

## **Undercover Student Sidebar: Why Chronicle Reporter Posed as a Student**

By Shann Nix

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When Mrs. D. wanted to cast me in the lead role for the school play, I wanted to jump at the chance. I calculated the dates the play would run and realized happily that I would still be in school for the rigorous rehearsal schedule and opening night. However, I realized it would be wrong to take the part intended for a student. After all, I was only an "Undercover Student."

As The Chronicle continued to report on the growing crisis in the public schools and the crippling effect of the budget cuts on education, we realized that in September, thousands of nameless, faceless students would struggle to learn in crowded, ill-equipped classrooms with teachers who were in danger of losing their jobs. We decided that readers needed to understand just how dramatically the budget crisis affects the kids.

But it would be difficult. Classroom visitors would be greeted by proud teachers putting on their best stiff-upper-lip performances, shy students and administrators complaining loudly.

Either way, I would never be sure I was seeing the unvarnished truth and readers would not get the accurate picture they needed to see.

George Washington High School Principal Al Vidal agreed and on Monday, September 21, I walked into the school for four weeks with my standard-issue backpack and my secret.

While I did my best to tell the truth as far as possible, sometimes questions demanded the most complicated fictions. For example, getting out of the play demanded a mythical after-school job, which then had to be fleshed out with convincing details. And the better I got to know the kids, the more difficult it was to continue playing a role. It was stressful. And exhausting. I never knew when someone would turn to me and ask me a question I would have answer with an unflinching lie.

I worried that I would let my guard down and make a mistake that would blow my cover. Once, I accidentally rushed out of the house wearing my wedding ring. When I noticed it in French class, I panicked.

It was not an easy experience for my new husband, either. We had to change the message on our answering machine from "Shann and Bill aren't home right now," to "You have reached the Hinkle family residence." He was instructed to act like my father on the phone, or my boyfriend if any of the kids met him in person. We were living a sitcom. Finally, he stopped answering the phone altogether.

The newspaper was very clear on the legal questions: Be especially cautious in any situation involving illegal activities by minors. It was OK to observe, but not to encourage -- I could drink a beer, for example, but couldn't buy one for a minor. In fact, to my knowledge, I was not present while any illegal activities went on.

The ethical questions were not so clear-cut. Should I attend a weekend training session in Marin? Go to a birthday party? Would my actions hurt the kids, or the school? Each situation had to be carefully considered.

But, when there was a public need to know and no other way to obtain the story, undercover work is sometimes the only solution.

Through this series of articles, we get to know Erica, Rachelle, Uri, Ying-sun, Mr. Curnow and Mrs. Martin. In a few months, the class of '92 from George Washington High School will face the challenges of college or the job market.

Perhaps their legacy will be to make public school education a higher priority for the children who are just entering the system.