

# PALO ALTO ODYSSEY

## The modern way of teaching kids to write

MIRANDA'S friend Valerie, a life-long resident of Palo Alto, obtained her master's degree at age 50, after raising her children, and now had begun teaching at an elementary school. Miranda wanted to know about it.

"Education has so changed," said Valerie. "It is very different than when you and I were students at Addison, way back when."

Miranda was trying to figure out what to do with her life. If she retired, and made the move from New York back to her hometown of Palo Alto, where she had grown up, how would she spend her time?

She felt fortunate to have the option of retiring at an earlier age, rather than a later age, since she had friends who said they would be working forever. But Miranda also realized that the happiest people she knew were those who loved their work; and that "retirement" could be just a pathway to the grave.

She thought she might tutor reading and writing.

"It's all different in the schools now," said Valerie. "The old 'drill-and-kill' method was to teach to the test, and that's gone."

This is part 56 of a 72-part fictionalized serial appearing in the Daily Post, written by John Angell Grant with illustrations by Steve Curl.

"But everyone wants their kids to have high test scores," said Miranda, "So they can get into Stanford, or wherever."

"Nowadays," replied Valerie, "All standardized testing results are 'ZIP code dependent.' That means that if your kid's ZIP code is 94301, her test scores will be fine."

"So where does that leave the teachers?" asked Miranda.

"We have moved back to child-centered education," said Valerie, "And passion-led student projects."

"I don't know what that means," said Miranda.

"For reading and writing," replied Valerie, "we let the children tell their stories."

"And how do you do that?" asked Miranda.

"We have four children work on a writing project together," said Valerie. "For two weeks they do 'seed ideas' — such as a big feeling moment; or a favorite person; or the first and last memories in their lives. Then they do a 10-minute quick-write."

"Later we ask them to story-arc it," she continued, "And pick out what the message is. But mostly they're allowed to do it themselves the way they want."

"And where does it end up?" asked Miranda.

"We post the stories on the wall," said Valerie. "Mistakes and all. Seeing a child's mistakes as part of the process is more satisfactory than seeing a teacher's red-lined drafts simply recopied as the child's own work."

"That fits my experience," said Miranda. "In my vocational world, all the big bosses would dictate a few major themes and then pay others to do their writing."

"Exactly," said Valerie. "It's figuring out the story that is important. And that's what we are teaching."

More tomorrow.



MIRANDA