Lessons in Black and White:

Crossing Color Lines with Miss Kay in Room 406

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The white lady is front and center inside Room 406, a tiny whirlwind of dark hair and bright ideals, pacing, clutching a newspaper and trying to prod her 11th-graders into a discussion about current events. There's the president in Africa. Reggie White's sermon. The D.C. school chief's resignation.

The main thing on her students' minds today, though, is Jonesboro. It was a horrible crime, they say, an American tragedy: children killing children.

But in Susie Kay's history class at H.D. Woodson High School, where all the students are African American, the schoolyard shootings are viewed through a scrim of race, delineated in black and white.

"Miss Kay, don't you think that if those two kids were black they would definitely be tried as adults and there wouldn't be all this discussion about it?" asks 16-year-old Kia Wiggins.

Right, several others agree. If two black children had been the shooters, there would be no hand-wringing about why they did it, what psychological event pushed them over the edge. "They would be called natural-born killers," says Lester Davis.

As always, there's a feeling in Room 406 that white children's lives are more valued than theirs. Across the country people are lamenting what happened in Arkansas, saddened that the innocence of the surviving classmates was stolen away. In this Northeast Washington neighborhood -- dubbed "the killing fields" by police -- funerals for bullet-riddled classmates are almost routine. In one year, three seniors in one of Kay's classes were killed.

The teacher interrupts. Calm down, she gently tells her students. "I could be talking about grapefruits and you'd bring up race."

But she knows, after eight years teaching at Woodson, that race is impossible to ignore. On this day, like so many before, Kay and her

kids confront the fact that they come from entirely different cultures. Worlds separated by class, race and a dirty river.

There is "Miss Kay's side," as the students call it -- what they see as a society of privilege and money and connections and happiness. The white side. And there is the black side, a place of poverty, struggle and pain. Kay's students say they know about white culture mainly from television shows; hardly any interact regularly with whites -- "Caucasians," as they call them. Most have never met a Jewish person, except for Miss Kay, who wears her Star of David necklace every day. Prompting students to ask, "Isn't that the star of the Devil?"

"And what's the difference between a white person and a Jew anyway?" asks another. Both are rich, right? Woodson, with an all-black enrollment of 1,165, has two other white teachers. But Kay is especially known for building bridges across the Anacostia River.

President Clinton has been pushing the nation to talk frankly about race and the legacy of slavery -- and as part of that initiative, she was invited to speak at one of the race forums. Her classroom provides a window into the raw emotions that surround one of the most divisive issues in American life.

In Room 406, the white lady and her black students are learning things about each other that most people never learn.

"The Tower of Power," as the students long ago nicknamed their school, is a nine-story slab of gray concrete that juts sharply above a desolate landscape of public housing. In reality, Woodson, named after a black civic and education leader, couldn't be farther from Washington's corridors of power.

People from Miss Kay's side of the river rarely come anywhere near her school, where the students step through metal detectors and lug their books up and down eight flights of stairs because the escalators haven't worked regularly for years.

They don't see the toilets that don't flush, the faucets that don't work,

the classrooms without heat or the swimming classes taught on long tables because the pool is so filthy that coach Bruce Bradford has scrawled the words "DIRTY" and "HELP" in the grime on the bottom. (To actually swim, the championship team must commute to the other side of the District, to a Tenleytown high school.)

Susie Kay, 33, the daughter of a well-connected naval captain, lives in a row house on Capitol Hill. She makes $26,000 a year at Woodson. She commutes across the Anacostia River in a decade-old Toyota.

Why do you teach at Woodson, Kay's white acquaintances ask. Aren't you uncomfortable being such a minority? Do you carry a gun to school? Do your students ever threaten you? Aren't you afraid of them?

The teacher smiles. You don't understand, she says. In her classroom, there is no them. There is Theo. And Randy. And Stefany and Dawn. And Shynetra and Byron. And Chris and William and Ayana and Jeffon

and Kerwin and LaQuinthia, and scores of other bright, college-bound students. Kay teaches world history and American government in the charter school at Woodson, called the Academy of Business and Finance. Students must apply to the academy. In a city school system with a 40 percent dropout rate, more than 90 percent of the academy's 240 graduates go to college. It should be obvious why she stays, Kay tells her friends. "It's the kids.

The kids are amazing. I'm so moved by their perseverance." And she's learning how to persevere, too. On a Monday morning not long ago, Miss Kay greeted one of her favorite students, LaQuinthia Carroll, and began chatting excitedly about the past weekend. Some friends had thrown Kay a surprise birthday party.

"And how was your weekend?" Kay asked LaQuinthia, who goes by Quinn. Quinn stared back, tears welling in her eyes. Somebody had shot at her over the weekend.

"Can't you do something to help me be safe?" she asked her teacher. It's become an old story. Every Monday morning brings a new list of relatives and close friends who either have been killed or have died because of poor medical care, Kay says.

Quinn, 18, is a senior, treasurer of the student government. She's been accepted at three colleges and wants to be a lawyer. She also loves to draw -- her chalk portrait of a serene and sensual angel hangs in the art room.

But if you ask what her greatest achievement is, she is very clear. "Still being alive," she says. Quinn's best friend was killed a few years ago, shot in the head and left in the middle of the street to die. Her father was killed, too, when she was 13. At Christmastime. Quinn is always sad around the holidays. She is sad a lot.

When they met two years ago, when Quinn was a 10th-grader, she was put off by Miss Kay's perkiness. The white lady was too enthusiastic about life, too upbeat. But they've since become close. Kay has secured an internship

for Quinn in a downtown law firm, one of many such connections she tries to cultivate. When she was growing up, Quinn says, the only white people she ever saw were prostitutes, cops and parole officers. She lives about six miles from

Woodson in a Southeast Washington housing project called the Stanton Dwellings. She wakes at 5 a.m. to take several buses to attend school. Like nearly all of her classmates, Quinn lives with only one parent. Her mother is a construction worker. Quinn is 6 feet 1 but she doesn't think of herself as tall.

"I feel kind of small because look where I live," she tells Kay one afternoon as they walk through her neighborhood. Dozens of young men line the sidewalks hawking drugs. Still, Quinn bristles when others refer to her apartment as a "ghetto" or "project."

"I live in a home," she says. "My home." Her voice cracking, she adds: "I'm going to get out of here someday. I'm going to make something of my life." She wants a little house with a picket fence. A family. Maybe a car. Nothing more than what she knows a lot of white people have.

"Someday I want to tell my kids I lived in the roughest part of D.C. and I made it," Quinn says.

Her rules for survival: Don't tell the police anything. Don't trust anyone. Consider everyone to be just "associates." Yet she considers Miss Kay a friend. About a year ago, the teacher's father died of cancer. A former commanding officer of the Newport, R.I., naval base, civic activist and member of the school board, Capt. Howard Kay inspired his youngest daughter to believe that one person could make the world a better place.

After he died, Kay could hardly get out of bed in the morning, let alone teach class. Quinn took her teacher aside. "Miss Kay," she recalls saying, "I know there's a hole in your heart. It will never go away. But you've got to keep going. Your father is watching you. He would be proud of what you're doing." And, Quinn added, don't you realize how lucky you are, Miss Kay? You got to have a father for 32 years.

Kay's mother, Liliana, still keeps, in a frame, a poem Susie wrote when she was in the third grade: ". . . Now it is nighttime. I see something very good. I see a little black child and a white child walking home together."

Yet growing up in Newport, Susan Beth Kay rarely crossed the boundaries of race or class. Her family was upper-middle class; her father knew senators and governors, and was best friends with Adm. Stansfield Turner, a former CIA director. Early on, Kay thought she'd go into politics. After graduating from American University in 1986 with a degree in political science, Kay went to work for the Close Up Foundation, a nonprofit group that brings high school students nationwide to Washington to learn about government. While her colleagues took students to embassies, Kay dragged about 100 teenagers to the Lincoln Memorial, where she turned on a boombox that blared out Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

Later she applied to Teach for America, which places recent college graduates into schools in poor neighborhoods. She asked for Watts in Los Angeles, but ended up pulling her application. Why go all the way to California, Kay reasoned, when she could simply drive four miles? Amid all the bad publicity about D.C. schools, Kay applied in 1990 to be a teacher at one of the most disadvantaged.

She landed in Room 406 -- where she planned to stay a year before pursuing her real dream, a career on the Hill. She couldn't leave. "I

wanted to feel like the job is done," Kay says. "A period at the end of the sentence. But I never feel that way. Something drives me back." She feels there's always another connection she can make for her students. One day she'll bring in Ari Fleischer, the white Republican spokesman of the House Ways and Means Committee (who has since hired two Woodson interns).

The next day the guest speaker is David Boyer, the black CEO of a Fairfax information technology firm (who later promises scholarship money). She moves her tiny frame across the classroom with boundless energy. She talks fast. She laughs a lot -- a loud, raspy laugh. She's quick to hug and touch. She's "phat," her students say, by which they mean attractive.

Partly to rationalize why they've grown so close, the kids tell her: You must be part black. (Actually her olive skin and dark hair come from an Italian mother and Jewish father.)

"Miss Kay puts her heart into it," says senior Theo Brannum. He and the others tease their teacher about her favorite foods (bagels and diet Coke) and her bungled but earnest attempts to learn their favorite rap lyrics.

Students barge into her class if they see a white man come into the school -- even if he's there to fix the elevator. ("Miss Kay, maybe you could marry this one!") In Room 406, posters of black and white sports figures and politicians stare down from the concrete-block walls. Malcolm X and John Kennedy. Michael Jordan and Larry Bird. The teacher loves basketball, and so do her students. It's another way they connect.

One afternoon in 1996, three of Kay's students were talking trash about white boys who can't jump or dribble. And it hit her: She could create a basketball tournament to bridge her two worlds. She would pit teams of students against white and black professionals in three-on-three, using sports to break down class and racial barriers.

Dubbed "Hoop Dreams," after the popular documentary, Kay's first tournament two years ago near Eastern Market attracted congressmen, business owners, sports celebrities -- and offers for internships and jobs. She also earned credibility at Woodson.

"My students are always saying, `You be faking,' " says Bradford, the swimming coach. "Well, Susie Kay, she's not faking. She's for real. I don't know anyone white or black, male or female, who tries to do what she does. Hoop Dreams is an awesome task."

Kay also uses Hoop Dreams as a way to raise badly needed funds to help send her students to college. Many are the first in their families to go. It's a myth that a pot of college money awaits every deserving disadvantaged kid who graduates from high school, Kay says. One of her students had to take out a loan just to apply.

Last year, with a bunch of volunteer friends and a $10,000 contribution from EDS Corp., Kay attracted 64 Hoop Dreams teams, raised $18,000 and

was able to give money to a student who couldn't have gone to Cornell otherwise.

Hoop Dreams has become so big that the city is closing off F Street in front of MCI Center June 6 for the tournament. Between classes, Kay dashes down two flights of stairs to make fund-raising calls. Nights and weekends are spent planning the tournament. Her friends are either pressed into service for Hoop Dreams or they are unable to see or hear from her. A former boyfriend says her dedication strained their relationship: "She can never put this aside. She always thinks about the kids."

It's second period, American government class. Here, Kay tries to teach about an idealized America where everyone has the same chance to succeed. Senior Kerwin Speight turns around in his front-row desk and tells his classmates about a trip he took with a group called Operation Understanding, which tries to bring black and Jewish students together.

"We all brought irons and starch," Kerwin says of the black students. "The white kids just threw on wrinkled T-shirts." See, it didn't matter how the white kids looked. But the blacks felt constant pressure to appear extra-sharp around white people, to overcome the stereotype.

Kerwin, 18, is an honor roll student, president of the student government. He has been accepted to 10 colleges. He wants to be a journalist and has already interned at C-SPAN and several local TV stations, most recently with Kay's help.

But when he tells people -- especially white people -- he attends public school in Northeast Washington, that look flashes in their eyes. He senses what they're thinking. Another black kid who can't read. Kerwin lives with his mother and father, a retired computer analyst, on a quiet, tree-lined street in a middle-class neighborhood called Hillcrest, in a peaceful pocket of Southeast Washington. His split-level brick home

is similar to a lot of houses across town in upper Northwest Washington. But Kerwin knows that its value is lower because it is located near Anacostia. John Speight always told his sons, Kerwin and Kiernan, not to worry about race. If you keep your head down and work hard, the playing field is level, he liked to say.

But after what happened to Kerwin's older brother, John Speight doesn't believe that anymore. In 1995, Kiernan was the star cornerback under Woodson's legendary football coach Bob Headen, who has racked up scores of city championships. Kiernan was heavily recruited.

Many Woodson students want to go to historically black colleges, where they would feel more comfortable. But Miss Kay urged Kiernan to take an enticing offer from predominantly white Boston College.

During his second year there, Kay was in a Newport hospital one weekend visiting her critically ill father. She picked up the Boston Globe and froze. On the front of the sports section was a grainy photograph of a

young man she knew and loved. But to a stranger, it was a generic, iconographic image: black man as criminal.

A scandal involving football players who shaved points and gambled on the games was unfolding at Boston College. Kiernan was accused of being part of it. Someone had tipped off the media, and reporters were there to shoot footage through a window when Kiernan and others were confronted.

John Speight called Susie Kay for help. He needed a lawyer and knew no one in Boston. From his hospital bed, Kay's father took the phone to offer advice. Two fathers who didn't know each other -- one white, the other black -- came together to help their children. One man was dying; the other was dying inside.

In the end, 13 players were suspended. Kiernan was completely exonerated. But not before his name was dragged through the mud for several weeks on national television and in the newspapers. "It was a nightmare," Kay recalls.

Kiernan told reporters he "felt torn up inside" and wanted out. He told his father he wasn't going anywhere but to a black school. He left Boston College and enrolled at Hampton University.

To this day, Speight doesn't know who unfairly accused his son of illegal gambling.But he knows one thing -- and don't try to tell him otherwise. What happened to his son at the mostly white New England university had to do with the color of his skin.

The treatment of Kiernan in the white world was big news back at Woodson, where many students looked up to him. And in Room 406, it resonated the loudest. Kay feels guilty for what happened. "I begged him to give Boston College a try," she says. "So he goes and this is what happens. The immediate feeling among my students was `Okay, Miss Kay, we're not going to try that experiment again.' "

The day O.J. Simpson was acquitted of murder, Miss Kay and about 100 students gathered around a television set to watch the verdict. Like elsewhere in America, it was a defining moment as the room erupted into whooping and cheering at the announcement. Students climbed on top of chairs, pumping their fists into the air.

Kay watched quietly for a few minutes. The students knew her opinion: For months, they had talked about the trial in government class. She believed Simpson was guilty. Ron Goldman's sister suddenly appeared on the screen. She was crying. According to Kay, one student yelled out, "Look at the Jew girl cry." A few others chanted: Jew girl! Jew girl! Jew girl!

Kay was overwhelmed by anger.

"This is sick! This is sick! This is sick!" she recalls yelling. She stormed out of the classroom, down the escalators and away from the school.

The teacher didn't return the next day because it was Yom Kippur, the most solemn Jewish holiday of the year. But her students didn't know that. They just thought she was gone.

Later, Kay called a fellow teacher to apologize for walking out. "Then, it's true what they're saying you said?" he asked.

Rumor was spreading through the Tower that Kay had used the n-word -- specifically, "You niggers are always getting away with murder." Parents who heard about it began calling in, outraged. The students closest to her were confused and deeply hurt.

"Miss Kay had us fooled," one recalled thinking at the time. "She's racist just like those other white people."

Kay was devastated. "Everything had gotten distorted in that moment of pandemonium," she says. "It seemed like any good I had been doing was ruined. I felt that it was never going to be okay again."

She wrote an open letter to the faculty, saying that such an abhorrent racial slur went against all her years of trying to build bridges. At the time, she had just completed a curriculum guide for the nonprofit group People for the American Way, to help teachers lead discussions on prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination.

A white teacher who had been in the room during the verdict came forward and said the rumor was a lie. So did some students. Quinn Carroll, who was in the room at the time, knows Miss Kay would never say such a thing. She also points out the obvious: "If she was a racist, she wouldn't be here for eight years, getting paid what she does. It takes guts."

"W'az up, niggas." Randy Barrett ambles into the classroom. He's a star on the football team. He wears cornrows and sports tattoos on his biceps. He doesn't have Kay as a teacher, but likes to stop by and talk to her. He tries to come off as street-tough, but Kay says he has a heart of gold.

"C'mon, you know you can't use that word in here," she tells Randy, wrapping her arm around his shoulder. "Miss Kay, we don't even hear ourselves say that word," says Theo Brannum. "It's just become a big habit. It's the culture. Slang amongst ourselves."

"Yeah, but if a white says it, I would say to him, `Do you have a death wish?' " Randy says, breaking into laughter.

She smiles too. O.J. seems like many years ago. Now she and the students have reached a level of trust that even allows for gentle humor about the harshest of racial slurs.

A black man and a white woman. Any such relationship can still raise eyebrows. It did with Miss Kay and Smitty. Virgil "Smitty" Smith is Woodson's basketball coach, the assistant director of the charter academy, a computer teacher and Kay's best friend at school.

He helps her with Hoop Dreams. A fanatic sports fan, she takes photographs of his basketball games. After the O.J. incident, a few female teachers warned Smitty to stay away from Miss Kay. What was the white lady really up to?

Nothing -- but it is an unlikely friendship. She from mostly white Rhode Island, he from rural Georgia, where he grew up in a family of 12 and picked cotton as a youngster. Years ago, Smith noticed her staying late after school all the time, as he did. She could be somewhere else, but she chose to stay. He was impressed.

"I admired her dedication and her ability to come into a totally black environment and be able to function," Smith says. But there's tension, he acknowledges. The success of Hoop Dreams led to a D.C. Council resolution praising Kay's efforts. Some teachers are suspicious about why the white lady was getting all the attention.

Uneasy about being the focus of a newspaper article, Kay repeatedly rattles off the names of other dedicated faculty: "There's principal Cleo Davis and lead teacher Barbara Birchette and counselor Anthony Talley, who work 14-hour days. And English teachers Kenneth Friedman and Charmaine Turner, who work tirelessly to teach the kids to write. And no-nonsense math teacher Samuel Scott . . ."

But what is she supposed to do? Avoid coverage of Hoop Dreams? That would cut into the scholarships for the kids. So she often finds herself in Smith's room, eyes teary, telling him about what is being said behind her back.

Ignore it all, the coach tells Kay. Forget the words that hurt, the looks that sting. Life is too short. Be tough. Black people have had to do that for years.

The Woodson auditorium stage explodes with color and rhythm as dancers draped in brightly colored kente cloth sway to the beat of an African drum. Students roar their approval, cheering and applauding during the Black History Month assembly.

Quinn Carroll, at the lectern, introduces the leader of the dance troupe. During slavery, the man tells the students, blacks were selectively bred. "So you are now above average in height and above average in intelligence. "You young people are just as quality as the people across the city," he says. "But if you're black, you're supposed to be rowdy. You are supposed to be ignorant. . . . You are not these things. As a black person, you have come from a glorious past."

The students join the choir in the singing of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," which serves as black America's unofficial national anthem. Later, Kay asks her 10th- and 11th-grade world history students if anyone knows all the words to the official national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner." No, most of the kids say. She assigns it as homework.

It's a blustery day in February, just after noon. Along with many of her students, Kay is attending the funeral of Bruce Wayne Taylor Jr., a

Woodson senior. He was gunned down near the school a few days before. It was 2 p.m. and he should have been in class.

The pews inside Beulah Baptist Church are jampacked with students holding each other and sobbing. Taylor, known to classmates as "Little Bruce," loved to play basketball and said his goal was to graduate and "make something of my life." Now he lies at the front of the church in a steel gray coffin, covered with a spray of roses and baby's breath.

There are no television cameras. The media has become numb to the carnage of black kids. Or perhaps no one across the river knows. School officials never put out a press release about the shooting.

"There would have been cameras if a Caucasian kid died or even if someone had killed a police dog," one student mutters.

A friend reads a poem. Prayers are said; hymns sung. Then Pastor Moses L. Jackson Jr. comes to the pulpit. "This boy didn't have to die," he says. "Watch the company you keep. . . . Your body is the temple of God. Don't get doped up, smoked up. Lift up your head. Let God possess you. "God wants you to live," Jackson says, his voice rising. "You are somebody, and you don't know it. Christ was not white. He was a colored man. You don't take second place. God made man from black African soil. Don't let the Devil turn you around."

Kay winces at mention of the Devil, but says nothing. Two of her students walk to the coffin to be pallbearers. One, who had left class early the day before to get a haircut for the funeral, nods to Miss Kay. Another waves. He is handing out T-shirts that say "We miss you, Little Bruce." Some of these students already have a full wardrobe of such shirts.

As the organist plays, Little Bruce's coffin is carried down the aisle. Senior Dawn Mitchell, sitting next to her teacher, leans over and whispers in a shaky voice, "Bruce was a good kid. But the streets ate him up." Kay puts her arm around Dawn. For this moment in time, there is no white and no black. No they. No them. No Devil. Just Dawn and Miss Kay, sharing their pain inside a little church on Dix Street. They hold each other as the coffin is rolled past them down the red carpet. Kay looks at her watch. There is never enough time to process the pain.

There will be another crisis tomorrow. And the day after that. Her students just have to keep moving on. And they do. Kay rises from the pew. Her father's words come back to her: Nothing is really worth doing which can be done easily. Don't quit.

Fourth period is starting. It is time to go back to class.

PHOTO,,Bill O'leary CAPTION: "The kids are amazing," says teacher Susie Kay, strolling in the hallway with junior Damien Womble. Kay has taught at all-black H.D. Woodson High School since 1990. At left is math teacher Samuel Scott. CAPTION: Kerwin Speight, student government president, focuses on a guest speaker as Kay talks with counselor Anthony Talley. Right, Kay laughing with her students. CAPTION: Clockwise from left: Senior Theo Brannum in front of posters of Michael

Jordan and Mother Teresa; "the white lady," as the students call her, teaching 12th-grade American government; Quinn Carroll, one of Kay's seniors; and "Miss Kay" with her friend, basketball coach Virgil "Smitty" Smith.

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