

Bob Lawrence
DeVry College

The Sub

“You *have* to find a job,” said Judy, my newly-wed wife and first-year Humanities professor at Loop College. She was on the nine-month pay plan, so in June, less than three months away, we’d have no source of income. Freshly armed with my M.A. in English, I wanted to teach at the college level too. But this was 1970, and college English departments were shifting modes from *find a warm body for freshman comp* to *sort through hundreds of desperate resumes*. With no college teaching experience, I didn’t even get an interview.

The prospect of subbing in high school brought back uncomfortable memories from student teaching: A hall monitor, mistaking me for a student, yelled, “Hey you, where’s your hall pass!?” My supervising teacher, a balding middle-aged guy with a pot belly, left me alone with the students, kindling a crescendo of disruption, which ceased the instant he returned. While lecturing on 18th century British literature to a sea of bored teen faces, I collapsed on the lit book in front of me, laughing and muttering, “This is absurd.” These incidents occurred in a suburban Long Island high school—what perils lay waiting for me in the rough and tumble classrooms of Chicago?

Wives, especially new ones, have a way: “Even if it’s only two and a half months, it’s *something*, Bob.” So I rode the L downtown and filled out an application. Illinois teaching certification wasn’t required for subs back then, just a bachelor’s degree—any bachelor’s degree—and passing grades on two tests: TB and Basic Skills. My pin-cushioned arm didn’t swell, and I breezed through the Basic Skills test, whose

apparent aim was to sift out any verbal or mathematical illiterates who had managed to graduate from college.

The machinery of assigning day-to-day subs made me feel like Charlie Chaplin on the gears in *Modern Times*. If my services were desired, I would receive a phone call before 7:00 in the morning. A voice would announce Sub Central, a number and a subject area. If I wanted the job, I must immediately respond, “Accept.” A long pause or any attempt at conversation would prompt a click in the ear.

The first two mornings after becoming certified to sub, I lay in bed hoping the phone would *not* ring. It stayed silent. Then, the next morning, at 6:45, I heard a monotone female voice: “Sub Central. One-fifty-eight, History.”

“Accept.”

I’d gotten an A in every history course I’d ever taken. Why not? I checked my directory. Cooley High. The same school that would become the setting of an eponymous movie wherein the hero goes on to LA to become a writer, while his best friend, falsely accused of snitching, gets beaten to death under the L tracks. I drove my rickety, smoky 2-cycle engine SAAB (one of the worst cars ever produced) to the Near North Side ghetto.

I found the main office, signed in, and was shown the refrigerator in the break room, where teachers, drinking coffee and chatting, appeared relaxed. The students in my first period classroom were relaxed as well—too relaxed. A few listened to me, but they asked questions about *me* instead of the New Deal: “Where you live? How long you been teaching?” Others read or doodled. Still others gabbed with each other or keyed in on my primary competition for attention—a rollicking card game in the back of the room.

In walked the assistant principal, a young white guy in silk tie and pastel shirt rolled up at the sleeves—the type you’d expect to see carousing on Rush Street on a Saturday night. In my high school days, the assistant principal looked and acted like a mean cop. *No matter how he looks, he must be checking up on me. And I have almost no control over the class.* The assistant principal headed for the back of the room. My stomach waxed queasy. I waited for him to read the riot act to the card players and chew me out. He stopped right in front of the game. A long pause ensued. My stomach tightened.

“Who’s winning?” he asked. Friendly banter between him and the kids followed. He exited the room with a smile; I sighed in relief and began to slip into relax mode myself.

As I drove home, I realized that a sub’s primary role was not *educator*. My primary role was somehow cued by Mayor Daley’s famous malapropism from the 68 Democratic Convention: “The police are not there to create disorder, they are there to preserve disorder.”

Two days later: “Sub Central. Two fifty-four. Physical Education.”

“Accept.”

They had to be kidding. Yes, I was a longstanding sports fan. I’d watched Joe DiMaggio play his last season, heard Floyd Patterson knock out Ingmar Johansen, watched the Giants fail to make fourth and inches in the 58 title game, watched Hondo Havlicek steal another championship for Bill Russell and the Celtics. But to the school gym I brought 5’ 5” and 130 pounds of athletically challenged apprehension.

Coach instructed me to monitor the students during their free time. Hey, this wasn't so bad after all—watching energetic teens engaged in hoops and other innocent diversions-- Until one of the boys, a tall, stocky, blondish kid circling the gym in a fast jog, assumed the spotlight. In addition to huffing and puffing with increasing volume, he was yelling angry epithets, his voice quavering with emotion. I heard a snippet of his rant, something about “the Jews.” With each subsequent circle of the shiny hardwood floor, the runner's face reddened while his anger intensified and focused on a group of students standing near the wall to my right. *This neo-nazi is on the verge of going apeshit. What am I supposed to do? I don't even have a whistle.*

One of the students ran into the office and warned staff of the impending blowup. A second substitute teacher, a guy not much taller than I am, darted out of the office toward the troublemaker, who had stopped running, and, seething with rage and tears, was confronting another student. The sub, shouting and waving his arms, broke up the incipient fight. Still emoting, the troublemaker flailed at the sub, who must have been a real PE major or an ex-MP (or both). The sub rammed his forearm into the breastbone of the troubled youth, hoisted him up and slammed him against the wall. Tantrum spent, the kid melted onto the floor.

Flush with my success as a gym teacher, I was to “teach” a health class during the upcoming period. An easy gig. I didn't have to feign expertise in disease pathology, hygiene or basic nutrition. All I had to do was watch an educational film along with the students. Coach introduced me as the substitute for his absent colleague. An AV geek came in to set up the film projector. Coach left. Immediately the kids started talking. The AV geek had some trouble threading the film, stoking the unruliness. (Having seen

numerous presenters fumble with ever more sophisticated equipment, I've come to dub such moments "the obligatory technical glitch.")

At last light flickered onto our little silver screen and the overhead fluorescents went off. *The film should shut them up—a practical application for everyday life; maybe I'll even learn something.*

I was in for a huge disappointment. The day's feature was a much bigger turn-off than those grainy old World Series films aired during extended rain delays. The day's feature was a U.S. government propaganda film, vintage 1950s, offering survival tips for the aftermath of a nuclear attack. The narrator was a handsome, impeccably suited man who came equipped with one of those voices-with-a-smile. A sample tip: The blast has subsided and you want to eat. You have a potato. Slice away the outer sections (close-up of potato and knife), which could be contaminated with radiation, and then cook the middle. The students greeted survival tips for nuclear war with talking, shouting and laughter—the room resonated like Party Central. Granted, as a critical response to the rabid absurdity of the film, their unruliness was more than justified. But hey, I'm the teacher, I'm supposed to be in charge here. "Quiet!!" Not a dent in the ruckus.

The film approached its conclusion. Hopeful violins swelled in the background while the narrator proclaimed, "Life poses difficult challenges; nuclear war could be one of them. But with careful thought and proper action, people can overcome even the most daunting of challenges." Spitballs started zipping back and forth. Lots of spitballs. Then an eraser. Had pastry been at hand, the class would have replicated a pie-throwing scene from an old slapstick movie. The small, darkened room seemed on the verge of exploding.

The door burst open; the overhead lights flicked on—enter Coach, looking as stern as an assistant principal from my high school days. He didn't say a word. He didn't have to. Instant silence.

During the remainder of the school day, I received not a word of admonishment about my shortcomings as a PE teacher. I drove home, shared my experience with my wife over dinner, guzzled a few beers, and collapsed, waiting for the Charlie Chaplin gears to turn the next morning.

I subbed three more times for a total of five over a span of two weeks. At Lakeview High, I was actually able to teach literature and grammar. An English teacher had left clear and thorough lesson plans; her tenth graders were polite and responsive. I learned from the students that she was in her first year of teaching—22 years of age (“She’s so old,” commented one 15-year-old). I could tell that the teacher cared for the kids, treated them with respect, engaged them in active learning, enjoyed what she was doing, and didn't rule as an autocrat. Students who are granted a temporary respite from the iron hand are the ones most likely to act out. (Is there a clue here to the recidivism that haunts our penal system?)

At the end of my two weeks, a letter arrived informing me that I'd been accepted as an Interviewer II with the Illinois State Employment Service. I immediately notified Sub Central that I was no longer available. I enjoyed a short vacation and went on to become an employment counselor, a job that fit me about as well as Cinderella's slipper on her stepsister's foot.

As month after month passed in the mind-numbing bureaucracy, my teaching aspirations receded like a distant dream. Then, after seven years, I spotted a listing in

The Reader for an adjunct instructor at Columbia College, teaching freshman comp with a creative writing approach. To the interview, along with my resume and writing portfolio, I brought black and white glossies of my two produced plays. In one photo, the protagonist of *The Crisis* is seen explaining how he lost control of a class while showing a film about surviving nuclear war.

I landed the Columbia job and started a new career. Now, approaching retirement after 30 years of teaching, I look back upon my two memorable weeks as a sub: I wonder whether the English teacher at Lakeview High is still teaching. Did she avoid burnout or the lure of early retirement? I wonder if Larry Lehan, the potbellied teacher who encouraged me at the Long Island High School, is still alive. I'd love to tell him that his trust was rewarded. I've become a good teacher whose special talent, ironically, is subbing for absent professors—I can step into almost any class as if I've been there all along. And I wonder what happened to that client of mine at the Employment Service who so poignantly illustrated the connection between the primary role of a Chicago sub and the task of finding employment.

He was a high school dropout, the son of a woman receiving Aid to Dependent Children and therefore required to register with the Work Incentive Program. He was short, chubby, well-groomed and, no doubt wary of “the man,” taciturn and soft-spoken. He showed up punctually for every appointment, and every week I couldn't dig up a suitable opening in our “job bank.” At long last, I found a potential winner: “Here's an employer who's willing to train. All the applicant has to do is read a ruler to the nearest quarter inch.”

“I was never too good with them rulers,” he replied.