I was 22 and straight out of my Teach For America training when I met Wendall. It was 1996, and he was an 11-year-old 6th grader in my very first class. He immediately caught my eye because he had a proclivity for being “off task.” I thought he might be suffering from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), but, as I watched Wendall more closely in class over the next several weeks, I realized that he could, if he so desired, work for long stretches with great concentration. He didn’t have ADHD. He simply wasn’t sure what to make of me and so set out to challenge me, to see if he could trust me.

In doing this, Wendall would turn out to be one of my greatest teachers.

I was smart enough that first week to know that I had much to learn. So I turned to the ultimate source of information about Wendall: his mother. Mrs. Jefferson informed me that her son had been a successful student in the elementary grades, but had become involved in activities outside of school that were taking him down a less-positive path.

When I asked her how to approach Wendall, she gave me the most important piece of education advice I may ever have received: be firm with him, but simultaneously “reach out” and connect, in a meaningful way, beyond math lessons.

When I learned that Wendall had earned honors in elementary school for his chess acumen, I invited him to play a few matches after school in an effort to get to know him better, as his mother had suggested. I must admit I was startled that first afternoon when Wendall defeated me match after match after match.

Even more humiliating, the next day I agreed, as a consequence of my defeat, to proclaim to the class: “Wendall is a chess beast. He beat me five times in a row.”

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Even after he left my 6th-grade class, we would meet in the afternoons to play chess, go over math assignments, or just talk about music, movies, or politics. He matured quite a bit during his middle-school years, and when 8th-grade graduation finally arrived, Wendall walked across the stage as class valedictorian. He then went on to Banneker Senior High School, one of Washington, D.C.’s flagship academic schools.

Throughout Wendall’s high-school years, we kept working together, first on math, and then on many other subjects. We also read and analyzed nonschool novels, and we explored museums across the city.

After his sophomore year, in an act of incredible loyalty, Wendall decided to leave Banneker and move to his neighborhood high school in order to watch over his younger brother, a young man who, like Wendall years earlier, had begun to go down a negative path. I was particularly moved by this as I have two brothers myself.

But Wendall never let go of his own dreams. After years of hard work and an SAT score in the mid-1300s, he is now a 20-year-old junior at Morehouse College with his sights set on Columbia University’s prestigious postgraduate engineering program. Last April, he honored me, more profoundly than he will ever know, by flying up from Atlanta to be in the Rose Garden when the president presented me with the National Teacher of the Year award.

I’m honestly not sure who helped whom the most over the past nine years. I know one thing for sure. I certainly would not have been standing in the Rose Garden last April had it not been for Wendall. He made me the teacher I am.

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