

Nigel Slade

By David Paul Palmer



I had the great good-fortune of working for Nigel when he was the Headmaster of Hillcrest Prep in Nairobi. He was a truly inspiring leader and I remember that I used to hurry to school and be reluctant to leave at the end of the day. It was also one of the few schools I worked at where there was never a shortage of volunteers for any extra activities - and the volunteers were often from the parents of the students. The relationship between the parents and the staff was very strong and many long-lasting bonds were formed in those days.

The physical structure of the school was quite unique. The staffroom was a converted classroom that still had a blackboard. This was often used by parents to leave messages for the staff:- "David & Alison! Don't forget you are invited to Clare & Batuk's for supper at 8!" The leaving of these notes was facilitated by the fact that the room had a door directly in from the car park. It had a second door - which led into the rest of the school - directly through Nigel's inner sanctum! His little room had three doors. The one you had just entered - which was to the right of his desk, a door to his secretary's office - which was opposite his desk and the third door - into the main part of the school, on the left of his desk! I have never, ever known a school where the staff would all walk through the Head's office several times every day!

I was told that if he had a visitor or was making an important phonecall the door would be closed and I should walk out into the carpark and around to the main entrance to go to lessons. This didn't happen to me for weeks and then one day the door was closed and I got up to go and take a class. I absentmindedly put my hand on the doorknob - and realised that (a) the door was vibrating because he was bellowing on the other side of it "AND IT BETTER NOT HAPPEN AGAIN - BECAUSE IF IT DOES IT WON'T BE HERE BECAUSE YOU WILL BE GONE!!!" I let go of the handle as if it was redhot! Another teacher laughed at me! "That was close!" he said. "It sounds as if he is roasting one of the students!" I said. "Oh no!" came the reply, "Nigel would never talk to a child that way - it is one of the parents! They sent their child to school two days running in a non-regulation sweater!" Now bear in mind, this was a fee-paying school!!

I struggle to put his philosophy into words partly because he didn't. But his passion for doing the best for his students was palpable. In most schools that I have worked in, at some point a member of staff will make a joke about a student, maybe imitating an accent or a mannerism. That NEVER happened in Nigel's school because we all knew subconsciously that he would tear us limb from limb! As well as being incredibly protective he also had a huge belief in the potential of his young charges. And he expected them to conform to a very high standard of behaviour. He never threatened or punished them but would show such intense personal anguish if he thought they weren't meeting his standards that they would correct themselves instantly! I vividly remember one morning assembly when he had dragged a throne onto the stage and was sitting on it with his head in his hands. The whole school filed in with everyone (including the staff) taking one look at this devastated figure and falling silent as they took their places. After a very long wait he finally raised his face and looked out at us all. "My heart is very heavy!" he whispered, followed by a long pause. At least two students (and probably a couple of members of staff) broke into tears at this display of raw grief. "This morning I looked out into the playground . . ." another great, sad pause, more muffled sobs from us . . . "and some of you had not pulled your socks up!" Cue more tears - and some furtive adjustments of clothing. I share his philosophies to this day - but I never had the purity of passion to hold a whole school in that magical grip!

We didn't have to keep lesson-plans but we did have to keep a diary with a brief note about what topics we covered in every lesson and we were encouraged to record reactions from any students. Nigel religiously collected our diaries every three weeks and would read every word and sometimes leave notations. If one of these ended in a questionmark then you had better make sure you wrote an answer because it would be checked on the next three-week inspection! With hindsight this was a really ingenious way of keeping his eye on his school.

Another brilliant habit was that he took every teacher out for lunch roughly once every halfterm. These one-on-one sessions were mainly devoted to non-school conversations but it was a very powerful way for him to be aware of the morale of his staff. Nigel was very well connected in Nairobi. His father had been the last governor before independence. (His official title wasn't "Governor" but in effect that was his role!) Nigel had also taught many of the leading characters in Kenya, up to and including the Vice-President! He belonged to all the best clubs and would take me to Nairobi club when my lunch-date occurred. He knew that I was very interested in the history of Kenya and that I knew people like [George Adamson](#) and Beryl Markham. He would apologise that because of my timetable we didn't have time to drive out to the Muthaiga Club because he felt we were more likely to meet notable characters that he could introduce me to there. Then we had a break because one of my classes was cancelled on the day I got the lunch call. We went to Muthaiga and en route he was wondering who we might meet (and happily reeling off a very impressive list of possible candidates). We arrived and were admitted to the magnificent Members' Bar . . . which was empty except for one, rather disreputable-looking guy leaning on the mahogany bar with a cigarillo. We arrived at the bar with Mr X on Nigel's right and me on his left. "My dear David! I

am so sorry there are no VIP's here for me to introduce you to!" he said. "Well Nigel, maybe I can do the honours! Can I introduce you to this chap behind you? Dorian Rocco?" because by some weird fluke I **did** know the guy - and he was a very unusual character whose father was an Italian Count who settled on 5,000 acres at Naivasha and who had worn dark make-up to infiltrate the Mau-Mau during the rebellion! I had spent three months [managing the farm for his sister, Oria](#). Dorian said "Nigel Slade? Was your father called Humphrey by any chance?" When Nigel nodded, Dorian said "Ah! My father proposed your father for his role in the colonial government! I am astonished that we have never met!"

Nigel had many facets and the theatre was very dear to his heart. He wrote a regular drama column in the national press and he wrote a play called "Mostly Moses" which was performed while I was at the school and was an excellent production. I would heartily recommend it to any school drama department as a project. One entertaining feature (for me) was that my oldest son was one of the shepherds. In the play they are somewhat rough, tough characters with studded leather wrist-straps and stubble. They visit the waterhole where the maidens are collecting water. "Ho Ho!" they rumble - "So what have we here?" The maidens are alarmed and shrill "Oh No! It is the shepherds! We should run away!" Which is all fine - except that at the age of ten the boys actually had higher voices than the girls!!

Tragically Nigel passed away at the very early age of 50. He was immensely proud of the fact that there were over 30 nationalities among the student population and that there was a complete spectrum of skin tones with no one shade predominating! After he had his terminal diagnosis the school put on a concert in his honour which culminated with every child in the school filing onto the stage in national costumes and then joining together to sing "[We are the World](#)" to him. I was sitting next to him - and if there was a dry eye in the house I certainly couldn't see it through the tears pouring down my leathery cheeks!