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Scott Sheedlo

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Lessons from Lunch Duty

Scott Sheedlo

Teenagers will complain that school lunch is the worst food imaginable—it's indigestible pig slop that costs a dollar too much. Or to put it in the words of many of my students, "It sucks!" But I have discovered strong proof that for many high school students, this is a myth, a fabrication—a mere conversation piece that lacks any foundation in truth. I have learned this because my teaching schedule includes lunch duty.

Everyday I monitor the cafeteria for cutters in the lunch line, for students who leave food trays or messes on the tables, for students who toss baby carrots or cause other lunchroom disorder and chicanery. What I have found to be a fascinating constant in this experience is that a large number of high school students, given the chance, will run to lunch. Nearly everyday I witness this as I enter the cafeteria from eating my own lunch with the other teachers: a herd of students some of whom are eighteen and legal adults, sprinting down the halls, weaving in and out of traffic, knocking over smaller students, just to secure a good place in line for the school food. On the really bad days it reminds me of the running of the bulls in Pamplona.

Of course, I have tried to slow them own. My voice can often be heard booming through the halls with desperate shouts of "slow down" or "Nathan, you come back here and walk, right now!" But without fail, they are back trying it again the next day. Apparently, a place at the

front of the line is worth the risk of getting yelled at. For a while I became quite frustrated with this repetitive, thankless job. However, that was until one day I rather inadvertently got a little, for lack of a better word, revenge.

The door to the teachers' lunch room opens into the cafeteria area. Normally I am very careful not to open it too quickly for fear of striking someone passing by. On this day, I must have been distracted by a conversation or a stain on my shirt sleeve, because I simply opened the door. At that moment Jeff, a man-child of a senior complete with a mustache and beard, was sprinting by in a mad dash for the line. He was a hulk, easily over two hundred pounds and six feet tall. His striding foot hit the bottom corner of the opening door squarely.

For a brief moment his body hovered, suspended in mid-air, then it crashed to the floor with the forceful thud of an asteroid hitting Earth. Jeff didn't scream at all. Fortunately, I didn't hear anything that sounded like bones breaking either. A little shaken, he jumped back to this feet, his eyes darting back and forth to see if anyone had noticed.

I could feel the laughter welling up inside of me. I wanted to burst. My conscience came to my rescue and I reacted as he started to leave. Feigning grave concern, I asked, "Are you okay?" and managed to add, "I am so sorry!" Jeff was not interested in hearing apologies, he was losing a

good place in line. He barely bothered a grunt of affirmation before he was on his way.

Before taking my post by the serving line, I ducked into the teacher's lounge. There I let my suppressed laughter erupt in waves of hearty guffaws as I replayed the astonishment in Jeff's face when his sprint was interrupted by the door. He had that expression Wiley Coyote has when he is still walking but the cliff ledge he was on has suddenly broken away. Finally, wiping away the tears that had come, I composed myself enough to return to lunch duty. I walked out the door wearing a big, cheesy grin.

These days when I catch a student running to lunch, I share Jeff's little accident with the apprehended runner. With all the seriousness I can

muster, I end my reprimand with, "He could have been seriously hurt." It doesn't seem to have much effect. They still run to lunch. But on days when lunch duty becomes a little too hectic, and I find myself growing tense and irritable, I think of Jeff's little accident and contemplate the sweet justice of it. Smiling broadly, I chuckle to myself and then bark at some kids who are trying to cut into the lunch line.

About the Author

Scott Scheedlo, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant, teaches English and biology at Ovid-Elsie High School.