

MICHELLE RHEE

RADICAL

Fighting to Put Students First



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MICHAEL ERHEB



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The names of some of the students featured throughout this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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RADICAL

TO THE CHILDREN OF WASHINGTON, D.C.,
WHO DESERVE THE BEST SCHOOLS IN THE WORLD

Introduction: Call to Arms

A few weeks before graduating from college, I faced a choice between two very different paths into my future.

One would take me to graduate school to study labor relations. My mind was brimming with ideas about how to improve manufacturing production through educational incentives for workers and their families. I had been accepted to programs at Rutgers and the University of Illinois.

The other would take me to a public school classroom. I had become intrigued by Teach For America, a relatively new organization in 1992 that trained college graduates to work in public schools in low-income communities.

Graduate school appealed to my practical side, the one that would satisfy my hard-driving mother. Get trained! Get a job! Get married!

Teaching spoke to the part of me that had been growing stronger since I was a teen in Toledo, Ohio, volunteering at a local elementary school. My father always taught my brothers and me that the person who has the ability to do more than take care of

her own should give back to the community. “Don’t just think of yourselves,” he would tell us.

So as my college days came to an end, I was caught between two conflicting choices. I struggled. Two weeks before graduation, I called my grandmother in Seoul, South Korea. My mother’s mother had always given me good counsel. I described my dilemma.

“What should I do, *Halmuhnee*?” I asked.

She paused. As a young woman, she had taught kindergarten. I knew she was considering my question.

“Go teach,” she said.

But the school was in a poor neighborhood in Baltimore, I explained, a city I knew nothing about.

“It’s going to be really tough,” I told her.

“It’s little kids,” she said. “What’s hard about that?”

Little did my grandmother know how hard the next few years as a teacher would be for me. Or how rewarding. Little did she know that my experiences in the classroom would lead me on an odyssey, from my rage at the failures of the public education system to my resolve to change that system. Making sure schools in America engage, teach, and prepare students—regardless of where they come from or how they arrive at school—has become my life’s work. I am committed to creating a sense of honor for teachers in our country, and to rewarding them for success in the classroom. Somewhere along the way our country has lost the expectations that all children can learn and excel, along with our regard for teachers.

America is the greatest country in the world. But that status is at risk. The United States will not maintain that leadership role—from commerce to military might to moral authority—if we as a nation continue to allow our public schools to deteriorate.

A report by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce found that the U.S. economy will create 46.8

million new and “replacement” jobs in the next five years, 63 percent of which will require some college education. Yet we’re failing to produce the well-trained American workers we need to fill these positions. Half of businesses report that they can’t find the workers they need to hire for vacancies they have. And the truth is that when we fail to fill these positions, they’ll inevitably have to be outsourced to places like China and India, or other countries where young people have the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in those roles. This is a significant problem that will consign America to decline.

True, America still generates some of the world’s best patents, ideas, and businesses—Facebook, Google, and Apple, for starters. But if the programmers are in India, the engineers are in South Korea, and the software developers are in Singapore—where does that leave us?

Two summers ago, I heard the prime minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, speak before an annual gathering of media executives. When the topic turned to competing in the global economy, he chose to discuss education. He said that when his country set its sights on entering the global market and winning its share, it decided it must first create a strong education system. If its children were not prepared to compete, how could Singapore hope to gain a foothold against the United States, Germany, or China? The country made sure to establish a first-class education system that was linked to the financial and commercial sectors. Seems obvious: invest in education and you ensure a strong workforce and vibrant economy. But in the United States we see education as a social issue, rather than an economic one. When budgets get cut at federal, state, and local levels, education often falls first under the ax. That, too, must change if we hope to compete.

In America in 2012, birth determines possibilities. A poor kid’s chances of graduating from college are one in ten. Of all developed nations, America is near the bottom in terms of social

mobility. If you told me the race of a child and the zip code in which she lives, I could, with pretty good accuracy, tell you her academic achievement levels. That's the most un-American thing I can imagine! This is supposed to be the land of equal opportunity. But for America's children, it's not. Where you live and the color of your skin largely determine your lot in life. In my mind, that is nothing less than criminal. And it will come to define who we are as a nation unless we do something dramatic—something truly radical—to reverse this reality.

Wealth and class do not ensure a quality public school. Middle- and upper-middle-class children and their parents suffer from mediocrity in the classroom, as well. First-rate suburbs have second-rate schools that are failing to prepare children to get good jobs, create new companies, or innovate. And often, these families don't even know it.

The poorest kids in America (the bottom quartile economically) rank twenty-sixth out of thirty developed nations in math compared with their peers. Our richest kids? They also rank twenty-sixth out of thirty in their peer group. Middling schools are not a problem confined to our ghettos. They plague every neighborhood and community across the nation.

My aim is to bring excellence back to public education by making sure that laws and policies have one goal: to educate students well. What I learned—from teaching at Harlem Park in Baltimore to creating The New Teacher Project to running the Washington, D.C., schools—is that a great teacher can inspire and help any child learn, regardless of that child's circumstances. He or she can come to class hungry from a filthy apartment and a single parent selling drugs, or a posh mansion where the parents are too busy making money to care about their kids. When they get to a good school in front of a terrific teacher, they can learn.

The education agenda in the United States for the last thirty

years has been driven largely by the teachers unions and many other special interests, from the textbook publishers to the testing companies. Students have often been neglected in the process, and our standing among other nations has suffered. Students in the United States rank fourteenth in reading, seventeenth in science, and twenty-fifth in math, according to the 2009 study of thirty-four countries by the Programme for International Student Assessment.

The predicament has only grown more desperate in the past two years.

In these chapters you will learn about my awakening to the potential that every child can learn, given a great teacher; my rage at realizing that adults and special interests were blocking change that could bring and keep great teachers in classrooms; and my realization that it would take a grassroots movement to break through the barriers standing in the way of making public schools work for students.

I have separated the book into three sections.

In Part I, “The Journey,” I narrate my path to becoming a reformer, from my roots in teaching to my upbringing in the Midwest to the challenges I faced along the way. I hope you will begin to understand how my values and rage developed me as a teacher and a chancellor—a daughter and a mother.

In Part II, “The Movement,” I describe the power, the struggle, and the potential of the movement to redirect public education toward the students. You will read my tale through personal stories: from students who have transcended their surroundings—thanks to great teachers—to teachers who have thrived in classrooms and improved the outcomes of their students to parents who have struggled and forced changes to improve their schools.

In Part III, “The Promise,” I present my vision for what American schools could be.

My goal is to help create a movement that will remake American public education, so that every child can have the opportunity to learn and excel—and join a workforce that will help the United States compete and win in the global economy. It will not be easy or gentle; it will not be quick. It will require a struggle over power and money.

My grandmother asked: How hard can that be?

Very.

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PART I

The Journey

Roots in the Classroom

China stared at me, desperate for an answer. I was paralyzed. Excuses filled my mind as her bulging eyes bored into me.

"Please, Ms. Rhee," she pleaded. "Please!"

We were in my car in front of the notorious Franklin Street housing project high-rises, one of the most dangerous places in all of Baltimore. Word on the street was that a dozen murders and scores of violent crimes had taken place in these towers in the past year. It was about 6:00 p.m., the sun was setting, and the situation at the towers was looking sketchier by the moment. I gazed up at the twenty-four-floor building with its grated and gated windows and walkways.

"Ms. Rhee, I can't walk up there myself. There are drug dealers everywhere!" She wasn't exaggerating. I could see the young men with baggy pants and hats on nearly every floor of the tower. "Ms. Rhee, I'm scared for real!"

My mind began racing with options, but mostly remorse. I often kept China after school with me to do her homework and help me prepare for the next day. Usually, though, I dropped her off at her mother's house on Carey Street, which, though also dangerous,

was filled with neighbors who knew me. "There's that crazy Chinese lady. The one from up over at the school!" they'd say.

Today was different. China was staying with her dad, who lived in the towers; as I pulled up to the entrance, she was begging me to walk her up to her dad's apartment. I didn't respond. While I couldn't imagine sending this tiny eight-year-old up into that building alone, I was terrified of walking into the building and back out again on my own. It was one of those moments that define a person. Half of me wanted to push her out of the car and peel out of the parking lot. The other wanted to grin widely, grab her hand with confidence, and head into the building.

The thought of fleeing was beginning to win out when a loud knock on my window startled the bejesus out of both of us. "HEEEYYYYYY! Ms. Rhee! What's up, China!" It was China's cousin. "You come to see your daddy? I'll get you up there!" he offered, having no idea what a bullet he was allowing me to dodge. "Great, appreciate it!" I said breezily, as I unrolled the window and flashed him a smile of gratitude.

The minute China got out of the car, I spun out of that parking lot so quickly I might have left tire marks. On my way home, visions of China's frightened eyes kept flashing in front of me. "Good Lord," I thought. "What kind of a world is this? I can't believe this innocent little girl is in these daunting situations on a daily basis."

It made my heart ache, and it made me evermore thankful for the idyllic situation from whence I came.

I GREW UP WITH certainty. I always knew what was expected of me, what I would do, and what would happen to me tomorrow.

The main priority in our family was education. It drove every conversation, admonition, and decision in our household. It loomed over my brothers and me like a smothering cloud.

We were expected not only to put 100 percent of our attention into school, but also to excel. To be number one. And nothing less was acceptable. In fact, anything less was considered a failure.

My first memory of school was not a pleasant one. My parents chose Little Meadows for me, a nursery school in Sylvania, Ohio, a small town northwest of Toledo, near the Michigan line. I remember walking by the staircase one day and overhearing two teachers talking about me. “I think she’s slow,” they hissed. “She *never* says anything!”

Actually, I was just painfully shy and quiet. But despite my outward appearances, I was sad and wounded just the same when I heard the teachers’ assessment of me. “What do they know?” I remember thinking. “They don’t know me!”

That feeling, the feeling of being an outsider, persisted throughout my life, mostly because my parents went out of their way to make us Korean. They spoke to us in Korean. My brothers and I went to Korean school every week. There were no Korean food groceries or restaurants in Toledo, so we drove to a suburb of Ann Arbor, Michigan, every week to buy cabbage, tofu, rice, and soy sauce.

My parents were dedicated to ensuring that we knew what being Korean and the Korean culture meant. They doggedly instilled in us the culture of the country they left in the 1960s, which my father described as “education crazy.” Both of my parents—Shang and Inza—grew up surrounded by educators.

I come from a family of teachers. Jung Sook Lee, my mother’s mother, taught kindergarten in Korea. Four of my aunts on my father’s side were teachers. Hae Woo Rhee, my father’s father, was a well-known educator in Seoul. He taught for fifty years, starting in primary school, during the Japanese occupation before 1945. He became a principal and served on Seoul’s board of education.

When my father was young, everyone knew his dad. Hae Woo Rhee was known as a strict but great teacher and a principal who