

## They Called Me “Mr. Dikenna”

In the past 8 weeks, I’ve been teaching at St. Gabriel’s Mercy Centre in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. I knew nothing about Mississippi before I arrived here. When I told friends at school where I would be spending the summer, they would squeeze their faces in what seemed to be genuine sympathy as if to say: “I’m so sorry for you bro.” I never really understood. I’d been using the word “Mississippi” to count while playing hide and seek since I learned what numbers were. I thought Mississippi was the name of the genius who invented Hide and Seek. I never told this to my housemates because I would never have heard the last of it. To be fair, I was a kid—in fact, a toddler—so I’m not ashamed.

My friends would drop words on me like “Deep south,” “racism,” “lynching,” “KKK” and “confederacy” so often that they began to reshape my childhood perception of Mississippi as the founding home of Hide and Seek. However, none of these people had ever been to Mississippi, and so with time, their comments meant less to me. But even more importantly, I was heading to Mississippi with a purpose, and this was what I decided would shape my experience.

I’ve been a camp counselor at the St. Gabriel’s Mercy Centre. I, with a friend, have been coordinating the Summer Enrichment Program in which we create a course of study and run it through with about a dozen kids for two months. It started out rough. The kids didn’t understand what I was—black, but not African American; so once my Nigerian accent hit their ears, a thick wave of confusion instantaneously filled the room. It took a good 3 weeks for this to disseminate. On the other hand, I barely understood the way they spoke. If they asked to use the bathroom, I would smile and say yes. Then I’d stealthily follow them out of the class to see where they were headed. The next time I hear a similar progression of sounds from their mouths, I would understand what they wanted. With time, we overcame the communication barrier, and began to form friendships deeper than the student-teacher relationship.

I had taught poetry at a Poetry Summer Camp that a friend and I run every summer in Lagos. The camps last a week with mostly teenage participants. Now I was going to be teaching kids a lot younger

for a period of 8 weeks. As the days passed, I began to notice the kids who would struggle to understand certain concepts, those who couldn't read or write easily, those in which math inspired so much fear and discomfort, the idea of counting sheep would suffice as a nightmare. We had to be creative in meandering the various mental blocks our students had about certain topics that their teachers at school might be less sensitive to. My favorite moment was during one of my impromptu global studies classes. I asked a student what country I was from in Africa, and one replied: "Louisiana." When I implored them to try again, I got nothing more than other American states and cities. America was their whole universe, while other countries, planets, and the Sun revolved around it. I began explaining the concept of continents, countries and states. One of my students just couldn't seem to wrap her head around the idea of the existence of other continents and countries. This student, Mercedes, was a cake lover. She wrote all her poems about the cakes she had eaten in her entire lifetime. I described a continent as a layer-cake, and its countries as the cake's many flavors. I didn't know what pure joy was until she said: "So Europe is like a cake, and Italy, and France are its flavors?" And just like that, it clicked! These were the magical moments I allowed to shape my experience in the Delta.

I learned that the best way to teach is not to pontificate views and ideas so dogmatically that it makes students feel less of themselves, descending from the skies like the deity of all knowledge sent to the world to show Earthlings how little they know. It's counterproductive to teach by exuding more pride than genuine interest in students' growth. I learned that students respond best when taught from a standpoint of humility, never forgetting that they would always know things that I don't, and I could learn as much from them as they from me. It's always inspiring to see growth in students. It's inspiring to watch them solve math problems quicker and more efficiently, use the new words learned in class, and hear them extrapolate the tiniest ideas into larger more relevant topics. If I were to talk about my time in the Delta, I would mention living in a house the size of an igloo with eight other housemates. I would mention all the long road trips we took with the endless car games and spontaneous karaoke sessions. I'd talk about how I was prescribed with crutches after spraining my ankle dancing on stage at Morgan Freeman's jazz club. There are more than enough great stories to tell. Some sound better when they're exaggerated till they reach the line of pure fiction; I'll make sure to tell those when my house-

mates aren't around. But most importantly, I'd talk about how a dozen kids who called me "Mr. Dikenna" every day allowed me to inspire a form of growth in their lives, as they did mine.