, too. They are hiding under bridges, cooking garbage-can leftovers with the old men and women who create homes in the most unexpected corners of the city. They are coming to school hungry, they are bringing knives, they are pushing their fathers off their bodies in the middle of the night, and they are carrying guns.

Jody, a boy I worked with in 1989 at a local junior high, began missing entire days, eventually not showing up at all, much to the dismay of his teachers, who had enjoyed teaching him and who believed he was doing well. One morning Cindy, the school social worker, and I went to his house to find out where he was and what he was doing during the day. He opened the door and stood before us in too-short pants, a ragged T-shirt, no socks, shoes flapping on his bare feet. It was the middle of November and cold. We could see his mother drift back and forth at the top of the stairs in her bathrobe. She refused to come down to talk to us. A baby girl lay curled between the feet of a couple of men who slept on the dining-room floor. Her diaper was obviously soiled.

We told Jody that he needed to come back to school. He looked at us, shook his head, shrugged his shoulders.

"I ain't got no clothes, man. I ain't got nothin' to wear."

"We'll get you something," said the social worker.

The next week, after collecting donations from the staff, Cindy took Jody shopping. They picked out a few sweaters, some socks, a pair of jeans, and a pair of name-brand athletic shoes, the most important part of his wardrobe. Cindy made sure Jody got free lunch as well as breakfast. When Jody came back he went to all of his classes. He missed only two days of school for the rest of the year.

One evening at a dinner party, not long after we had worked with Jody, I described his situation to an elegant woman on my right who lives twenty minutes away from Jody's house. She gives to liberal causes and reads newspapers each day, yet her response to my story was, "Hungry kids? In Minnesota? I find it hard to believe that we have that here." Her reaction did not shock me. I have heard it too often, more frequently here than in New York, D.C., Boston, Chicago, L.A., and other major cities. People in Minnesota refuse to admit that we do not take care of our hungry children, our disenchanted, cold, and shivering kids.

Because we have been praised for our education system and because we tell ourselves we have escaped the usual problems of big cities, we tend not to believe the bad news, the facts. The skepticism of those who are not faced with these realities contrasts sharply with the shrill hysteria of the voices of those of us who are. We who teach are silenced, almost believing that we *imagine* what happens in our rooms each morning. We almost doubt what we see: the advance of the knives and guns, the increasing violence, our kids stumbling into class hungry. We begin to think our urgency must be exaggerated, that we are being melodramatic.

We doubt until the next day at school, until the next afternoon when a young girl comes into the classroom and tells us that she's hiding out from her pimp, staying on the streets by

the lake although it's getting cold. Then we know. We are telling the truth. Even here in Minneapolis, the kids are not doing well.

As I write this, a principal is recovering from being knocked unconscious when he tried to keep a group of Vice Lord gang members from coming into his high school. As I write, a boy who decided to stop selling crack and was beaten severely lies in the hospital. Our city, solidly midwestern in values, idyllically set in the midst of a series of beautiful lakes, is home to crack babies, runaways, and Disciples. We are not exempt.

This book is a recounting of a school year during the time I worked in a special program in the Minneapolis Public Schools, a program for students who are so assaultive and verbally disruptive that they cannot get an education in the regular classroom in their home school. I will call the program SAVE. Every incident described actually happened. The kids are based on real individuals, with names and details about them changed in order to assure their privacy. A few of them are composites of two or three students with whom I have worked. In order to present a situation in my personal life and my students' responses to it, I have collapsed several years into one.

I did not include the most dramatic events in my teaching life in this book. I did not include the death of Sherry from a shooting related to her drug use, or the gang fights in the hallways. I kept to the story of one class during one year. Now, many more students like the ones I describe in this book are in regular high schools in our city. Large numbers of them are not getting any extra help.

If there is one thing I have found over these years, it is that students like these want to learn. They want the tough love of programs geared toward working with them, encouraging them to read and study, making them responsible for their

lives. They want teachers who will say to them: “You need to try to read, you need to learn this language, on this page, even though your mother was beaten by your father last night, even though your aunt fell down the stairs because she was so stoned she couldn’t see. Here is food. Here is warmth.”



August

*“You have the baby, someone to love, someone
who’ll love you, someone to talk to.
This was going to be my child. Nobody
could ever take him away from me.
So I made my decision to have my baby.”*

—Leticia, pregnant at 15,
from *Before Their Time: Four Generations
of Teenage Mothers*
by Joelle Sander

I am sitting in my classroom. It is a week before school officially opens. The building looks beautiful: the floors waxed, the windows washed. A squirrel stops by but only briefly on the branch outside my window. The silence in my room is different from the silence after a day of teaching. Then the kids' stories will still reverberate off the walls. Now, though, I feel a silence of separation, of rest deserved, of privacy.

Without knocking, Leah walks in. I haven't seen her for over a year, not since she left one May afternoon to have her baby. A couple of times last year, she brought her son to school. Then she disappeared entirely. Before leaving for the summer, I heard that Leah, at seventeen, was about to deliver her second child.

"Hey!"

"How are you?" I ask.

"Oh, tired, Landsman. Pretty tired. Did you hear?"

"No. Hear what?"

"My new baby died, Landsman."

I get up and put my arms around her. Holding her, I think about what I do not learn in the summer, what I do not know about the lives of them all.

"She was such a perfect one," Leah tells me now, her long arms on my shoulders, her face near mine. "She was a little girl, and I bought her clothes, a few pink things, so she'd be different from my other one."

And suddenly I know it all. I can see her bringing her baby home, laying her down to sleep in a small room at the back of the apartment, sitting on an old plastic-covered chair next to the crib, whispering to her daughter, the baby in a new pink nightgown.

And now, before school begins, in the moment when Leah holds me against her and the sound of her voice is full of

bewildered sadness, resting near my ear, in my hair, now that we talk, I am not sure I am ready again for these stories, the anger, starting all over again, with a new group.

"I got to go," she says, pulling away. I put my arm around her waist, hers slips around mine, and we walk to the door.

"You going to school this fall?" I ask.

"Yeah," she answers. "Over across the North Side."

"You think you'll finish up?"

"Yeah. Maybe." She shrugs. "That algebra class is so hard, though. And that history stuff about Egypt. So much readin'."

"You're good at reading. Remember how you helped out Susan? You could *teach* reading!"

Leah looks surprised. "Naw, Landsman. I couldn't teach no readin'." She smiles, stops for a moment and looks sideways at me. "I couldn't teach no readin'."

"Yes, you could. You were so patient with her and she wasn't easy."

Leah laughs. "Ooooh. She used to cuss everyone out!"

"You could hear her all the way across the lunchroom when she didn't like the food."

Leah chuckles again. "And then she would start tossing those trays all around. What she doin' now?"

"I think she went to Washburn. Somewhere to a regular school. She calmed down after a while."

"Yeah. With a grandma like that, you *had* to calm down." We both laugh, remembering Susan's grandmother, who had taken over the job of raising her when Susan's mother couldn't cope. Mrs. Walters would come right into my classroom swinging her purse at her granddaughter's head. Susan would duck, and I would try to intervene, but I could never get there in time. After one swing, she would stop, pull Susan out of the chair, and walk her down the hall to a little room where some shop equipment was kept. There they would meet with the head of the school for an impromptu guardian conference. For weeks afterwards Susan would behave in class,

in the lunchroom, and even on the bus.

“She did learn to read before she left,” says Leah, wistfully. “She really tried.”

“Because you helped her,” I say, turning to her. She looks pleased, accepts the compliment this time without a shrug.

“I really do got to go now,” she says.

I nod, give her a hug again. I don’t want her to leave, but she does, moving slowly down the hall, in her bulky post-pregnancy clothes, her feet in backless sandals flopping along the polished floors.

“Come back again and visit when the year starts,” I shout after her.

“Maybe,” she calls back without turning around.